

Brainstorming: Getting Started Script

This workshop has been designed for a 50-minute class, and should last no more than 45 minutes if run as efficiently as possible. In longer classes, this leaves extra time which can be used either for other (non-Writing-Studio-assisted) class activity or for extending the time allotted for the activities below.

Note to Consultant: While this script is full of content, it should not be seen as strict or constraining; rather, it is designed to provide guidelines upon which you can rely, but which you can also depart from. Your role in facilitating a workshop is to generate and guide conversation, so do what works for the class. Also keep in mind that if you have a way of talking with clients about, for instance, thesis statements that you find more useful or that better suits your own style, then please feel free to make use of that, or even to rewrite any portion of the script for yourself—this can help to make you a more comfortable and effective facilitator. However, if you are nervous about being in front of a class and not knowing what to say, this script should provide a useful resource to which you can turn at any point.

Materials Required

From Writing Studio: Index cards for minute papers; Handouts: [“Invention”](#) & [“Questions for Breaking Down Assignments”](#)

From Instructor: Paper assignment; Please prepare to speak to students about your own writing process in the invention stage

Objectives

- Students will reflect on their writing process in order to develop strategies to help them begin writing.
- Students will learn how to interpret an assignment and shape their papers as proper responses to it.
- Students will generate ideas for the papers they are currently assigned.
- Students will be introduced to, and given opportunities to try out, a few invention techniques.

Plan

I. Concentrated Writing Studio Presentation (5 min.)

II. What is brainstorming? (9 min.):

Brainstorming, or invention, is a part of the writing process during which writers discover ideas and sharpen the focus of their essays. Invention exercises give us the opportunity to experiment and play with ideas without necessarily committing to them. At any stage in the writing process, these strategies can provide a way past writers block to help you discover what you want to share with readers and how you should focus your work. Today we will be employing brainstorming

exercises as a way to *begin* writing. Beginning any new project can be difficult; working through invention exercises may serve as a launch pad for your writing process.

At this point ask the class about their writing habits and processes, writing responses on the board, perhaps putting ‘eeking’ and ‘gushing’ aspects of people’s responses on opposite sides of the board.

Ask the instructor about his or her own writing process in this regard:

- Do you have writing habits like any of those we have been discussing? (See ‘eekers’ and ‘gushers’ below for examples).
- Do you have any exercises you use to come up with ideas?
- How often do you revisit the invention or idea-generation portion of the writing process?

After a short conversation here, tie this discussion to the invention exercises as follows:

Not every exercise will work for every person or every assignment; so try a few to find the ones you like. Which ones suit you, and which will be helpful, might depend on your writing style. *Refer to the responses you wrote on the board.* For instance, some people are what we call ‘eekers’—these are the folks that typically have a difficult time with free-writing exercises and prefer to do quite a bit of thinking and outlining/mapping, talking, etc. before ever sitting down to write. Others are ‘gushers’-- they write out whatever is in our heads and write and write until it’s all out. Gushers tend to learn about their topics as they write about them; often, they discover what they want to say only after starting to write. Gushers usually need to spend quite a bit of time revising papers.

So Eekers: you might not like it, but you can often benefit from freewriting; and Gushers: you may be able to freewrite easily, but you may benefit from the discipline of the more structured invention exercises, like charting.

Today, we are going to work through some exercises to give you an opportunity to try them out for yourself (*distribute both handouts at this time*). On these handouts you will find instructions for some invention exercises, some of which we will be doing today.

III. Turn to prompt (1 min.)

Let’s turn to the prompt that your instructor has given us. We will brainstorm together at first, then on our own.

We will be working with the actual class assignments, but you will not be required to share the content of your paper ideas; rather, the focus of the activity reflections will be on what you got out of the activities, what worked for you and what did not—i.e. process rather than product.

