

CONTENTS

Lesson Plan

Handout 1: Brainstorming Strategies

MATERIALS NEEDED

An assignment prompt/instructions, writing pads, pens, highlighters, sticky notes, index cards

LEARNING GOALS

At the close of the workshop, students will be able to:

- Understand how brainstorming helps reduce the pressure of getting started
- Choose a brainstorming strategy based on their writing goals
- Implement brainstorming strategies to help address anxiety, a difficult assignment, or a blank page

OVERVIEW

In this workshop, three primary activities take place:

- Instructor leads a brainstorming activity and frames a conversation about the purpose of pre-writing.
- As a group, students consider several strategies for revision and select one to practice.
- Students spend time implementing one or more brainstorming strategies and reflect on their experience.

LESSON PLAN**Introduction**

Frame this workshop as an opportunity to begin developing an efficient and independent pre-writing process. Emphasize that while students will work to address a specific assignment, they will be practicing strategies they can apply again in the future.

Make sure all students have brought in an assignment for a paper, personal statement, grant application, etc., or an idea for an independent writing project. (If the group is small, ask students to go around the room and describe what they are working on.)

Say: Today, everyone will need an assignment. Since this workshop is focused on independent writing, it may feel a little different from other Writing Center workshops you have attended in the past. Of the center's more than twenty workshops, many are focused on introducing new concepts or skills. Others, such as today's workshop, are focused on helping you apply these skills to develop a specific writing project.

Explain that this workshop introduces students to brainstorming strategies and gives them time to apply at least one. Preview the workshop: today, we'll offer some options for brainstorming and drafting, help students to choose one strategy, and then give them time to implement it in response to their assignment. Our aim today is to give students time to write and revise, and to create a space where they feel comfortable trying something new.

Part One: Why Brainstorm? (15 Min)

1. Tell students we'll begin by doing a short brainstorming activity together. Ask them to imagine that their Writing I professor gave them the following assignment:

How do you get over writer's block? Write a 3-page paper explaining strategies students can use to make writing easier.

A few things might come to mind immediately, but they might not have ideas to fill three pages.

- To address this prompt together, we'll use one brainstorming strategy: **reverse brainstorming**. Instead of listing things that make writing easier, we'll list things that make writing harder.
- Ask students what makes writing difficult, and **record their responses on the board using a brainstorming cluster**. As necessary, prompt with questions: *Where is it difficult to write? What time of day is it difficult to write? When do you usually start writing before a deadline? When did you have a difficult time beginning an assignment—and why was it difficult? Etc.*

- When you have generated sufficient responses, model how a writer could use this as a starting point. They could use this brainstorm to:
 - **Reverse engineer their argument.** If they've mentioned that anxiety or insecurity makes writing hard, for example, they now know they need to explain how to increase confidence. This list implies many ideas about when and where it is comfortable to write, when to begin writing, how to seek out help, etc.
 - **Introduce the “stakes” of their paper, or why it matters.** By showing how difficult writing can be, they'll make it clearer why we need strategies for getting started.
 - **Anticipate counterargument.** This list will help them see where a reader might disagree with their recommended strategies.

- 2. Tell students that today, we'll focus on one just one strategy for making writing easier: **brainstorming.**
 - Sometimes, getting started is the hardest part of writing. When we don't know how to begin, we may procrastinate.
 - Brainstorming and pre-writing strategies offer great ways to get started: our brains often do better, more intuitive work when we aren't thinking directly about the subject we need to write about.
 - Emphasize that today's strategies are all about filling up a blank page with thoughts, lists, ideas before you write your first draft.

- 3. Note that none of what students write today has to be in the form of full sentences or complete paragraphs!
 - **Say:** By allowing yourself to be messy, unstructured, or informal, you can get words on the page and generate new ideas about your subject—which will ultimately help you produce a stronger paper.

Part Two: Brainstorming Strategies (10 Min)

1. **Pass out Handout 1: “Brainstorming Strategies.”** Give students a few minutes to read through Handout 1, and explain that their job is to select one of the following brainstorming strategies and implement it.

2. As a group, talk through the strategies and elicit questions.
 - Note that strategies under “1. To generate new ideas” are meant to help students who might feel stuck on how to begin a current assignment.
 - For students whose main goal is generating a “messy first draft”—a bulk of text they can turn to and revise later—“2. To start drafting” may be helpful.
 - Strategies under “3. To work through anxiety” use writing as a way to *address* anxiety rather than provoke it. Many of us feel better once we've gotten specific on our anxieties: when we know exactly what they are, it may be clearer what steps we need to take, and in what order.

