

Brainstorming

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about brainstorming strategies and how they enable writers to begin writing projects. You will also strengthen your innovation skill as you consider all the possibilities for your writing. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. **Brainstorming in the Writing Process**
2. **Brainstorming Strategies**
 - 2a. **Clustering/Mapping**
 - 2b. **Listing**
 - 2c. **Five Ws**
 - 2d. **Freewriting**
 - 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 tasked with writing 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

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

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. By practicing multiple brainstorming methods across different writing projects, you will strengthen your **innovation skill**.

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 “job satisfaction.” To create a map (or cluster) of this topic, write “job satisfaction” 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 job satisfaction:

- *Healthy workplace culture*
- *Impacts productivity—e.g., positive collaboration, time management*
- *Employee retention*
- *Many different influential factors—salary, job duties, benefits, management*

Unlike a cluster, which can take any form, lists tend towards hierarchical arrangement, as the first ideas are placed higher. Lists are also a great brainstorming technique to use early on if you don't yet have a topic or are trying to decide what to write about within a given topic.

2c. 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: Employees

What: Job satisfaction

When: All the time

Where: At work

Why: Because there are many factors that influence job satisfaction, but we don't always take the time to find out what those are.

Some of the writer's responses may not have produced useful information. 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.

2d. 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:

Job satisfaction can mean so many different things to different people—some people might find salary to be the most important factor in determining job satisfaction, but others might put more value on their specific job duties or the team they will be working with. I think for me, the most important thing is feeling

valued at my job. Although, there are other things that also feel important to me, like having a good balance between work and life and getting to work on interesting projects...

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 job satisfaction means to you:

I think there are a lot of factors that influence job satisfaction, but to me, the most important is feeling like a valued member of a team. I need to know that members of my team will support one another and work together effectively in order to feel happy at my job. In turn, this job satisfaction impacts other aspects of my work, like how productive I am.

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.



BIG IDEA

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.



Innovation: Skill in Action

Imagine that Jorge is a massage therapist who is starting his own business. He'll need to develop communications for several purposes such as marketing pamphlets for potential clients, information on his website, and a business plan for his stakeholders. By using the brainstorming methods in this lesson, he can begin thinking outside the box for these communications, strengthening his innovation skill.

For instance, he may start clustering different needs of potential clients, such as people recovering from injury, people with high stress jobs, people with chronic illness, and people with who prioritize self-care. As he considers various client needs, he's strengthening his innovation skill.

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 job satisfaction, you might use clustering or mapping to decide what you want to write about this topic.

Take another look at the brainstorming examples above. Connections have been drawn between subtopics like “productivity” and “employee retention.” Those connections might be interesting, but the connections between happiness at work and the subtopic of “influential factors” might be the most useful. Beginning with no more than “job satisfaction,” the writer was led to think about different aspects of work that impact employees’ attitudes toward their jobs.

Perhaps, then, this writer is most interested in what a company can do to increase job satisfaction among its employees.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** This brainstorming process could turn into an informative report in which the writer conducts research to determine the top three factors that influence employees’ happiness at work. The relationship between these factors and job satisfaction can certainly be a topic worth writing about.



Author, comedian, and actress Kim Coles is a writing pro with two bestselling books to her name, and in this *Sophia Story*, she’ll share her writing process with you! You’ll discover the writing strategies that keep Kim productive and help her communicate her best. By applying Kim’s attitude and methods to your own work, you’ll have what you need to start writing your future.

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**, **the five Ws**, **freewriting**, 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. Finally, you discovered how brainstorming strengthens your innovation skill.

Best of luck in your learning!

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