

BRAINSTORMING AS CONVERSATION

Sitting at your desk in a silent room, your laptop open to a blank screen -- you might relate to the dread some students feel when it comes to brainstorming for a new writing assignment. Especially when writing your first big college paper, approaching writing this way can be an isolating and frustrating experience, but it doesn't have to be!



At its essence, writing is a social act that takes place between writer and reader. In every text, the writer and reader interact with each other and make meaning from the work despite potentially never meeting face to face. No piece of writing exists in a vacuum; instead, writing takes into account and plays off of the social, cultural, and physical context it's written in as well as the reader's values, pre-existing knowledge on your topic, and purpose for reading your work. It may not seem like it at first, but writing really is social communication!

For more details see: Palmquist, M. (1994-2020). Understanding Writing Situations. The WAC Clearinghouse. Colorado State University. <https://wac.colostate.edu/resources/writing/guides/>.



For the brainstorming methods below, check out how each looks at brainstorming as a conversation and writing as a social act. By taking this approach, you might find your perspective on the writing process changes for good -- and for the better!

Free Write



Are you the kind of person who thrives when talking about your ideas to someone else?

A free write is the written version of spilling out all your ideas in a conversation. No need to worry about everything making sense at this stage. Think of it like a word vomit -- you just want to write out everything and anything related to your assignment as you would talk it out with someone else. That means a free write can feel very similar to a conversation with yourself as you figure out what you already know and what you want to explore.

For a free write, sit down and start writing about anything that comes to mind related to your topic. Just see what ideas you come up with as you go!

Write for about 10-15 minutes, then read over what you wrote to see what you might want to use for your paper. You can do multiple free writes for different parts of your assignment as well. Maybe you know what your main argument will be, but can't think of any good counter-arguments. Try a free write focused on the opposing ideas related to your topic!

The main takeaway: it's just an open conversation, but on paper.

Looping



Think about trying to explain a concept or idea to someone else. You might start out with a broad overview for context before narrowing in on a particular aspect to elaborate further.

As you keep going, your explanation gets more and more focused in order to really communicate the concept or idea well. Once you have this scenario pictured, you're halfway to looping!

Consider looping an in-depth version of a free write; it takes a little bit more structuring, but might help you clarify your ideas further just as you would in explaining an idea in a conversation.

For the same time length as free writing, write out any thoughts and ideas, then reassess what you've written when time's up to look for a sentence or two with the most compelling point.

Alternatively, you can branch off from a sentence to re-word it into something new. The takeaway: continue writing from that sentence/idea for another 5-10 minutes, repeating the process multiple times as you progressively pin down what it is you want to focus on in your piece. The end result -- a clear and specific direction for your paper!

*(Adapted from Peter Elbow's *Writing with power: Techniques for mastering the writing process*)*

Class Discussions

Oftentimes, when we discuss ideas with other people, we hear perspectives and thoughts entirely unique and unexpected. These can be great starting points for a paper! Think back to discussions you had related to the prompt in class. Which one's were especially interesting to you? Did any topic or argument stand out in particular? See if anything that struck you in class could potentially be turned into your paper's topic/argument!

For more on collaborative learning, see: Bruffee, K. (1984). Collaborative learning and the "conversation of mankind." *College English*, 46(7), 635-652. doi:10.2307/376924



You might combine brainstorming methods here; after thinking back to class discussions, pull a topic and do a free write to keep the ideas flowing! Again, don't get bogged down in the writing component. Focus on the discussion and how it affected you, then "talk it out" on paper.

Office Hours

If you'd rather start brainstorming with someone else and want an insider's perspective on the prompt, take advantage of your professor's office hours and talk it out! Not only does your professor of course teach the class, but they also wrote the prompt and should be able to help you figure out what topics make sense in terms of the particular assignment.

You might not have any idea of where to start, but if you can, try to bring a list of topics discussed in class or that you came up with on your own to get a conversation started. It'll also continue to show your professor your commitment to the assignment! The takeaway: be prepared to have a critical discussion about your ideas and the material as you engage in thoughtful conversation regarding the direction you want to go.



Keep in mind: depending on the type of assignment, your professor may or may not be able to brainstorm in-depth with you (for example, on a midterm or final assignment).

For these assignments, also check whether there are limits for collaboration with peers.

Visit the HUB

Whether you have a few ideas or no clue where to start, any HUB Writing Partner will be more than happy to talk things out with you! You don't need to have anything written down. Many writers visit the HUB specifically to talk out their prompt and potential ideas with someone who's there to listen and engage with you. Just bring the prompt and be ready for a thoughtful conversation!

**Get started to
see which
method works
for you!**



the HUB **THINK. WRITE. SPEAK.**