- For research and literature papers, it may be helpful to start with the act of analyzing and interpreting evidence: strategies under “4. To work with sources” are geared towards these papers.
 - Once you have some initial ideas, getting organized might help you spark new connections or see gaps in your thinking. Turn to strategies under “5. To plan your approach to an assignment” if you’re at this stage, or after you complete your first round of brainstorming.
3. Say: you may begin with one brainstorming strategy and quickly discover that you need to use *more than one*. For example, if you begin by free-writing, you might discover that, after 10 minutes, you have enough ideas to begin organizing your paper. You might want to move to Strategy #5 and create an outline.
 - Each brainstorming strategy is a starting point for writing, but part of our goal for today is to make new discoveries, so feel free to combine strategies, experiment, and follow your intuition.
 4. Ask students which strategy they will start with.

Part Three: Brainstorming Activity (40 Min)

1. Give students time to employ one or more of the brainstorming strategies.
 - *Note to facilitator:* circulate and help students choosing Strategy #1 (talk out loud to a partner) to pair up. If there is an odd number of students, create one group of three. Partner up with a student if there is only one who wants to try this strategy. Be available for questions as they arise, and feel free to try out a brainstorming strategy of your own. Give students time markers halfway through, and encourage everyone to keep pen to paper.
2. **Have students reflect on the work they did, and what next steps they will take to continue writing their essays.**
3. **Solicit questions.** Wrap Up.

BRAINSTORMING STRATEGIES

1. TO GENERATE NEW IDEAS

- **Brainstorm in a new space.** Try writing by hand, on your phone, on a large sheet of paper, in an email draft, or any space that feels new to you. Write down any ideas that come to mind about your assignment.
- **Talk it out.** Try recording your ideas about your essay on your phone (or another voice recorder). Later, you can go back, listen, and transcribe.
- **Work with a partner.** Ask your partner to take notes as you talk through your essay. Then, take notes as your partner describes their own ideas. Exchange notes.
- **Reverse brainstorm.** If your paper is meant to solve a problem or make a recommendation, reverse the problem. Ask yourself, “What would have the *opposite* effect? What *wouldn’t* help with this problem?” Write down everything that comes to mind. Then, reverse your notes to come up with a list of useful recommendations.
- **Brainstorm in a language other than English.** If you speak, read, or write more than one language, use all of your languages in the brainstorming process. You may think of some ideas in your native language and others in English—give yourself the freedom to get your ideas out in whatever language they come in. By the end, your paper will include a mix of words, phrases, drawings and/or questions in one or two languages. (You can do this work on a blank sheet of paper or using the **Brainstorming Cluster**.)

2. TO START DRAFTING

- **Write the easiest part of you paper first** instead of starting with the thesis, argument, or introduction. For example, you might begin by describing your evidence, writing about your object of analysis, or using a key term from your assignment or class discussions as a starting point. Pre-writing will help you develop your main ideas later.
- **Set a timer and type** (or write by hand) without stopping. Start small (five–ten minutes), and then try for a longer stretch. Resist the temptation to pause, and focus on keeping your hands moving. This might require following a tangent or skipping to a part of your argument that feels easier to write, even if it’s disconnected. The goal is to get your ideas freely flowing and to get rid of that stressful blank page.

3. TO WORK THROUGH ANXIETY ABOUT AN ASSIGNMENT

- **Write down what you’re worried about.** Take out a new page or open up a new file, and write about any anxieties you have about this assignment: Is there a concept you’ve struggled with this semester? Critical feedback you’ve received in the past? A really busy week ahead? Try to produce one page of free writing. Nobody will read what you’ve written, and you can write in any language. The goal is simply to get these first thoughts or fears out of mind. When you reach a stopping point, start planning your work: switch to another brainstorming strategy, create a to-do list, and/or identify who you might ask for help.
- **Write a draft for yourself** (rather than a draft in which you think about the reader or instructor). Write down any idea that comes to mind, in response to the assignment—you can be as messy, unstructured, or informal as you’d like. Later, you can focus one step of your revision on meeting your readers’ needs.

