

Brainstorming Techniques

Chapman University Writing Center

Sam Risak

Adapted from the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill Writing Center

Do you have a paper or assignment that you just can't figure out how to start? Maybe you are feeling totally blank, uninspired, and anxious because you feel so blank and uninspired? Or maybe you have so many ideas that you are getting overwhelmed by the thought of having to choose only one? Whether it's generating new ideas or organizing random thoughts into concrete steps, brainstorming can help give your ideas somewhere to go. Below, you'll find some techniques that might help you pick out a direction to start.

1. Free Write

This one is simple: Grab a piece of paper or a blank Word document, set a timer for 15 minutes, write, and don't stop writing. Write even if it isn't about the topic you have to write about. Write even if you can't think of anything to write—write that down. At the end of the 15 minutes, you'll have a lot of filler on the page, but you'll also find some thoughts you didn't know you had on the topic. Take these thoughts, copy them onto another page, and set about making an outline from there.

2. Map it

Step 1: List. Take a sheet of paper and write your topic in the center, using no more than a few words. Moving out from the center, fill in the open space with as many related terms as you can think of. Write fast and when you run out of ideas, try writing opposites or loosely related ideas—anything at all that keeps your hand moving until the page is full.

Step 2: Cluster. Grab a colored pen or pencil and circle terms that seem related and then draw a line connecting the circles. When you run out of terms that seem linked, start with another color and another term. Continue this process until you have found all the associated terms. (It's okay if some of the terms go un-circled.)

Step 3: Draw Conclusions. When you stand back and survey your work, you should see a set of clusters. From here, you can start to form conclusions about the related terms and think about how you might approach your topic.

3. Consider Purpose and Audience

a. **Purpose:** What are you trying to do? Are you trying to inform? Convince? Describe? What about? Why in this form?

b. **Audience:** Who would read this paper (outside of the professor)? What does that audience need to know? What do they already know? Figuring out who you are writing to and what they need explained can help you organize your thoughts.

4. The “Big Six”

Ask yourself the questions that journalists rely on to thoroughly research a story: Who?, What?, When?, Where?, Why?, and How?. Answer each question with thoughts related to your topic.

5. Listing/Bulleting

Put the title or topic of your paper at the head of your paper. Think of three or four categories that would serve as subtopics based on features could you use to divide it (For example, if you were writing a paper on *The Scarlet Letter*, you might create subtopics based on the symbolism of the “A,” the author Nathaniel Hawthorne’s life, other literary works that were published during this time period, etc.) Beneath each subtopic, leave a few inches of space where you can list your thoughts about the topic. Once you’ve filled the page, review your work to see what kinds of patterns emerge.

Created 12/7/2020.