



GENERATING IDEAS & TOPICS FOR WRITING

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Experienced writers understand that their ideas for writing don't just happen; those ideas need to be *created* and *developed* through the use of deliberate *heuristic strategies*—systematic strategies for generating ideas. Following are descriptions of some of the most common idea-generating strategies. Keep in mind that experienced writers typically use *combinations* of these various strategies, depending on their purposes for writing, their topics, and information they may already have. In other words, be *flexible* in your use of the following techniques. Some may work better than others for different writers and/or topics.

Brainstorming. The most immediate way to begin exploring a topic is also the most simple and familiar: *Talk about it* with your friends, your classmates, a tutor, and/or your instructor. This exploratory talk can work effectively for you in two ways:

- As you talk about your topic, you can hear your mind at work, articulating what you think about the topic and what you most need to know about it.
- You can also find someone else, another instructor or someone who works in a related job, for example, who knows about your topic and talk with him or her, listening carefully and taking notes.

Freewriting. Freewriting is a method of exploring a topic by writing about it—or whatever else it brings to mind—for an *uninterrupted* period of time and *without concern for form or correctness*. Begin by setting a time limit for yourself (5 or 10 minutes). Then let your mind wander over your topic, writing down everything that occurs to you. Don't stop for anything; if necessary, write "I can't think of what to write next" over and over until something else occurs to you. Use the full time you allotted to write. When the time is up, look at what you've written. You are sure to find much that is unusable, irrelevant, or nonsensical. But, you will also find important insights and ideas to build your paper on.

Looping. Looping is a form of *focused* freewriting that narrows or focuses a topic in 5-minute stages, or loops. Begin by freewriting for 5 minutes. Then, read over what you have written to identify a central thread or important idea in those thoughts and begin writing for a second 5 minutes, following that thread or idea wherever it leads you. Keep this looping process going until you feel comfortable that you have discovered and developed a clear and productive angle on your topic that will focus your essay.

Listing. Like freewriting, listing is a method of *free association* of ideas. Just let your mind wander freely over your topic, jotting down key words as they come to you. Don't even bother trying to write out your ideas in complete paragraphs or sentences. Just a random list of related words and phrases is all you should aim for.

Clustering. Clustering is a way of building on the ideas generated by freewriting or listing and organizing those ideas into a *visual diagram or chart*. Like a more formal outline, a cluster diagram is especially helpful in understanding and representing the *relationships among ideas*. Begin by writing down a topic or main idea in the middle of a blank piece of paper and circle it. In a ring around that main idea, write down what you see as the component parts (or subtopics) of the main topic. Circle each and draw a line from it to the main idea. Think of any ideas, examples, facts, or other details relating to each subtopic. Write each down near the appropriate subtopic, circle it, and draw a line connecting it—the new information—to the subtopic. Repeat this process until you exhaust your ideas about the topic. Some trails may dead-end, but you will still have generated some extended trains of thought to follow and many useful connections among ideas to explore in your essay.

Reporters' Questions. A more structured way of finding something to say about your topic is to ask the kinds of questions news reporters ask when they write their stories. Your answers to these questions will allow you to explore your topic in an orderly and systematic fashion. Ask yourself the following six questions: *Who? What? Where? When? How? And Why?* Keep in mind that these questions can be repeated to explore your topic from a variety of different perspectives (e.g., *Who* are the characters I'm describing? *Who* is my audience? *What* is my main idea? *What* am I trying to accomplish in this paper?). Also, each question can be used to help develop and elaborate on the others (e.g., *What* happened? *Where* and *when* did it happen? *Who* did it? *How* was it done? *Why* was it done?).