Brainstorming Writing Assignments

Most of us are not taught how to brainstorm, whether the goal is to develop a new program at work or to write a class paper. With writing assignments, we usually fall back on what’s worked for us before. Just as often, we flounder until the last minute and then simply write a mess of words with a few sources sprinkled in.

Brainstorming works for both individuals and groups. This handout focuses on individual thinking for a required class assignment.

The Process

- Study the writing assignment, including rubric, immediately and carefully upon receiving it, asking questions, taking notes.
- Break down the assignment into component parts, e.g., research expectations, length requirement, deadline, etc.
- Sum up the central task in a few words or a sentence.
- Next, write your ideas down using bullet points, or outline (see our handout on “Outlining”), or an idea map to generate writing.
- After ideas have been captured, share ideas with a peer if you prefer, but in any case think about the next steps.
- Next, freewrite (see our handout on “Prewriting”), followed by more thinking, so that you have a chance to build on your ideas.
Brainstorm as soon as possible after receiving the assignment. An effective brainstorm session lasts 15-50 minutes. If the results are minimal, you’re probably not brainstorming long or effectively enough. It’s essential to not be inhibited or self-conscious during brainstorming. Don’t censor your ideas and guesses. At the outset, the freedom to think in many directions at once is important.

Finally, if you find that the assignment is unclear and prevents you from brainstorming successfully, consult the Writing Center or seek clarification from the instructor, but only after studying the assignment as fully as possible. Ask specific questions that will clarify your central task.

Good luck brainstorming!