

Writing an Essay: Brainstorming

Note: These reference guides do not take the place of assignment guidelines



Brainstorming is the first step to any writing assignment or activity you do. It is when you begin generating ideas, exploring those ideas, and developing what will become your topic, thesis, and, ultimately, your essay.

Important Tips to Remember before you Begin:

- First and foremost, *don't panic!* Brainstorming, like all aspects of writing, is a process. Allow yourself some time to sit and think about what you would like to see in your assignment
- *Write everything down.* Even if it doesn't seem like it is important, it might lead you to a great idea later. Trust yourself and put it on paper.
- *Remove distractions from your work area* (cell phones, computers, mp3 players, etc.). This will help you focus on the task at hand.

Sometimes brainstorming can be intimidating—staring at a blank page with nothing but an open prompt can leave you uncertain of where to go next. Luckily, there a number of ways to brainstorm, and the only measure of whether a technique is “right” or “wrong” is how well it works for you. Don't be worried if something that worked for your composition essay doesn't work for your lab report—that's totally normal! Just keep trying out techniques, and you'll find the ones that work for you.

Strategy One: Brain Dump

A “Brain Dump” is exactly what it sounds like. After reading your assignment, give yourself a few minutes to absorb it. Then, set a timer for five minutes and grab a pencil and paper. Start your timer, and don't stop writing until it goes off. Even if things that are unrelated to your paper cross your mind, write them down. The purpose of this exercise is to prevent you from over thinking.

After your timer goes off, reflect on what you have. Go through what's written and cross out anything that isn't relevant to your topic, then look at what is left. Do you have some possible body paragraph topics? What about the start of a topic sentence or thesis? You can repeat this process numerous times and then, when you feel like you have enough information, you can consider starting to develop and outline.

Strategy Two: Outline

You have probably seen an outline before, been given an outlining handout by a professor, or even done one for another paper. No matter what those outlines looked like, remember every outline is different and there is no right or wrong way to do one. However, if your professor has asked for a specific set-up to your outline, try to make sure you complete the outline following their guidelines.

If you need a place to start, see the attached page for a sample outline template.

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Strategy Three: Word Web

This strategy is great a great resource if you find that you relate to things better by seeing the connections between them. A template for one is on the attached page.

Start with a word that either is your topic or relates to it, and write it in the inner circle. From that point, try to think of things (words, images, current events, ect.) that would relate to what you want to focus on. If one of your related points makes you think of additional ideas, you can add new bubbles and continue to explore the idea further. After you feel that you have exhausted your topic, look for similarities or differences in the ideas that you wrote down, interesting connections that you made, or unexpected ideas that you thought of that you could discuss in your paper. As you narrow down your thesis, you can use this exercise to examine your paper's sub-claims or counter-arguments as well.

Don't Forget:

Not all brainstorming methods work for everyone, and you may find that some of these methods work better than others. Don't be afraid to try a few different ones before finding the strategy that works best, and be prepared for the fact that a method that works for one paper may not work for another. If you are every completely stuck on where to go next, don't be afraid to talk to your professor for recommendations and guidance, and feel free to visit the Writing Center with any brainstorming questions you might have.

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Outline Template

Topic: _____

Working Thesis: _____

Body Paragraph #1—Topic Sentence: _____

Main Points:

Body Paragraph #2—Topic Sentence: _____

Main Points:

Body Paragraph #3—Topic Sentence: _____

Main Points:

Conclusion: _____

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Word Web

