

BRAINSTORMING AND FREE WRITING

“Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.”

Thomas Edison

Often times when you begin the process of writing a paper, you feel totally devoid of inspiration and simply do not know where to begin. Finding a topic or main argument for a paper is a difficult task for many writers, but one of the best ways to help you get started is to brainstorm.

Brainstorming is the process of coming up with ideas. You can brainstorm in order to decide on a topic, to explore approaches to your paper, or to deepen your understanding of a certain subject. Finding a brainstorming technique that works for you can greatly improve your writing efficiency. There are myriad brainstorming techniques to choose from. Take some time to try out several of these techniques and find one that suits your learning style:

- Key Word Clustering/Mapping:**
Write down key words or phrases relevant to your topic of interest. Draw lines to identify connections between them.
- Listing:**
Make a list of ideas and/or quotations about your potential topic. For each idea or quotation, write a question you would like your paper to answer, according to your interests.
- Asking Questions:**
Write down every question you have about your topic. Circle the ones you want to address in your paper.
- Making a Recipe:**
Write a recipe that lists all of the ingredients or basic ideas of your paper.
- Writing Dialogue:**
Write a dialogue where person A agrees with your point of view and person B disagrees. Try to be objective.
- Writing Letters:**
Write a letter to someone explaining why you agree or disagree with a particular point. Write another letter taking the other side. Write a letter to the author of the text you are working with. What questions do you have about the text?
- Free Writing:**
Write without stopping for a set amount of time, using one idea as your springboard. See reverse of this handout for further information about free writing.

Consultants in the Naropa Writing Center can give you explanations that are more detailed, engage in these activities with you, or dialogue with you about your results so you can move to the next phase of writing.

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Another effective way to jumpstart a writing assignment, whether you are just beginning or already mired down in revision, is to do a free write.

Free writing is an exercise in which you write without stopping for a set period of time with no consideration of grammar, punctuation, spelling, or even logical progression. The purpose of a free write is to rely on your subconscious to make associations and to keep your pen moving without editing each word or thought before it hits the page. This can be very useful in helping you put ideas down that you might not have previously considered.

The following are some guidelines for a successful free write:

- Set a time limit between five and thirty minutes, and try to stick to it—don't stop early or continue too long.
- Allow yourself to continue writing regardless of what your “inner critic” might say (or what your professor, parents, or best friend might say if s/he read what you were writing). Write fearlessly. This free write is for your eyes only.
- Don't stop for grammar, spelling, or word choice. In a free write, your first thought is your best thought.
- If you get stuck, don't stop writing. It may sound silly, but keep your hand moving at all times, even if that means rewriting the last word you came up with over and over again until something else comes to mind.
- Other key phrases to write your way out of being stuck include:
 - I remember...
 - I forget...
 - I hate...
 - I love...
 - This book is about...
 - This book is not about...
 - I just want to say...
- When the time is up, look over your writing and highlight ideas that you feel are important, meaningful, or thought provoking. You can take these ideas and do another free write or perhaps begin some preliminary research.