Brainstorming

This handout will give you techniques to help you start your writing assignment and keep you writing through the revision process. Brainstorming can help you choose a topic, develop an approach to a topic, or deepen your understanding of your topic’s potential.

Technique 1: Freewriting

Freewriting allows your thoughts to flow as they will, putting pen to paper and writing down whatever comes to mind. Remember: Silence your inner critic! Do not concern yourself with surface-level issues such as spelling and punctuation. This exercise is intended to help you overcome your anxieties and write things you might not have if you were being too self-conscious.

While freewriting, you could set a time limit (15 minutes) or a space limit (3 notebook pages) and continue writing until you have reached that goal. Remember: Keep writing! Word must follow word, regardless of relevance.

Example:
“This paper is supposed to be about the economics of communism but even though I’ve read the books and gone over the presentations I still have nothing to say and I’ve felt this way for the past 3 minutes and still have 12 minutes left and I wonder if I’ll keep thinking nothing during every minute but I’m not sure if it matters that I am babbling and I don’t know what else to say about this topic and it’s a beautiful day here which makes me think of the beach which reminds me of that time I went on a cruise to the Caribbean which makes me wonder what it’s like to live in Cuba…”

When you are done, go over your text and look for the gems and insights that appear. Even if there are no diamonds, hopefully, this exercise will have helped you quiet some of the chaos surrounding your thoughts about the topic or helped motivate you to face the paper’s topic with more confidence.

Technique 2: Listing and Bulleting

Jot down a bulleted list of ideas or phrases based on your general topic, one or more aspects of your thesis, or a word or phrase that is the complete opposite of your original idea.

Example:
Your general assignment is to write about changes in inventions over time. Your thesis claims that “the 20th century presented a large number of inventions to advance US society by improving upon the standard of living in 19th-century society.”

You might brainstorm two lists on opposing sides of your thesis:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>20th century inventions, positive societal impact</th>
<th>20th century inventions, negative societal impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Polio vaccine</td>
<td>• Atomic bomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Air conditioning</td>
<td>• Karaoke machine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Listing and buleting allows you to clearly map the aspects of your thesis. This technique helps you gather more perspective on the topic and ensure your thesis is solid or, at any rate, alerts you to any holes in your claim.
Technique 3: Clustering/Mapping/Webbing

Using this technique, you will jot down lots of different terms and phrases onto a sheet of paper in a random fashion. Later, go back to link the words together into a “map” or “web” that forms groups. Allow yourself to begin with chaos, knowing that you will make sense of it soon.

Example:
Your assignment is to write about the how the French Revolution influenced modern democratic ideals.

Your assignment may seem broad and overwhelming; however, by using a brainstorming map such as this, you simplify the topic and make it less daunting.

Here, you see an example of a simple, first draft of an idea map. Subsequent brainstorming sessions will help you define your ideas more succinctly and hone a clearer thesis.