Brainstorming Exercises

What is Brainstorming?

Brainstorming (often called prewriting) is all of the writing and thinking about writing that you do before you actually start writing a paper. Many people brainstorm in their heads, which is fine, but all of the best writers know that the writing out your thought process makes a great writer even stronger. Brainstorming is a great way to generate ideas for your paper, keep those ideas organized, and save time when writing because it gives you a clear record of what you did and what you thought about doing.

Different Types of Brainstorming

There are many different types of brainstorming, but the ones this handout will focus on are: note taking, listing, clustering, freewriting, and outlining. Each type of brainstorming is a different tool and has its own strengths and uses; some people will use each type before they write a paper and others may only use one method to get started. Regardless of the method used, keeping a record of your thought process when writing is the best way to become a stronger writer and create better papers.

How to Brainstorm

Note taking

This is probably the easiest of all the types. Simply take notes whenever you read, hear, or think about something relevant to your paper. A good way to organize notes is to keep different ideas or notes from different sources on separate sheets of paper or note cards. Also, reading over the double entry journal handout for another useful format is a good idea as well.

Listing

Listing is another pretty easy method of brainstorming. To list, write down your topic, and then write out everything that you can think of that is related to your topic.

For example, if I were to write a paper about cats my list might include things like: costs, allergic reactions, food, breeds, temperament, batman, declawing, toys, neutering, and fleas.

After you finish your list you can cross out things that don’t fit or move into categorizing your list through clustering.
**Clustering**

Clustering (mapping, webbing) is when you take ideas and show how they are connected to each other and your main topic. The easiest way to do this is to take your list and write similar topics under a sub-heading and then draw a line connecting the sub-heading to your main topic. For example:

![Clustering Diagram]

**Freewriting**

Freewriting (also called a brain dump) is where you write for 5 or more minutes on your topic without stopping, thinking, or worrying about grammar, spelling, or anything else. If you run out of ideas when free writing you should write “I don’t know what to say” or something similar until you start to come up with more ideas. This process allows you to clear out some of your bad ideas before you start writing, and it can even help you to find really good ideas that you didn’t know you had.

**Outlining**

Outlining consists of creating a heading and putting your ideas, evidence, or resources under those headings so that you have a true sense of your paper’s layout. Outlining is a really good process to use when research is involved because it allows you to see what order your ideas go in and when you can fit your quotes, data, or paraphrases in your paper. Generally, an outline looks similar to this:

- **Topic:** Cats
- **Thesis:** In this paper, I will argue that cats......
- **A. Costs of keeping a cat**
  - **1. Food**
    - **I. Research shows that cat food can cost up to 5,000 dollars per year**
  - **B. Health concerns for cats and their owners**
    - **1. Declawing**
    - **2. Neutering**

Just keeping following this process until you are comfortable with where everything will go in your paper. For more information the TLC has a full handout on outlines.