



Writing Center Academic Affairs

Tips on Generating Ideas

Many of us experience writer's block when we face a fresh writing assignment. The following are just some of the strategies you can use to overcome this problem. A tutor will be happy to explain them in more detail and/or demonstrate them.

Brainstorming

These intuitive techniques are used to get the ideas flowing and to stop your internal censor from editing text.

- **Listing:** List of all the ideas you can think of that relate to your topic. They don't have to be in order, and if something ends up on the list that doesn't belong, don't worry about it; you can throw it out later.
- **Clustering:** This technique is sometimes also known as webbing. Write your main topic in the middle of a sheet of paper, circle it and draw lines to the next idea in the cluster. This method allows you to see some of the connections between ideas.
- **Treeing:** Here the idea cluster takes the shape of an inverted tree. Start with the most general idea at the top and "branch" off with more specific ideas. You can add however many new branches you want to get as specific as necessary.
- **Freewriting:** Give yourself about ten minutes to write on your topic without stopping to think or correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, or organization. You'll be surprised by how quickly the ideas flow when you turn off your editor.

Talking

Sometimes talking it out verbally can help you to better understand the topic you're writing on. Find a friend, a relative, or a classmate with which to discuss your topic. Writing Center tutors are also happy to discuss assignments with you! For more information, see the separate Writing Center handout "Tips on Planning with a Partner."

Analogy

Get ideas flowing by using analogies to explore your topic.

- **Personal:** Put yourself in the position of problem solver. "When I write, I assemble ideas like building blocks."
- **Direct:** Compare your topic to something concrete. "Writing with a plan is like following an architect's blue-print."

- **Symbolic:** Compare your topic to an abstract principle. "For every action on the author's part, there is an equal reaction on the reader's part."
- **Fantasy:** Here anything goes. "It was like walking into the writer's head and watching it work."

Rest and Incubate

Formulate a problem to solve and then stop working. Let your mind rest and forget about it for a short while. When you come back to your writing, you should have a fresh perspective with new ideas. Remember that this is not the same thing as procrastination!

The Aristotelian Topoi

These strategies are as old as the Greek city states, and you will recognize them in many of the strategies you use to develop an essay.

- **Definition:** Define key terms or concepts that are crucial to your discussion. Are there conflicting definitions of these terms? Are you debating them or simply adopting one? How does your definition affect your position?
- **Comparison/Contrast:** Use your discussion of the differences and similarities between two objects, options, courses of action, to make your case.
- **Cause/Effect:** Show the connection between taking an action and a possible outcome.
- **Evidence:** To prove an argument, make judicious use of testimony, statistics, and expert opinion.

The Journalist's Questions

This strategy should be familiar. Just answer the five W's (and one H!):

- Who
- What
- When
- Where
- Why
- How

Burke's Pentad

Similar to the journalist's questions, Kenneth Burke's pentad gives you a way to look at a topic from different angles.

- **Act (What):** What action is in question and why is it important?
- **Agent (Who):** Who performed the action and how does the performer's position affect what has happened?
- **Agency (How):** By what means was the action performed and how does this affect the outcome?
- **Scene (When/Where):** In what context did the action take place?
- **Purpose (Why):** For what purpose was the action performed?

These categories can also be paired in different ways to produce twenty different ratios, or ways to look at your idea. For example, discussing the relationship between the agent and the scene may tell you something new about your problem.

Tagmemics

This is another way of producing different views of a problem.

- **Particle:** consider your topic as a thing in itself.
- **Wave:** Consider your topic as a thing changing over time.
- **Field:** Consider your topic as a thing with context.

Information is taken from Linda Flower's *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing*. 4th ed. N.Y.: Harcourt, 1993 and Irene L. Clark's *Writing in the Center*. 2nd ed. Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1992.