Brainstorming

Inquire: Searching for the Beginning

Overview

Getting started on a project is usually pretty easy if you already have an idea of what you want to do. But, without that original idea as a framework – a starting point – how do you know where to begin? This is where brainstorming becomes useful. Brainstorming is sort of a catch-all term for various techniques that are designed for jump-starting your thought process, unlocking your creative potential, and allowing you to start putting together ideas that you can use as the basis for a project.

Big Question: How do I find the starting ideas for a project?

Watch: How to Get Started on Getting Started

Getting started on a project is usually pretty easy if you already have an idea of what you want to do. But without that original idea to build off of, how do you know what first step to take? While banging your head against a wall is a solution often talked about but rarely used, this obviously isn’t the best way to move a project forward. Instead of head-banging, consider brainstorming. Brainstorming is sort of a catch-all term for various techniques that are designed to jumpstart your thought process, unlock your creative potential and allow you to pull together ideas that you can use as the basis for a project.

Brainstorming is a strategy often used in group settings to enable group members to introduce, react to, and revise ideas. “Try this.” “What about if we did that?” Particularly effective in problem-solving situations, brainstorming allows for multiple perspectives and ideas to be considered. Brainstorming in writing follows a similar path, although the ideas put forth are all your own. This allows you to get ideas for what you want to write out of your head so that you can consider the direction you want to take your essay. Generally speaking, brainstorming techniques use word association or topical questions to help focus your mind on various specific aspects of a given subject, or even to find a subject to start with.

It is important to note that the goal of brainstorming is not to develop a final version of a project, but simply to help you move forward with discovering the ideas you want to use to get started. While this can be a useful tool, it is also limited. Brainstorming is most successful when you are able to tune-out your inner critic and instead listen clearly to your unique creative voice. You should never let the fear of failure keep you from trying something, but it is especially important that you allow yourself the freedom to create when you are looking for that great idea that will get your project going. With brainstorming, the goal is quantity not quality of ideas. Once you begin writing, you can winnow out the ideas with less merit. The brainstorming session itself, though, is a “no judgment” zone.
What are some ways you have discovered ideas? Were you able to find them with ease, or did you have difficulty? Do you think that brainstorming will help you get started on a project?

Read: Brainstorming Techniques

Overview: More than Banging Your Head Against the Wall

Brainstorming is generally thought of as a problem solving technique. In the case of writing, the problem you are trying to solve is knowing what idea or topic to write about, and how you want to structure what you write. There is no scientific process for this; rather, during brainstorming you use whatever works to get your ideas flowing. This is not about organizing your essay or creating a fully formed outline. Instead, your goal in brainstorming is to get to the root idea of what you want to write about so that you have a launching pad when you begin developing your project. There are no sure-fire ways of getting yourself to develop ideas; there are, however, a few techniques you can use to spark some thoughts on something you might be interested in writing about. Most of these techniques are focused on topic association, meaning you will be mining your thoughts on a given subject for an idea that you want to discuss in depth.

Making a List

Often, you will have a general, broadly defined subject to start with, whether it is has been assigned by the particular class you are in or is related to a subject you happen to be studying at the time. If you don’t have a topic to start from, a good way to find one is to make a list. You can generate a list of hobbies or interests you have, or a list of activities you do during the day. Simply write words down. This practice starts focusing your mind, which in turn enables you to begin the process of selecting ideas that you can build upon for a project.

Dissecting a Subject

One of the best ways to brainstorm is to take your subject apart and look at each component separately. To do this, ask yourself successively detailed questions about a subject. Start with a simple question, such as “What is a university?” Then add details to this question that relate to the subject, from “What is a university’s role in education?” to “What is a university’s role in providing education to lower income students?” Once you have a question that you feel is both interesting and specific enough, you can start building on that question by capturing it in a thesis statement. Alternately, you could start building an outline to address your question, and through that process determine its suitability as an essay topic.

The Six Journalistic Questions

This technique involves asking yourself the six one-word questions that classically make up journalistic articles: who, what, when, where, why, and how. Examine your subject, asking yourself these questions, and write down your answers. The goal here is to break down a subject into its component parts. For example, suppose your subject is World War II. “Who” might refer to the main political figures of the war, or the countries involved in the conflict. “What” might be the major events that took place, such as specific battles or the atrocities committed. “How” and “why” may refer to causes of the war, or the different decisions made by the leaders on the battlefield. There may be some overlap between your answers to these questions, which is good. Finding these connections between different aspects of a topic will help you identify ideas that you are interested in writing about.
Consider Multiple Sides of an Issue

If your subject is based around an issue, you can also consider the different sides of that issue, and the opinions and larger contexts associated with each of those sides. Understanding the various facets of an issue can broaden your approach, allowing for different, and perhaps more original ideas on how to analyze or argue about a subject. This can involve researching groups of people associated with different aspects of an issue, and this research itself is a form of brainstorming, since you are reading primary or secondary sources.

