

LNC Writing Center

Brainstorming Strategies

One of the most difficult aspects of writing is getting started. This is because students who need to analyze or write an argument about a text or topic need to come up with their own thoughts and form those thoughts into a main claim. Brainstorming can help you reach a thesis statement that will build a successful paper.

First, read the text and underline/highlight/circle whatever sticks out to you as interesting, confusing, or related to the paper's prompt. Then, try one or more of the brainstorming strategies below.

Question Raising

A thesis statement is ultimately an answer to a question about the text. Brainstorming questions, then, can be a good start to choosing your main claim. The most useful questions will be *why* and *how* questions; however, *who*, *what*, and *when* questions can also lead you down paths to a main claim.

It may help to use a time or space limit for this one. For example, require yourself to write for 10 minutes or to fill half a page.

1. Look back at your underlines and highlights of the text. Write as many questions about those parts of the text as you can.
2. Re-read the text and write questions about it as you go.
3. When you've asked as many questions as you can, look over your list and check for common themes, especially interesting problems, and more.
4. It may be helpful to pair this brainstorming strategy with the storm cloud method (see below) of noticing connections between your thoughts and between elements of the text.

Freewriting

This strategy asks you to just write; just write without judging or evaluating your thoughts while you're writing.

In order to truly allow your ideas to flow, don't look at what you write until the end. If you're typing on a computer, try coloring the font white so that you can't see what you're writing.

1. Set yourself a time or space limit. For example, require yourself to write for 10-15 minutes or to fill a page. This will encourage you to push your thoughts past the obvious.
2. Start writing. Try thinking about the text and the initial thoughts and questions you noticed as you underlined and highlighted. However, let your mind wander elsewhere, as well: a surprising result from this activity could be just what you need.
3. If you find yourself getting stuck, and even if you don't, re-read the text and then continue your freewriting.
5. Only once you've finished, look at what you wrote and make notes on common themes in your thoughts. It may be helpful to pair this brainstorming strategy with the storm cloud method (see below) of noticing connections between your thoughts and between elements of the text.

Storm Cloud

The storm cloud is a little like freewriting, but focuses on creating shorter terms and phrases that seem related to the text you're brainstorming. It also allows you to visually map common themes in your thoughts.

1. Work with a sheet or paper, or two papers taped together for extra space, or a whiteboard. Write your main topic in the center, using 1-3 words.
2. Moving out from the center and filling in the open space any way you are driven to fill it, start to write down as many related concepts or terms as you can associate with the central topic. Jot them quickly, move into another space, jot some more down, move to another blank, and just keep moving around and jotting.
 - If you run out of similar concepts, jot down opposites, jot down things that are only slightly related, but try to keep moving and associating. Don't worry about this getting messy.
3. When you're done storming concepts, you should have a big scattering of terms and phrases. Now try to cluster those. Circle terms that seem related. You may want to take notes on what you think the relationship is between those ideas.
 - To show the different clusters, use different colors when you're circling. You can also vary the kind of line you use to encircle the topics (wavy line, straight line, dashed line, dotted line, zig-zag line).
4. Continue this process until you have found all the associated terms. Some of the terms might end up un-circled, but these outliers can also be useful to you.
5. At this point you can start to form conclusions about the text, your thoughts, how to approach the paper, etc.