

BRAINSTORMING

Brainstorming is an important step in the early writing process that helps you capture as many ideas as possible in a short time, without judging or editing them. It helps you generate ideas freely, explore your topic from different angles, and overcome writer's block without worrying about perfection.

WHY BRAINSTORM?

Many writers feel stuck when facing a blank page. Brainstorming helps you discover what you already know about a topic, what you still need to know, and the gaps you need to fill when creating an argument. The point is to turn vague feelings or half-formed thoughts into actual words you can work with later. This act of getting something written down is how brainstorming helps you overcome that stuck feeling and get started. Brainstorming often surprises you with identifying/locating/noticing connections or angles you didn't realize. It improves the quality of your argument by giving you multiple options to choose from, rather than forcing the first idea you have.

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL BRAINSTORMING

- Keep it short and fun: Set aside 10-15 minutes max per session, so you don't burn out.
- Change your setting: Try brainstorming in a different room, outside, or with music.
- Don't censor yourself: The weird or silly idea might be the one that sparks something brilliant.
- Choose the tools that feel easiest: pen and paper, phone notes, a word processor, or voice memos.
- If you're still stuck: talk it out with a friend, tutor, or instructor.

COMMON BRAINSTORMING TECHNIQUES

Here are some practical methods to try. Pick one that fits your style, or mix them.

Freewriting

Set a timer for 5-10 minutes and write nonstop about what you know or have read about your topic. Don't stop to fix grammar or think too hard, just keep your pen or fingers moving. If you get stuck, write "I'm stuck" and keep going. This will build your momentum and lead to unexpected creativity and insight.

Looping

Do a quick freewrite, as explained above, then read it and pick the most interesting sentence or idea. Start a new freewrite focused on that one thing. Repeat a few times to zoom in on the heart of your topic.

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Listing

Make a simple list of words, phrases, or questions related to your topic. Jot down anything that comes to mind: facts, examples, opinions, questions, or random thoughts and ideas. Don't worry about the order. The goal of listing is to gather a broad range of ideas so you can identify the most relevant points for your essay.

Clustering/Mind Mapping

Write your main idea in the middle of a page and circle it. Then branch out with lines to related ideas, and keep branching from those. This technique is visual and can help you see the relationships among various points within the topic. With this, you might end up with clusters of connected thoughts that can become paragraphs.

Asking Questions

Pretend you're a reporter interviewing yourself. Answer the 6 journalistic questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how? Add extras like "so what?," "who cares?," or "what if?". Answering these questions allows you to look at your topic from every angle, helping you find a clear focus and a strong purpose for your thesis statement. These questions challenge your initial ideas about the topic to ensure it has significance and relevance for your writing.

Cubing

Imagine your topic is a cube with six sides. For each side, answer one of these prompts. This systematic approach ensures you examine your topic from multiple, structured angles and generate a comprehensive, multi-faceted set of notes:

1. Describe it (what does it look like?)
2. Compare it (what is it similar to?)
3. Associate it (what does it make you think of?)
4. Analyze it (break it down)
5. Apply it (how does it work in real life?)
6. Argue for/against it. (look at the topic from different angles)

WHAT TO DO AFTER YOU BRAINSTORM

Once you have a messy page of notes, now what?

- Look for patterns. What ideas keep showing up? That might be your main focus or thesis statement.
- Cross out or set aside anything that no longer fits your main idea.
- Group related ideas; this can turn into an outline.
- Pick your favorite point and start drafting a body paragraph from there.

COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

Writers sometimes think brainstorming has to look organized from the start, but that's the opposite of what it is. They judge ideas too early and shut down good ones, or skip the step of brainstorming because "I'll just think it through in my head." Most of the time, getting it on paper (or on a screen) makes everything clearer, and brainstorming is one of the most reliable ways to get unstuck and make writing feel less overwhelming.