

Generating Ideas

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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 *prewriting strategies*—systematic strategies for generating information to write about. Following is a description of some of the most common prewriting strategies. Keep in mind that experienced writers typically use *combinations* of these various strategies, depending on their purposes for writing, the topic they are writing about, and the kinds of information they already have to write about. In other words, be *flexible* in your use of the following techniques

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 Writing Center consultant, and your teacher. This exploratory talk can work effectively for you in three ways:

1. 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.
2. You can also seek out those who know about your topic and talk with them, listening carefully and taking notes.
3. You can find out what others want or need to know about your topic as potential readers.

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. However, you will also find important insights and ideas to build your paper on.

Looping

Looping is a form of *recursive and increasingly directed* 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 and phrases as they come to you. Don't even bother trying to write out your ideas in complete paragraphs or sentences. Just a random list or collage of more or less associated words and phrases is all you should aim for.

Clustering or Mapping

Clustering, also called mapping, 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*. The following steps will help you create a cluster diagram:

- 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 related subtopic, circle it, and draw a line connecting 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?*
- *When?*
- *What?*
- *How?*
- *Where?*
- *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 am 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?).

Tagmemic Questions

Tagmemic questions are another highly structured method of generating information that explores a topic from 3 separate perspectives

1. Think of your topic as *a thing or separate entity*. What are its defining characteristics? What separates your topic from other topics? What makes it unique?
2. Think of your topic as *a process or a part of a cycle*. How did an action occur or unfold? How much can your subject change and still be itself?
3. Think of your topic as *a part of a system*. How does one action fit into a broader scope of actions? How does your topic fit into the larger systems of which it is a part?