

Brainstorming Activities

In college you are often expected to come up with your own ideas and arguments. There is a certain element of creativity involved that can be intimidating, but through proper brainstorming you can come up with a wide range of ideas. There are a multitude of brainstorming activities that you can find all over the internet, and I encourage you to look and find any brainstorming methods that work well for you, but here are a few that you can pull from to start working on that original idea.

Break Down the Assignment

This is a simple step that you should do for any assignment, whether or not you need to brainstorm further. A better understanding of the assignment can often prompt your mind to come up with ideas before you even start brainstorming.

- Pick apart everything the assignment is asking you to do by listing the specific tasks and questions. Look for verbs in the prompt like “write,” “connect,” “explore,” “argue,” or anything of that nature.
- It might be an open-ended prompt, such as “create a project based on chapter 6.” In that case you would want to ask your professor for more specifics about what the project entails.
- It might be a longer prompt with a lot of description of the assignment, in that case you will want to look through each sentence to find those directive verbs. But the other sentences will help provide context to your assignment, so don’t just ignore them.

Make Connections

An important part of any kind of inventive exercise is to situate yourself in the material that already exists. That means you should make use of the other knowledge you have about the topic.

- First, you will want to learn what you can about the topic. Look through your class notes, look up articles or books, or talk to your friends or professor about the topic. The more you understand the topic at hand, the better equipped you are to create your own idea.
- Then, see how your own ideas fit, or don’t, with the information you gathered. Do you disagree with someone? Why? Do you agree with someone, but you think you could prove it in a different way? Do you see how someone’s idea could be applied to another situation? Asking those questions will give you a path towards your own idea.
- Your own ideas shouldn’t come out of a vacuum; people don’t think that way. It is a good thing to be able to connect your ideas to others and to build upon the knowledge you already have.

Listing/Mapping

This is a simple word association exercise to start to get your brain flowing. You want to start with a word that is related to your topic, then simply list words that come to mind when you think about that word. You can list them line after line if you are more a linear thinker, or if you are a more visual thinker, you can try a bubble map. Keep your strategy as simple as you can; this is a method just to get the brain flowing.

Free Writing

This is one step up from listing, in which you want to get your brain going via writing complete sentences rather than just words. Take an idea from your list, or use a prompt if you have it, and write it at the top of your document. Start writing without picking up your pen (or lifting your fingers off the keyboard) for at least four minutes. It might seem like a long time, but you want to push your brain to think and be creative. You can write about anything, but a good place to start is with things you already know about the topic. There are no rules, just write based on the topic at hand. When the four minutes are up, look over what you wrote and see if you made any connections or asked any questions that seem interesting.

- Variation: **Question-based Free Writing**

Use the same first step of writing the idea or prompt at the top of your page. But then only write down questions you have about the topic, going both as broad and as specific as you can. This might lead to an argument because you want to find the answer to those questions.

- Variation: **Dictation Free Writing**

If you tend to be an auditory learner, meaning you understand things better when you hear them out loud, try this exercise but instead of writing, talk out loud and record yourself. Then play back the recording and see if anything jumps out at you.

Looping

This is another step up from free writing. You want to look through your free write and highlight or underline phrases that are interesting, or even ones that are confusing. Then do another free write with your underlined phrase as your main topic. You can repeat this process any number of times, and the more you do it, the more refined your idea will be.

Round-Robin Brainstorming

This is a brainstorming technique for a group project. Take your prompt and think silently for a few minutes. Then, everyone has to come up with an idea, no matter how vague. Go in a circle and state your ideas. The catch is that you can't repeat an idea and you can't skip. You also can't comment on other people's ideas until everyone has gone. This forces you to adjust an idea if yours was already mentioned. Also feel free to change your idea if you heard something from someone else that triggered something for you. It's a good idea for someone to be the notetaker so you don't forget anything, especially if you have a big group.

SCAMPER Method

This method is more of a series of leading questions rather than a concrete exercise. These questions can help you to come up with your own argument in a more specific way. Feel free to apply any of these questions to another brainstorming method to guide your brainstorming.

- Substitute: *What would happen to the project if we swapped X for Y?*
- Combine: *What would happen to the project if we combined X and Y?*
- Adapt: *What changes would need to be made to adapt this project to a different context?*
- Modify: *What could we modify to create more value on this project?*
- Put to another use: *What other uses or applications might this project have?*
- Eliminate: *What could we remove from the project to simplify it?*
- Reverse: *How could we reorganize this project to make it more effective?*