



brainstorming

“[T]here is always a point in the writing of a piece when I sit in a room literally papered with false starts and cannot put one word after another and imagine that I have suffered a small stroke, leaving me apparently undamaged but actually aphasic.”

-Joan Didion, literary legend

The point: You're not alone if you feel that starting is the scariest part of writing. Brainstorming is an important part of the writing process. It can be incredibly hard, so here are some ways to make it as painless as possible.

The purpose of brainstorming is to try to come up with as many ideas as possible. Right now, you don't have to worry if your ideas are good or bad, as the point is simply to think of as many possibilities as you can. You don't need to plan the entire paper, as your goal currently is simply to think of a direction for your research and writing to take.

Research

The first step to brainstorming is collecting general, broad information about your topic. The more general information you have about your prompt, the easier it will be to think of specific ideas regarding the topic, thesis, and support to go into more targeted research on later. Find reputable sources and dive deeper into what interests you about the topic. Places to start: assigned readings from class, your textbook, and journal and newspaper articles in the field.

Next, narrow down to more specific information that will help you develop your perspective. What kinds of readings/sources are mentioned in your assignment description? Examples could include: scholarly articles and book reviews.

Now, the fun part! For best brainstorming outcomes, DO:

- Start early! It can take time to thoughtfully consider possibilities, so this definitely isn't something to save for the last minute.
- Make a goal. Even though this is a very informal process, you still need to have a goal in mind of what you need to accomplish. This could mean identifying your topic, supporting arguments, idea to explore, etc.

- Talk to someone else! It is much easier to notice what interests you about a topic when you can compare perspectives with someone in the same class, program, or a writing tutor who is trained to help!

DO NOT:

- Be afraid of collecting too much information; it's better than having too little! Remember that in this step you want lots of possibilities available to you, and it can be narrowed down later.
- Worry about formality, grammar, or polishing phrasing in this stage-free write, bullet point, doodle it, map it, etc. (Check the next page for brainstorming exercises!)
- Get stuck making it perfect. You don't need to have the perfect idea, or the entire paper planned out. Right now, you just need to focus on generating possibilities so you can choose how to direct your research and writing.
- Assume you have to do it alone!

BRAINSTORMING EXERCISES

1. Concept Map | *The goal: visualize the information you've retained from research and how ideas are related*

Draw a bubble in the middle of a page. Write your topic/main idea in it. Now draw bubbles off of that central one, each one answering the 'what,' 'where,' 'when,' 'why,' and 'how' of the main idea. For the third set of bubbles off of those, write any of your thoughts to the following questions:

- **Who is not mentioned in this concept map and should be? Who should play more of a role in this topic? Who should not be involved?**
- **Where does the topic take place and why? How would it be different if it took place elsewhere?**
- **Why did this topic develop the way it did? Why is it important to learn about it?**
- **How did this topic become important? Who is deciding it's important? Should it be more talked about than it is?**

2. Freewrite | *The goal: Move ideas from your brain to the page so you can see that you have valuable insights and writing obstacles are almost always solvable.*

Set a timer for 15 minutes. Write everything you know and think about the assignment topic in the order it comes to you. Do NOT stop to correct grammar or ideas. Even if all you can think of is "I hate this assignment because it is boring and complicated,"

write that down. Lay everything out the way your stream of consciousness tells you to. If you stop coming up with ideas, write your thoughts about what is stopping you and any obstacles you foresee in coming up with ideas for the assignment.

When the timer goes off, take a break for 10 minutes. Then, come back to your writing and highlight the ideas that seem interesting, surprising, or helpful to direct your next step, whether that's further research, drafting, or more brainstorming.

3. Journaling | *The goal: Work through writing anxiety and writers' block by validating why writing is hard, identifying obstacles, and coming up with options for how you may surpass them.*

Set a timer for 15 minutes. Write how you feel about how your research is going so far, the class, the assignment, and other similar challenges you've had in the past.

Identify where any confusion or insecurities lie with this assignment and what may help you, versus what would not help.