Brainstorming

Try out several of these options and challenge yourself to vary the techniques you rely on; some techniques might suit a particular writer, academic discipline, or assignment better than others. If the technique you try first doesn’t seem to help you, move right along and try some others.

Freewriting

When you freewrite, you let your thoughts flow as they will, putting pen to paper and writing down whatever comes into your mind. You don’t judge the quality of what you write and you don’t worry about style or any surface-level issues, like spelling, grammar, or punctuation. If you can’t think of what to say, you write that down—really. The advantage of this technique is that you free up your internal critic and allow yourself to write things you might not write if you were being too self-conscious. When you freewrite you can set a time limit (“I’ll write for 15 minutes!”) and even use a kitchen timer or alarm clock or you can set a space limit (“I’ll write until I fill four full notebook pages, no matter what tries to interrupt me!”) and just write until you reach that goal. You might do this on the computer or on paper, and you can even try it with your eyes shut or the monitor off, which encourages speed and freedom of thought.

The crucial point is that you keep on writing even if you believe you are saying nothing. Word must follow word, no matter the relevance. Your freewriting might even look like this:

“This paper is supposed to be on the politics of tobacco production but even though I went to all the lectures and read the book I can’t think of what to say and I’ve felt this way for four minutes now and I have 11 minutes left and I wonder if I’ll keep thinking nothing during every minute but I’m not sure if it matters that I am babbling and I don’t know what else to say about this topic and it is rainy today and I never noticed the number of cracks in that wall before and those cracks remind me of the walls in my grandfather’s study and he smoked and he farmed and I wonder why he didn’t farm tobacco…”

When you’re done with your set number of minutes or have reached your page goal, read back over the text. Yes, there will be a lot of filler and unusable thoughts but there also will be little gems, discoveries, and insights. When you find these gems, highlight them or cut and paste them into your draft or onto an “ideas” sheet so you can use them in your paper. Even if you don’t find any diamonds in there, you will have either quieted some of the noisy chaos or greased the writing gears so that you can now face the assigned paper topic.

Break down the topic into levels

Once you have a course assignment in front of you, you might brainstorm:

- the general topic, like “The relationship between tropical fruits and colonial powers”
- a specific subtopic or required question, like “How did the availability of multiple tropical fruits influence competition amongst colonial powers trading from the larger Caribbean islands during the 19th century?”
- a single term or phrase that you sense you’re overusing in the paper. For example: If you see that you’ve written “increased the competition” about a dozen times in your “tropical fruits” paper, you could brainstorm variations on the phrase itself or on each of the main terms: “increased” and “competition.”
Listing/bulleted:
In this technique you jot down lists of words or phrases under a particular topic. Try this one by basing your list either
• on the general topic
• on one or more words from your particular thesis claim, or
• on a word or idea that is the complete opposite of your original word or idea.
For example, if your general assignment is to write about the changes in inventions over time, and your specific thesis
claims that “the 20th century presented a large number of inventions to advance US society by improving upon the status
of 19th-century society,” you could brainstorm two different lists to ensure you are covering the topic thoroughly and that
your thesis will be easy to prove.
The first list might be based on your thesis; you would jot down as many 20th-century inventions as you could, as long as
you know of their positive effects on society. The second list might be based on the opposite claim and you would instead
jot down inventions that you associate with a decline in that society’s quality. You could do the same two lists for 19th-
century inventions and then compare the evidence from all four lists.

Clustering/mapping/webbing:
This technique has three (or more) different names, according to how you describe the activity itself or what the end prod-
uct looks like. In short, you will write a lot of different terms and phrases onto a sheet of paper in a random fashion and
later go back to link the words together into a sort of “map” or “web” that forms groups from the separate parts. Allow
yourself to start with chaos. After the chaos subsides, you will be able to create some order out of it.
To really let yourself go in this brainstorming technique, use a large piece of paper or tape two pieces together. You could
also use a blackboard if you are working with a group of people. This big vertical space allows all members room to
“storm” at the same time, but you might have to copy down the results onto paper later.
How to do it:
1. Take your sheet(s) of paper and write your main topic in the center, using a word or two or three.
2. Moving out from the center and filling in the open space any way you are driven to fill it, start to write down, fast, as
   many related concepts or terms as you can associate with the central topic. Jot them quickly, move into another space,
   jot some more down, move to another blank, and just keep moving around and jotting. If you run out of similar con-
cepts, jot down opposites, jot down things that are only slightly related, or jot down your grandpa’s name, but try to
   keep moving and associating. Don’t worry about the (lack of) sense of what you write, for you can chose to keep or
   toss out these ideas when the activity is over.
   Once the storm has subsided and you are faced with a hail of terms and phrases, you can start to cluster. Circle terms
   that seem related and then draw a line connecting the circles. Find some more and circle them and draw more lines to
   connect them with what you think is closely related. When you run out of terms that associate, start with another term.
   Look for concepts and terms that might relate to that term. Circle them and then link them with a connecting line. Con-
   tinue this process until you have found all the associated terms. Some of the terms might end up uncircled, but these
   “loners” can also be useful to you. (Note: You can use different colored pens/pencils/chalk for this part, if you like. If
   that’s not possible, try to vary the kind of line you use to encircle the topics; use a wavy line, a straight line, a dashed
   line, a dotted line, a zigzaggy line, etc. in order to see what goes with what.)
There! When you stand back and survey your work, you should see a set of clusters, or a big web, or a sort of map:
   hence the names for this activity. At this point you can start to form conclusions about how to approach your topic.
   There are about as many possible results to this activity as there are stars in the night sky, so what you do from here
   will depend on your particular results. Let’s take an example or two in order to illustrate how you might form some
   logical relationships between the clusters and loners you’ve decided to keep. At the end of the day, what you do with
   the particular “map” or “cluster set” or “web” that you produce depends on what you need. What does this map or web
tell you to do? Explore an option or two and get your draft going!

*Handout derived from information on the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill Writing Center web site: http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/
brainstorming/*