Read a Primary or Secondary Source

It’s important to remember that your sources of information can be used for brainstorming as well. As simple as it sounds, reading a primary or secondary source related to your subject or at the center of your subject can be a great foundation for ideas. Taking notes while you read, marking pages with passages that you find inspiring or relevant, and re-reading passages multiple times are simple but effective ways of using your sources to brainstorm ideas to discuss or use as the basis for a project. Remember when brainstorming with this approach to make sure that the ideas you are developing are your own original thoughts on a subject, and not simply the repeated opinions or outlooks of one of your sources.

Reflect: Is Brainstorming Necessary?

Poll

Some people find brainstorming more helpful than others. For some people, brainstorming an idea might seem like more of a distraction that keeps them from actually getting to work on a project. This is perfectly fine, so long as you aren’t restricting your own creativity for the sake of getting something done as quickly as possible.

Have you found brainstorming useful in the past?

- Yes, I have found it to be very useful
- I have brainstormed an idea before with mixed success
- I don’t usually find brainstorming useful
- I’ve never brainstormed an idea before

Expand: More Brainstorming Techniques

Getting More Involved in Brainstorming

While the techniques covered so far are relatively simple, there are slightly more involved brainstorming exercises that you can use if you feel the need to explore larger ideas, or if you find the previous techniques too simple or not sufficiently stimulating.

Freewriting

Freewriting is a free-associative exercise that involves writing, for a set amount of time, whatever comes into your head. The goal is to write without boundaries or fear of mistakes, allowing your mind to create without being burdened by criticism. You can use a short phrase or question to help yourself get started, however, don’t force yourself to try to stay on topic. Write for a short amount of time: 5-15 minutes. Once
you’ve finished, read over what you’ve written and circle any ideas that appeared during your freewriting session.

Group Brainstorming

Even though the focus in this lesson so far has been on individual writing related ideas, brainstorming can be either an individual activity or a group activity, which can be applied to a wide variety of projects. In a group setting, most of the techniques listed in this lesson can be simply reapplied by turning each activity into a group discussion. This usually works best with the techniques that are question-based, such as the Six Journalistic Questions method. Pooling your ideas together will allow your group to discuss and collectively decide what the best idea is for your project.

Clustering

Clustering is a free-associative exercise that uses words and basic concepts to build “idea maps” that will help you start thinking about the relationships between different concepts so that you can build a well-developed and focused project. This can be either an individual or group technique. Begin by writing a word or short phrase in the middle of a page or writing area and circle it. Then, write the first word that comes to mind when you read your first word. Circle that word, then draw a line connecting the two circles. Take a few minutes to continue doing this — writing words that come to mind from the words or short phrases you’ve written and connecting them with lines. Then, look at your idea map, looking for clusters of words that are connected to each other. Think about the relationships between these words and list any of these larger ideas.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Papers & Essays: Crash Course Study Skills #9
- A Crash Course video covering the basics of writing
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KlgR1q3UQZE

Brainstorming
- An extensive list of brainstorming techniques that can be helpful for a variety of projects
  https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/brainstorming/

Introduction to Prewriting (Invention)
- A resource with more help on prewriting
  https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/the_writing_process/prewriting/index.html

Lesson Glossary

**brainstorming**: techniques used for generating ideas to use as the basis for a larger project

**clustering**: a free-associative exercise that uses words and basic concepts to build “idea maps”

**freewriting**: a free-associative exercise that involves writing, for a set amount of time, whatever comes into your head

**primary source**: a direct source of information or material, usually a document written or artifact created during the events taking place, a work of fiction, or an autobiography
secondary source: a source about or extensively referencing a primary source, or written after an event by someone who did not take part in, or was not present at, the event

Check Your Knowledge

1. Brainstorming is _____.
   A. a scientific process for generating ideas
   B. not very effective
   C. the beginning of the process of formulating an idea
   D. a specific technique for formulating an idea

2. Using the six journalistic questions to brainstorm an idea is only effective for works of journalism.
   A. True
   B. False

3. When reading a primary or secondary source in order to brainstorm ideas, you should _____.
   A. disregard things stated as facts in a work of opinion
   B. only read the parts of sources that are directly related to your idea
   C. copy ideas completely from a source
   D. make sure the ideas you develop are your own thoughts and not simply the opinions or outlooks of one of your sources

Answer Key:
1. C  2. B  3. D

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