Stop staring at the blank page! Strategies for brainstorming

Writing is difficult. Understanding why writing is hard can help us to overcome some of these difficulties and can allow us to get some of our best ideas down on paper.

The inner critic vs. the creator

Throughout our school years, our teachers have taught us to be critical of own writing. They have taught us to be our own editors and inner critics. This is an important skill in writing. However, when we are trying to get our ideas down on paper, we need to set aside our critical editing thoughts and give ourselves the freedom to explore new ideas without judgment. If our editor or inner critic is particularly vigilant and vocal, we might experience writer's block, a period of time when we cannot write at all.

We can use writing as a tool to learn and to brainstorm as well as a tool to communicate. To do so, we have to practice silencing our inner critic until a later stage in the writing process when his/her input will be valuable.

Free writing

One of the best-known techniques to help writers put aside their inner critics is called free writing. When you free write, you write quickly without stopping and without paying attention to your spelling, grammar, punctuation or any of the formal rules of writing. Free writing is often throwaway writing. This means that it is not necessarily polished writing that will end up in your finished work. Instead, free writing helps you to develop thoughts that will form the basis for your final product.

To free write successfully, try to:
- Give yourself a time limit and set a timer. Some writers like to free write in short bursts of less than 15 minutes.
- Don't stop or slow down writing during this time. Don't stop even if you see mistakes on your page. You might want to turn off the automatic spell- and grammar checker on your computer so that you aren't distracted by these corrections.
- Recognize the voice of your inner critic and learn to put it aside. This takes practice after years of developing our critical muscles.
- Keep writing even when you are stuck and feel you have no new ideas. If you get stuck, you can write, "I am stuck" until new ideas come to your mind. Alternatively, if you are stuck, read your previous sentence and ask yourself a question about it. For instance, after you write, "I am stuck," you could ask, "Why am I stuck?" or "What do I mean by stuck?"
- If English is not your first language and you have an idea but can't express it well in English, use words or concepts from your first language to fill in the gaps. You can look up the words in English later.
- After you are done free writing, read what you have written and highlight any ideas that you would like to expand upon. Some writers will then take these highlighted ideas and free write upon them.

Focused free writing

When you are developing ideas for an assignment or presentation, you may want to use some focused free writing techniques to help you with that specific topic. These techniques help to give your free writing more structure. Below are a few focused free writing strategies.

Summary-Response-Reflection (SRR)

This free writing strategy helps you to understand material that you are learning. For instance, after reading a chapter in a textbook or listening to a lecture, you could try 15 minutes of SRR free writing. Spend the first five minutes of your free writing session summarizing what you have read or heard. In the second five minutes, respond to the new material by writing any questions that you may have about it, writing down what was not clear to you, what you liked or didn't like about the material, and any thoughts you may about the strengths or limitations of the material (i.e., did it make sense logically). In the last five minutes of the SRR free writing, try to connect the new material to other things that you are learning or that you already know.

Perl guidelines

The Perl guidelines are a series of questions that will help you to brainstorms ideas and topics for a paper. It is particularly useful to do the Perl guidelines at the beginning of a writing project, as they will help you to narrow down what you would like to write about. Some of the questions in the guidelines include:

- What would I like to write about? Write a list.
- What here draws my attention right now? What could I begin to write about, even if I'm not certain where it will lead?
- What makes this topic interesting to me? What's *important* about this that I haven't said yet? What's the *heart* of this issue?

You can find all of the Perl guideline questions here: http://www.focusing.org/perlprocess.html

Loop writing

Like the Perl guidelines, the loop writing technique involves asking yourself a series of questions. It is better to try loop writing later in your writing process, as it is most helpful when you have a topic for your project and you have some knowledge about your project.

Some of the loop writing questions include:

- Write your first thoughts, preconceptions, and prejudices about a topic.
- Write down the evolution of your thinking about this topic.
- Write portraits of people who are related to this topic.
- Write a dialogue between two opposing views on this topic.
- Write down any errors or lies about this topic.

You can find loop-writing questions by searching on the Internet for "loop writing."

Visual tools

You may find visual tools helpful with brainstorming. Visual tools can help us to understand the relationship between ideas in a way that writing doesn't make clear. Common visual brainstorming tools include mind maps, lotus blossom diagrams, and an argument map.
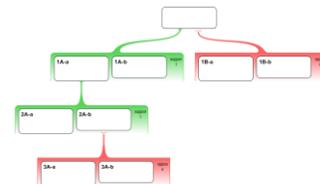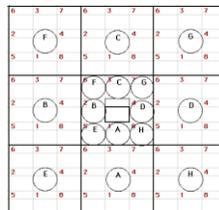
Mind maps are spider diagrams. You start with a key word and add connected ideas in branches. You can use mind mapping software to help you. (Image from Wikipedia).

Lotus blossom diagrams are grids. The central idea goes in the middle square. You must generate eight related ideas from the central idea (A-H). For each of these related ideas, you must generate eight more ideas. This is a more structured approach than free mind mapping. (Image from Wikipedia).

Argument maps are flow charts that help you isolate the components of your argument. At the top of the argument map, you identify your conclusion. Below, you identify premises and evidence that support your conclusion. You also identify any opposing premises or evidence. This is a very structured form of brainstorming. (Image from Wikipedia).