



One of the most difficult aspects of writing is often getting our ideas down on paper –often called “the tyranny of the blank page.” Since it is usually easier to talk out loud than it is to write, this handout will address the benefits of brainstorming during a tutoring session. Meeting with a trained tutor can prove extremely helpful at this initial stage in the writing process – particularly if you plan ahead for the brainstorming session.

What is Brainstorming?

Brainstorming – also called “invention” – is a part of the writing process where writers work to discover *what* their ideas are and *how* they might focus their essay. The goal of brainstorming is usually to overcome writing anxiety and gather ideas to start writing your essay.

Brainstorming comes in various shapes and sizes:

1. **Freewriting:** According to the Vanderbilt University Writing Center handout titled “Invention” and the Thompson Writing Center handout on the subject, freewriting involves your immediate response to the assignment or essay prompt. At this point the writer need not worry about clear connections between different ideas or write in complete sentences; the goal is to continuously write for a set amount of time. As the Vanderbilt handout notes, “Write for 10-15 minutes in response to this idea – do not lift your pen from the paper or your hands from the keyboard.” After this exercise, read through what you have written, underlining ideas that you are interested in exploring.

So what role does the tutor play in this exercise? First, the tutor will help you adhere to both the time limit and encourage you to write continuously. Second, the tutor can serve as a sounding board for the ideas *after* you have completed the initial freewriting session. The tutor usually only knows what you share about the course and the assignment at the beginning of the session. Tutors can also give an outside perspective on the results of a freewriting activity because they are not familiar with the class readings that you may have based your writing on.

2. **Listing:** Similar to freewriting, listing can be useful as a way to get down *all* of your ideas, whether you think they are good or bad. During this exercise, the tutor writes down your suggestions on a white board or piece of paper, while you as the writer concentrate on all the ideas that come to mind. After this initial exercise, the tutor can help you arrange these ideas into a more coherent and cohesive grouping, which leads into a possible first draft.

3. **Asking Journalist's Questions:** After listing all of the possible directions your essay might go, the tutor can help by asking you pointed *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how* journalistic questions. These questions help writers organize the themes alluded to in the listing and freewriting process. For instance, the tutor might ask, "What are the connections between the ideas you have begun to articulate in your freewriting and the themes of the course?" "How might these themes address the assignment prompt?" "Who is the audience for this essay?" It is not necessary for you to be able to answer these questions during the session; however, it is **vital** that you keep them in mind as the draft begins to take shape.



4. **Talking out Loud:** "I hate writing. I love having written." This statement by author Dorothy Parker has become something of a mantra in the academic world. The issue it highlights is an important one for writers to think about when crafting their essays: the actual labor of putting pen to paper (or finger to keyboard). For some, writing is a chore to be avoided at all costs; indeed, many writers often claim, "I know what I want to say, but I just can't write it." If that is the case, talking about your ideas out loud with a tutor is very useful. By stating your ideas and letting the tutor record the main ideas (or what the tutor *thinks* are the main ideas) you can almost magically "have written" while avoiding – at least initially – the "writing."
5. **Summarizing Positions:** Similar to talking out loud, working with a tutor during the brainstorming session allows you to work through what you think are some of the main positions in your arguments, or the arguments of the essays you are summarizing. This can be done either orally or in writing. You will benefit from summarizing your position to someone who might be unfamiliar with the topic, as it forces you to be clear about the argument you want to make and reveals whether you truly understand it well enough to explain it to another person. Albert Einstein once said, "Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex, more violent. It takes a touch of genius – and a lot of courage – to move in the opposite direction." This is a main goal of writing: to move toward both clarity and concision.

Pre-Appointment Reflection

While it is not necessary to have a draft prepared for a brainstorming session, it is crucial that you come prepared to address a few concerns. To begin, you should come prepared to explain the assignment prompt to your tutor and point out the aspects of the prompt you find confusing.

Do you have trouble interpreting the prompt? Do you have a lot of ideas but don't know how to express them? Can you articulate your points clearly but do not know how to organize them? Reflecting on these questions ahead of time will help your tutor tailor the session to your particular strengths and weaknesses so you can gain the most from the brainstorming session.



What to Expect

The tutor is there to guide you and help you develop your OWN critical reading and writing skills. As with the face-to-face and online tutoring sessions, and in accordance with the Honor Code, the tutor is NOT there to line edit or write your paper for you.

These brainstorming sessions essentially serve two primary functions:

1. To allow you the space and freedom to work through and make connections and associations between what may appear at first to be random thoughts
2. To write down – or paraphrase – much of what you say so that you don't have to worry about *what* you say or how the ideas may or may not relate to each other; you riff, and then you can work with the tutor to come up with strategies to help focus your essay.

In many ways, brainstorming with a tutor helps students make connections between ideas that may at first seem unrelated, and the tutor can help guide the student more fully to understand the assignment prompt and specifications the professor requires. Moreover, by brainstorming with a tutor writers can understand how someone interprets their ideas outside of their specific course or discipline.

Helpful Resources and Links

- <https://writing.ku.edu/prewriting-strategies>
- <http://www.esc.edu/online-writing-center/resources/research/research-paper-steps/one-big-mess/>
- <https://gallaudet.edu/student-success/tutorial-center/english-center/writing/pre-writing-writing-and-revising/pre-writing-strategies-to-help-you-organize-your-thoughts/>