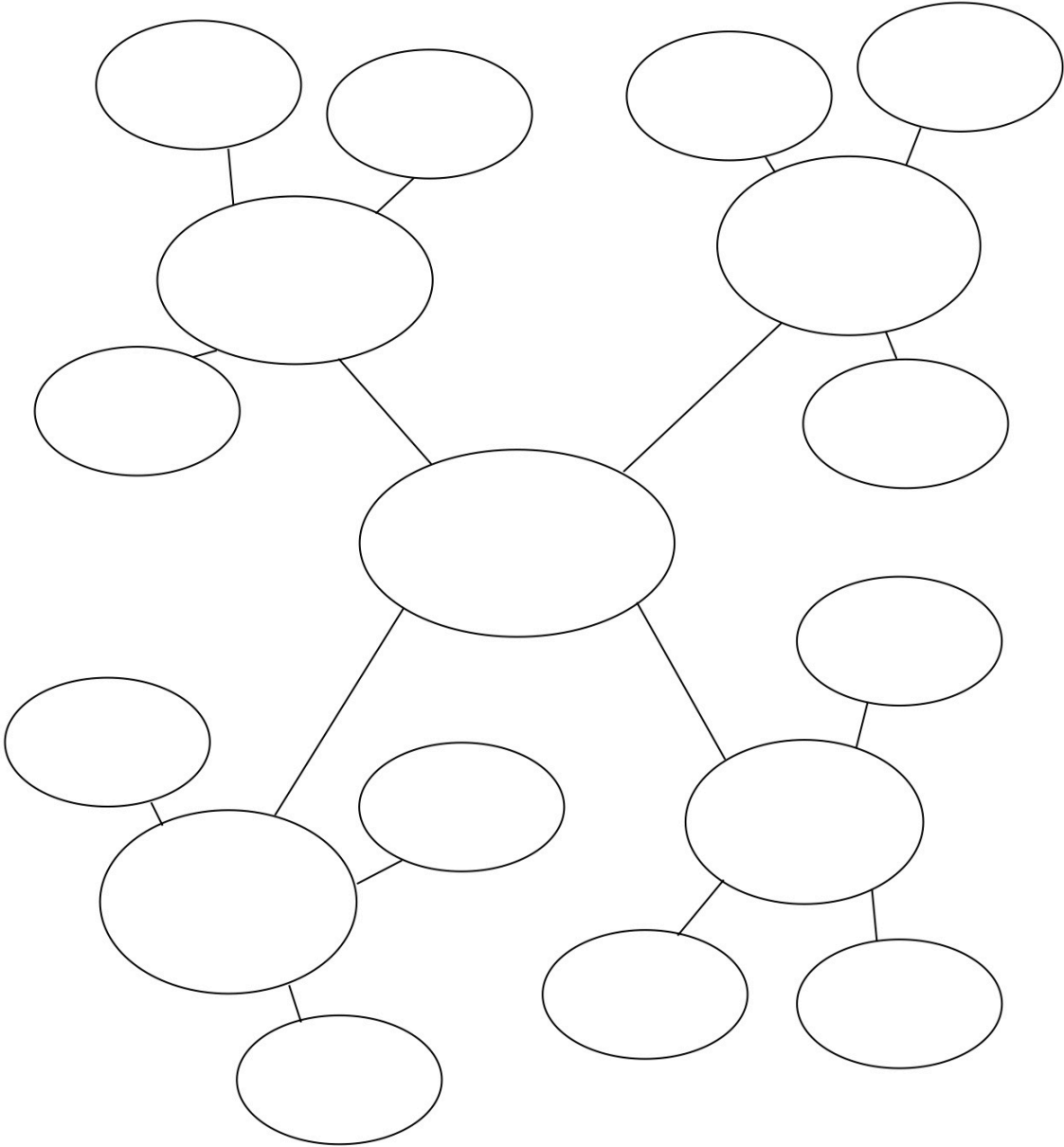
4. TO START WORKING WITH SOURCES

- **Pull quotes, data, or arguments from your sources.** Then, draft how you'll frame each piece of evidence. Why is it important? How does it support or complicate your argument? Do you agree? What do you know about the author or context?
- **Start by close-reading.** If you're working on a paper that requires close-reading, take out your text and select a short passage that interests you. Reread, underlining or circling any parts that seem important. Freewrite for ten minutes—write down any ideas that come to mind about what you have read. Answer the following questions to get started: Why do you think you chose this passage over others? What is significant about it? Do you notice any patterns or repetition? Any contradictions? How do you think others might interpret this passage? If you wanted to explore these ideas more, what other passages would you select?

5. TO PLAN YOUR APPROACH

- **Annotate your assignment.** Note questions, circle or highlight important parts, and make the following lists:
 - List the “action verbs”
 - List the questions you know you'll need to answer
 - List points from your readings/notes that you know you'll want to use
 - Make a to-do list of all the actions you will need to perform to successfully complete this assignment
- **Write an outline.** You might try:
 - A topic outline: list topics and sub-topics for short assignments that do not require an argument (memos, cover letters, response papers, etc.)
 - A claim outline: list claims and sub-claims for an argumentative paper to check whether the logic of your argument makes sense
 - A storyboard outline: when you have a lot of important points, but don't yet have a clear idea of what order they work best in, write them out on note-cards and experiment with arranging them in different orders
- **Organize visually.** Start with a blank page and map your ideas out:
 - Write down one important word or phrase in the middle and circle it.
 - How do the other items you need to include connect to this main idea? Would you use straight lines to connect these ideas? Overlapping circles? Draw your ideas in any form you'd like.
 - After, consider what the relationship between your ideas might be. Take notes for possible transitions or missing links.
 - Alternatively, try filling out the **Brainstorming Cluster** or **Flow Chart** on the following pages.

BRAINSTORMING CLUSTER



FLOW CHART

