

Brainstorming and Prewriting Techniques

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about how to make the most of brainstorming during the prewriting stage when you begin a writing project. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Prewriting and Brainstorming in the Writing Process

2. Brainstorming Strategies

2a. Mapping/Clustering

2b. Listing

2c. Freewriting

2d. Five Ws

2e. Directed Writing

3. Choosing a Topic

1. Prewriting and Brainstorming in the Writing Process

There's a lot that has to happen before experienced writers actually begin the drafting process, and much of that work falls into the category of **prewriting**. Recall that prewriting is the planning and organizing that a writer does before actively beginning to write.

Prewriting includes:

- Planning, conducting, and organizing the research that needs to be done before any real writing can begin
- Narrowing down the writing project's focus and making sure it's one that can be fully explained given the time and space constraints on the writer or the writing project
- Outlining the project, or making a plan for what to write

It's important to do this kind of prewriting, because the organizing and clarifying of thoughts and plans that it provides gives writers greater control over their projects and usually saves them time in the long run.

As part of the planning and narrowing down phases of the prewriting process, **brainstorming** involves strategies that help generate ideas and clarify thinking. Writers use these techniques to discover and focus their thoughts about a given subject. In other words, brainstorming helps 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 five-paragraph essay about a specific topic to determine not only what they can write about, but also what they cannot.



TERMS TO KNOW

Prewriting

A stage in the writing process in which the writer generates ideas and creates a plan for the writing project prior to composing a first draft.

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.

2a. Mapping/Clustering

Mapping, or clustering, is a way to generate ideas using words and shapes, and lines that show the connections between them. The end result often looks a bit like a spider web. 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" in the center of the page, and then surround it with all of the other words that you can associate with it.

Mapping helps writers to see how they can progress from a broad subject to specific examples that support the main subject.

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)

Some lists may not have any particular order, especially when a writer is trying to figure out a topic and quickly generating ideas. Often, when writers know their main topic, lists have a 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. Freewriting can be general or focused depending on whether or not you already know your chosen topic.

2d. Five Ws

The five Ws are:

- Who
- What
- When

- Where
- 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 flavors, 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.



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.

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 dessert, you might use listing to generate ideas and determine you want to write about pie. You might use clustering or mapping to help decide what details you might write about pie. You might use freewriting to start fleshing out those ideas and see which ones might make the best paragraphs later on in your writing assignment.

Do you see how brainstorming techniques can be used alone or together? 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 about the role played by **prewriting and brainstorming in the writing process**. In the prewriting stage, you will spend time planning out and focusing your ideas. As part of that stage, there are five main **brainstorming techniques** that you can try: **mapping/clustering, 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!



TERMS TO KNOW

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Prewriting

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