

Brainstorming and Prewriting

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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. You will also discover how brainstorming strengthens your innovation skill. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Prewriting and Brainstorming in the Writing Process

Once we have chosen a topic, we can start writing the essay, correct? Actually, 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. Prewriting is the planning and organizing that a writer does before actively beginning to write. It features several distinct phases or purposes, each of which will have to be tailored to a particular writing project.

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 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. By thinking outside the box during the brainstorming process, you are setting yourself up for success in generating ideas and strengthening your **innovation skill**.

➔ **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 “pizza.” To create a map (or cluster) of the subject, write “pizza” 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 pizza:

- Very popular food
- Part of both franchises like Dominos and Pizza Hut, and smaller pizza places
- Large part of frozen food aisle
- Many different types
- Chicago pizza

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:

Pizza is my favorite food, but I do not know exactly what to write about it. There are so many different types of pizza, which is why I like it. Someone could get a cheese pizza or veggie pizza is she was a vegetarian. Supreme pizza is good, too. I prefer specialty pizzas from the little shop on the corner. There are so many types of pizza in the frozen food section of the grocery store. Some even cost less than a dollar.

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 everyone. Everyone likes pizza.

What: A delicious savory crust topped with sauce, cheese, and an infinite possible combination of toppings.

When: I had some last week, but what is the history of pizza?

Where: Anywhere: grocery stores, chains, small shops.

Why: Because pizza can be customized to so many different preferences and even allergies.

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. It also generated a possible research question: what is the history of pizza?

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 pizza means to you:

Pizza is just a food, but then again it is more. We have always eaten pizza as a celebration food in my home, so I think I associate it with happy times. As I have gotten older, pizza is a food that is very versatile: if I am eating vegetarian, there is a pizza for that. We can make cauliflower crust pizza if we are not eating carbs. Pizza is a symbol of celebrating and gathering around the table.

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 Tip

Brainstorming allows you to be creative. You likely won't use all, or even most of the ideas you generate, but it lets you see the big picture. This type of thinking builds your innovation skill by looking at issues from different perspectives.



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 strategies** 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. Finally, you discovered the connection between brainstorming and **innovation**.

Best of luck in your learning!

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