IV. Activity 1 – Breaking down the assignment. (5 min.)

Direct students to 'Questions' handout for guidance on this activity. It reads as follows:

- Sometimes prompts are complex, and they can seem overwhelming. Try to break the assignment down into its constituent parts. Here are some questions you can consider once you have your assignment:
 - a) What does the assignment ask me to do?
 - b) What is the general topic of this assignment?
 - c) Are there any specific sub-topics?
 - d) Are there any required questions? – what am I being asked to talk about specifically?
 - e) Are there any single terms or phrases that seem to repeat in the prompt, in course material or in class discussion?
 - f) What am I being asked to think about in the assignment?
 - g) What questions am I expected to answer?
 - h) What will my readers be looking for?
 - i) How broad or narrow should my focus be?
 - j) Are there any related questions that need to be answered in order to address the primary question? If so, what are they?

Facilitate the class in answering some of the questions above using the prompt provided. Ask instructor for feedback with questions like these:

- Are there any questions we should be asking that are not covered here?
- Should we be emphasizing any of the questions that *are* here?

V. Activity 2 – Listing/Charting (5 min.)

There are two possibilities to choose from for this activity, listing and charting.

Refer to Invention Handout for instructions for the rest of the activities.

For Listing:

- Start with the overarching idea. It could be about an important theme, a particular argument or theory, etc. Under that idea, begin listing everything that comes to mind in association with it. Consider any idea or observation as valid and worthy of listing. List quickly.

For Charting, or spatially organizing ideas:

- For some people, charting or drawing out their ideas works better than writing things down consecutively, so feel free to incorporate this into your listing. Use phrases or words that are central to your topic and try to arrange them spatially on a fresh page in a graph/grid/table or chart. Use the spatial representations of your ideas to help you see the relationships among your ideas. If you can't imagine the

shape of a chart at first, just put the words on a page and draw lines between or around them.

Now take a couple minutes to try whichever option seems best to you.

Reflection:

If your items are becoming more and more specific, you might have the beginning of an outline. If not, try to circle and connect any related terms that you've listed. If any patterns emerge you could begin a new list with these as your starting point.

Discuss the reactions of those who listed vs. those who charted.

What happened for those of you who listed? For those of you who charted? Do you think there are good reasons for using one approach over the other?

VI. Activity 3 – Free writing (4 min.)

Instructions: Choose one of your ideas, perhaps an item off of your list, perhaps something that occurred to you while making your list or chart. Write it at the top of a fresh page, and then write for 4 minutes in response to this. Do not lift your pen from the paper (or your hands from the keyboard, if you are using a computer).

Some students may be resistant to writing continuously, so stay on top of them and encourage them if they seem to be stalling.

Reflection:

Discuss student reactions.

How did free writing go for you? Did it seem to go better for those of you who would identify as “gushers”? Did you get different insights than when you listed?

VII: Activity 4 – Looping (6 min.)

Instructions: Now, read through your draft and circle ideas that might lead you to a thesis—that is, to the central claim you want to make in your paper (keep in mind the demands of the assignment)—or underline a sentence or phrase that expresses your ideas most clearly or that has the most interesting idea in it.

Write this at the top of a fresh page and use it to guide a new freewrite; this one will go on a couple of minutes longer. We can only do this once today, but you can do this over and over until your thesis or argument becomes clear.

VIII: FINAL REFLECTION & Wrap-up (5 min.)

Discuss people's reactions to the activities. Here are some guiding questions:

- How might you move on from here to developing a thesis statement or even an outline?
- Do you think you might return to any of these activities later?
- What results did different activities yield?

Brainstorming activities help you to generate ideas, organizational grids help you to organize your thoughts and see connections, free writing exercises help you overcome writers blocks and begin drafting, topic exploration activities help you to expand upon and refine your ideas.

While brainstorming is particularly useful at the beginning of the writing process, exercises aimed at facilitating invention can be helpful at many stages of writing. Some of the best writers return to this stage a number of times while composing drafts of their essays. Although we focused on getting started today, Writing Studio appointments are available to you at any stage in your writing process.

IX. Minute Paper

Distribute the index cards and ask the students to answer (anonymously) one question on each side.

Question 1: What is the most important thing you've learned about writing today?

Question 2: What questions or concerns do you still have regarding writing?

Collect these responses. If time permits, it might be worthwhile to read some or all, especially of Question 1, aloud. And possibly also to invite brief answers to the concerns raised in Question 2, if you decide to read any of those.