

Brainstorming

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about brainstorming strategies and how they enable writers to begin writing projects. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Brainstorming in the Writing Process

2. Brainstorming Strategies

2a. Clustering/Mapping

2b. Listing

2c. Freewriting

2d. Five Ws

2e. Directed Writing

3. Choosing a Topic

1. Brainstorming in the Writing Process

As part of the first step in the writing process, **brainstorming** involves the use of a number of techniques to generate ideas and clarify thinking.

Writers use these techniques to discover and focus their thoughts about a given subject. In other words, brainstorming enables writers to discover what they know or believe about a topic. Brainstorming also helps them to generate ideas.

Once writers discover what they know or believe about a topic, they can use a brainstorming technique to search through that knowledge for related ideas, and to set boundaries for their topic.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Brainstorming can help writers who have been assigned to write a three-page essay about a specific topic to determine not only what they can write about, but also what they cannot.



TERM TO KNOW

Brainstorming

2. Brainstorming Strategies

Now that you know what brainstorming is good for, how do you do it? There are a number of different brainstorming techniques, but all of them share a similar purpose.

Though it's unlikely that any writer would use all of these techniques at the beginning of every writing project, consider how each of the following methods might help *you* with a writing project. It's possible that your brainstorming needs will be different each time you begin the writing process.

2a. Clustering/Mapping

Clustering, or mapping, is a way to generate ideas using words and shapes, and lines that show the connections between them. To use this technique, begin by thinking about your subject.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Suppose that your subject is "pie." To create a map (or cluster) of pie, write "pie" and then surround it with all of the other words that you can associate with it.

Clustering is a visualization of how a writer can progress from a broad subject to specific examples and can even discover a different translation of the central term—one that is unrelated to any other term in the cluster.

2b. Listing

Lists are also useful for generating thoughts related to a topic, question, or problem. As shown below, lists can present thoughts in a more structured way than clustering.

Things about pie:

- Dessert—others include ice cream, cake, etc.
- Mostly have it at parties—e.g., Thanksgiving, other holidays
- 3.14
- Many different types—cherry, apple, pumpkin (Thanksgiving)

Unlike a cluster, which can take any form, lists tend towards hierarchical arrangement, as the first ideas are placed higher.

2c. Freewriting

Freewriting, which is also referred to as stream-of-consciousness writing or free association, is perhaps the simplest brainstorming technique, but it can produce great results.

To freewrite, just start writing. Write anything and everything that comes to mind as quickly as you can. Keep writing until you can't think of anything else (or your hand hurts from holding a pencil, or your keyboard is steaming). Don't slow down (or stop) to correct grammar or even to "make sense."

Freewriting gives you *something* to work on. It's much easier to work on something than on nothing (e.g., a blank page that remains blank while the writer struggles to come up with something that makes sense and is grammatically correct).

Freewriting might look something like this:

I like pie but I don't know how to write about pie because when I think about pie I don't think about writing I think most about my grandmother and Thanksgiving. She made a great pumpkin pie. There are so many kinds of pie, like cherry and apple and I don't want to list them all, but the number 3.14 also means pi in math....

Note that this example contains most of the information in the list example above. However, it's presented differently because it was created differently.

2d. Five Ws

The five Ws are:

- Who
- What
- Where
- When
- Why

To use the five Ws technique, ask these questions about your topic, or in response to a question or problem you've been asked to write about.

Here's an example of results produced by the five Ws technique:

Who: For me and my grandmother, who used to make pies.

What: A kind of dessert that comes in different kinds, like cherry, apple, and my grandmother's pumpkin.

When: It's been ages.

Where: Anywhere I want.

Why: Because pie is a cultural thing, but we don't think of it that way, for some reason.

Most of the writer's responses in this example did not produce useful information (in part as a result of the silly topic). In response to the last W, however, the writer made an insightful statement: an answer to a question (why) that may not have been asked without using the five Ws brainstorming technique.

2e. Directed Writing

Directed writing is writing in response to an assignment. Writing assignments often include not only a topic, but also related questions (or prompts) that are designed to encourage the open-minded thinking involved in brainstorming.

Here's a response to an assignment to write about what pie means to you:

It's not a topic I might have chosen myself, but to answer your question, yes, I think that pie has a cultural significance for me. Much of my family moved out of state, but when I was a child, we would all get together at my grandmother's house for holidays like Thanksgiving, and there would always be one or even two pies, so for me, now, when I think of pie, I think of being a child back there.

Note that this response sounds a bit like an essay. There may be a thesis statement in it, or an interesting narrative that might help the writer to come up with a thesis statement.

Any of the brainstorming techniques described here can help you to begin the writing process. It's up to you to find which of them works best in a particular situation. The "best" technique is the one that enables you to find ideas, generate content, and beat "writer's block" before it starts.

3. Choosing a Topic

Brainstorming is particularly helpful when you need to find a topic to write about. Writing assignments often include a broad subject, but not a specific topic. In academic writing, a topic is the focus of an essay or other written work; it's what the essay is about.

Any of the preceding brainstorming techniques can help writers to identify topics.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** If you were assigned to write an essay about pie, you might use clustering or mapping to decide what you want to write about pie.

Take another look at the brainstorming examples above. Connections have been drawn between "types" and "desserts" and "party." Those connections might be interesting, but the connections between the party and the subtopics of "Thanksgiving" and "grandma," and the notion of dessert, might be the most productive. Beginning with no more than "pie," the writer was led to think about her grandmother.

Perhaps, then, this writer is most interested in the way that food (in this case, pie) can trigger memories.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** This brainstorming process could turn into an essay about how the writer remembers details about a grandmother (who may have died years ago) because of the sight, smell, or taste of a dessert she

made only once or twice a year. The relationship between food and memory can certainly be a topic worth writing about.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned how to **begin the writing process by brainstorming**. There are five main **brainstorming techniques** that you can try: **clustering/mapping**, **listing**, **freewriting**, **the five Ws**, and **directed writing**. The technique that will work best for you may vary depending on the specific writing task at hand. When **choosing a topic**, brainstorming enables you to organize your thoughts, and to bring to the surface anything that you might already know about that topic.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Brainstorming

The use of a variety of techniques to generate ideas and/or clarify thinking.