

## Brainstorming

Brainstorming can take many forms. Some writers like to write ideas down longhand. Others prefer the efficiency of typing into a Word document. Still others like to use more visual mediums, like a whiteboard and colored markers. Many writers like to start with a blank page and jot down ideas in no particular order or pattern. Others like a more structured method, such as the one you will find on this handout.

You can work through the following steps by yourself, with a friend or study group, or with a consultant in the Writing Center. The back of this page is a form that you can use to help guide your process, but you can also complete these steps on a blank piece of paper, whiteboard, or other writing surface of your choice.

- 1) To start, make sure you understand your prompt for the assignment. Read it over carefully. If anything is unclear, ask your instructor. Then, re-write the prompt in your own words. Be sure to include the type of assignment (opinion essay, research paper, literary analysis, etc.) and any special requirements, like the number of sources or page length.
- 2) Next, list as many topics as possible that you might like to write about. Depending on the type of assignment, these topics could be very broad (open-ended research papers) or more narrow (papers that ask you to form an argument about a specific subject). You don't need complete sentences or even complete ideas for this step – just think of as many potential topics as possible.
- 3) Once you've finished brainstorming topics, look over list and choose the most promising one. Then, spend 2-3 minutes writing down any words, ideas, or phrases that come to mind when you think of that topic.
- 4) Repeat the previous step, but this time using one of the elements from the list you made in step 3.
- 5) Now, look back at all the ideas that you have generated. They should be arranged from more general topics (step 2) to specific ideas (step 4). Highlight or circle the ideas that seem like they could fit together. Then, go back and look at the prompt. Do these ideas seem like they could answer the question that your paper is asking? Do they fulfill the purpose of the assignment that you identified in step 1? Will they fill the required number of pages? If the answer to any of these questions is no, you may need to repeat some or all of the above steps.

### Tips

- Don't get discouraged! You may need to repeated the steps in this handout multiple times in order to come up with an idea that accurately addresses every aspect of the prompt. You might even need to repeat the process after you've done some research or begun writing.
- Try setting a timer for steps 2-4. A small amount of informal pressure can help distract your inner perfectionist and let your ideas flow freely.
- Once you've come up with ideas, try phrasing them as questions that your paper might answer. For example, you could turn "Wolverines – endangered – habitat loss" into "What are the major threats to wolverine habitat?" or "feminism – *The Awakening* – sexuality" into "How does the portrayal of sexuality in *The Awakening* relate to the novel's feminism?"
- It's never too early to think about why your ideas matter. Even as you form these preliminary questions, pause to ask yourself why your audience should care about the answers.
- Know that your ideas will evolve as you research and write your paper. This is a natural part of the writing process.

**1) Prompt: re-write the assignment prompt in your own words and list any specific requirements**

**2) Topics: list as many potential topics as you can in 3-5 minutes**

- |    |     |
|----|-----|
| 1. | 6.  |
| 2. | 7.  |
| 3. | 8.  |
| 4. | 9.  |
| 5. | 10. |

**3) Ideas I: choose one of the above topics and write down words/phrases/ideas that relate to it**

**4) Ideas II: choose one element from #3 and write down words/phrases/ideas that relate to it**

**5) Compare the words/ideas in the boxes above with the prompt**