


BRAINSTORMING



Stirring Up the Winds – Getting Started

Break down the topic – write it out!

General Topic: What are the books/sources, class themes, terms, etc. that this paper will address?

Specific Subtopic or Required Question: What specific question[s] am I asked to answer?

No specific prompt? – write out your own!

General Goal: What are the books/sources, class themes, terms, etc. that I might like to address?

Specific Subtopic or Required Goal: What questions do I have about these sources or ideas?

Generating Electricity – Brainstorming Techniques

FREEWRTING – Freewriting can help alleviate the pressure to relay perfect, complete ideas from your brain to the paper, and it can free your thoughts to pursue paths and connections between ideas that may not have been immediately observable to you. Think of freewriting as a stream of consciousness, an unmediated path from your mind to the paper or screen: the act might force out some thoughts you are hesitating to articulate or help you visualize the methods by which you can reach conclusions.

Set a time limit for yourself [5 – 10 minutes], read over your assignment prompt and topic breakdowns, take a deep breath, and **WRITE** – without pausing – for the entire duration of your allotted time. **DO NOT STOP**, even if you run out of things to say [write, “Why am I getting stuck here?”], disagree with an earlier thought [write, “That might not be correct, but...”], or forget where a point is going.

- **DO NOT THINK ABOUT GRAMMAR, SPELLING, OR SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION.**

At the end of the allotted time [but not before!] go back and reread what you have generated. Highlight ideas that might go together, ideas you feel like you can expand upon, and ideas that might be suggestive of a thesis.

LISTING – Like freewriting, listing helps to create an unmediated avenue from your brain to the paper, but instead of spinning an uninterrupted thread of ideas, it encourages you to pluck out individual thoughts, words, or questions as they come. Listing might be a more natural form of brainstorming for those who think sequentially or find comfort in organization.

Set a time limit for yourself, write out your general and specific topics/questions [or an initial thesis idea, if you have one], take a deep breath, and **START PLUCKING!** List the individual words, phrases, themes, questions, arguments, counterarguments, etc. as they occur to you when you think about the topic heading. If you find yourself losing momentum, look at your list and see if any of the words trigger something new – or if any of the words are general terms that might need some unpacking.

- **BE SPECIFIC!** Assume at this stage that nothing is self-explanatory.

After you have generated a list [or a few], try to color-code, copy & paste, or otherwise reorganize your terms and see how they relate. You might also identify key counterarguments to keep in mind as you craft your thesis.

CLUSTERING – Clustering (also known as webbing or mapping, depending on your end product) is another method through which you can start generating, even if you do not yet have clear ideas or a thesis. Clustering might be a helpful brainstorming tactic if you tend to think spatially or visually. Like listing, it allows you to record your ideas in fragments as they come, but it encourages you to consider how your ideas, key words, etc. relate to each other and relate to your main themes or questions.



CLUSTERING continued.

Choose a word [or general topic] that will be central to your paper, and situate it in the center of your paper. As you reflect upon your topic and specific questions, record your thoughts and key terms as branches/clusters stemming from the central word/phrase – or stemming from each other.

- If words are coming to you that do not seem to immediately relevant, write them down anyway!
- Some clusters will spawn new clusters, and others will not seem to go anywhere. If a particular idea seems exhausted, return to the central word and see if it takes you off on a new cluster.

After your paper is full, or you feel you have completely exhausted your mental source, start **CLUSTERING!** Circle ideas that seem to go together and link relationships with lines or arrows. Dense clusters might indicate fruitful topics to pursue, and unclustered words could show you which ideas are dead ends.

ASKING QUESTIONS – THE BIG SIX (**Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How**) are the six fundamental questions journalists ask as they research and craft news stories. By asking yourself [and attempting to answer] the Big Six questions about your topic or assignment, you might discover a potential thesis or organizational strategy. You might also pursue other types of questions, such as comparisons/contrasts, definitions, and relationships to deduce what sort of questions your topic generates AND which questions you feel you can answer.

Using the Big Six as a guide, write out some variations of the following questions as they pertain to your central idea or assignment question:

- **Who does this topic concern? Who is/are the subject[s] of my analysis or interpretation?**
- **What is this subject accomplishing? What is it/he/she trying to accomplish?**
- **Where/how can the implications of this idea be seen?**
- **When did/does this idea emerge? Why? How?**

After you have generated some questions about your topic, attempt to answer them. Evaluate which questions you have elaborated upon and which questions stumped you. Both might be potential sources of a thesis.

CUBING – Cubing asks you to consider your topic from **six sides**, or perspectives. By imagining your central idea from the six different points of approach, you might discover new interpretive angles or see more clearly the way different aspects of your question relate to each other. By providing a structural framework, cubing may be a helpful exercise if you prefer linear or organized thinking methods.

Write your central topic/question at the top of the page, and allot yourself 3 – 5 minutes to approach the topic with the following six objectives:

- **DESCRIBING:** Physically describe your topic. What does it look like? What are its parts?
- **COMPARING:** How is your topic similar to or different from other topics in the same theme?
- **ASSOCIATING:** What other ideas and experiences does your topic make you think of? Why?
- **ANALYZING:** How are the different aspects/components of your topic related?
- **APPLYING:** What uses does your topic have? What other problems can it help explain?
- **ARGUING:** What arguments can you make in support of or against your topic?

Reread your six sides to determine which approaches could yield an interesting path to pursue, which might need more research, and which could spark a thesis idea.

Washing Away the Muck – Organizing

After you have tried out one or more brainstorming techniques, try to hone in on the ideas or notions that you may have circled around multiple times – or identify the trains of thought that inspired the most active storms.

At this stage you might also attempt to identify the specific question you would like to answer or to articulate a thesis statement. If your brainstorm has not quite subsided enough to reveal a clear central argument, try to outline some of your key ideas or focused freewrite a draft of a body paragraph.