

Brainstorming Strategies

There are many brainstorming strategies, and some of these may already be familiar to you. The five strategies on this handout may be particularly well-suited for the types of papers that you will be writing at SLU.

1. Create questions. Questions can guide you as you are writing and give your paper a purpose, which is to answer the questions! Questions work for almost any type of paper.

- For a response paper, you can record any questions you have while you are reading. For example: “Why didn’t the author discuss cooperatives as a form of institutional structure?” Or “Where is the discussion about how gender may impact class in this article?”
- For a literature review, you may start with something broad: “What do scholars have to say about veterans and mental health services?” This can help you collect key words (“veterans” + “mental health services”) for database searches. If you don’t have any specific questions, try to use the journalistic questions: who, what, when, where, why, how? Write a question for each one.

2. Free write & looping. Set a timer and just write around the topic for a specified amount of time. Don’t worry about grammar. Let your writing take you anywhere -- this may lead you to write down questions or to reflect on personal experience. It may lead you to connect to other readings.

Looping¹ is a freewriting technique that allows you to focus your ideas continually while trying to discover a writing topic. After you free write for the first time, identify a key thought or idea in your writing, and begin to free write again, with that idea as your starting point. You will loop one 5-10 minute freewriting after another, so you have a sequence of freewritings, each more specific than the last. The same rules that apply to freewriting apply to looping: write quickly, do not edit, and do not stop.

Loop your free writing as many times as necessary, circling another interesting topic, idea, phrase, or sentence each time. When you have finished four or five rounds of looping, you will begin to have specific information that indicates what you are thinking about a particular topic. You may even have the basis for a tentative thesis or an improved idea for an approach to your assignment when you have finished.

¹ From the Kansas University Writing Center <http://writing.ku.edu/prewriting-strategies>

3. Consider purpose & audience.²

All writers and speakers consider purpose and audience. Try to answer the following questions.

1. What is your purpose?

What are you trying to do? What verb captures your intent? Are you trying to inform? Convince? Describe? Each purpose will lead you to a different set of information and help you shape material to include and exclude in a draft. Write about why you are writing this draft in this form. For more tips on figuring out the purpose of your assignment, see our handout on understanding assignments.

2. Who is your audience?

Who are you communicating with beyond the grader? What does that audience need to know? What do they already know? What information does that audience need first, second, third? Write about who you are writing to and what they need.

4. Cubing³

Cubing enables you to consider your topic from six different directions. Take a sheet of paper, consider your topic, and respond to these six commands:

1. Describe it.
2. Compare it.
3. Associate it.
4. Analyze it.
5. Apply it.
6. Argue for and against it.

Look over what you've written. Do any of the responses suggest anything new about your topic? What interactions do you notice among the "sides"? That is, do you see patterns repeating, or a theme emerging that you could use to approach the topic or draft a thesis? Does one side seem particularly fruitful in getting your brain moving? Could that one side help you draft your thesis statement? Use this technique in a way that serves your topic. It should, at least, give you a broader awareness of the topic's complexities, if not a sharper focus on what you will do with it.

5. How to start working with sources⁴

Pull quotes, data, or arguments from your sources. Then, draft how you'll frame each piece of evidence. Why is it important? How does it support or complicate your argument? Do you agree? What do you know about the author or context?

² From the UNC Writing Center: <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/brainstorming/>

³ From the UNC Writing Center: <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/brainstorming/>

⁴ From the Baruch College Writing Center:

<https://writingcenter.baruch.cuny.edu/files/2018/03/Brainstorming-Strategies.pdf>