Brainstorming for Essays

Brainstorming is the first stage in any writing project, as it is the process of discovering and selecting a topic. Here are a few guidelines and ideas to help brainstorm for and select a topic for a writing assignment.

**Step 1: Make sure you understand the assignment.**

**Strategy:** Re-read the whole assignment, noting any research or topic requirements, due dates, or other considerations. Still confused? Highlight the verbs—are you analyzing, arguing a point, or informing? This will clue you into the purpose of your assignment, which will give you more clarification on what type of topic you could select.

**Step 2: Start compiling ideas about what you could write.**

**Strategy:** Freewriting. Open a blank document or take out a blank sheet of paper. Set a timer for 10 minutes. Write down whatever subjects come to mind. Here, it is important not to edit or restrict the flow of your thoughts as you jot them down on paper or type them on your device. You are writing to yourself here, so take the opportunity to express anything related to the writing task—not just ideas for topics and directions you can take, but also questions about confusing aspects, anxieties about completing the assignment. Not everything you jot down will be usable in a draft, but you may discover some things about your topic by letting your thoughts wander. Reread your freewriting and highlight any interesting thoughts. How do they connect to each other? To material you’ve discussed in classes?

**Strategy:** Listing/Bulleted. This is a more concentrated free-write. Make a list of possible topics and jot down short descriptions of what you know, what questions you have, or what you think you would write about.

**Strategy:** Review what you have previously covered in class to help narrow in on a specific topic to write about.

1. Refer to your class notes; these can include notes that you have taken during class discussions as well as documents and presentations that are available on Moodle. Look for topics or ideas that you found interesting or had questions about.
2. Next, begin to make connections between different ideas and concepts you have discussed in class; how might different ideas you’ve discussed in this class relate to one another? For instance, how might modern social justice movements draw from past ones, and what do they do differently to adapt to current events?
3. Also, think about how concepts you’ve discussed in this course might relate to ones you’ve covered in other courses. For instance, how might a certain psychological theory help you better understand character motivations in a play you’re reading for an English course?

**Step 3: Start to narrow down and try out your topic.**

**Strategy:** Journalistic Questioning. Asking the who, what, how, when, where, and why of a topic helps to determine what you know and don’t know about your topic. This prompts you to begin researching
areas of your topic you are not so familiar with. By reviewing sources and better understanding different perspectives on your topic, you will have a much more thorough understanding of your topic, what has been said about it, and what is controversial about it. By knowing what is controversial about your topic, you will be in a much better position to take a stance on your topic and effectively write an argument about it.

**Step 4: Turn the brainstorming session into an essay topic and get started.**

If the assignment requires research, begin searching the Internet for language that describes your topic. Use this language in the library databases or internet to collect reliable information.

If the assignment doesn’t require research, start crafting a claim that will serve as the main idea of your essay, and go through your brainstorming and sort into the categories of main ideas, supporting ideas, evidence, and counterarguments. This will be helpful in your next potential step, which is organizing your ideas into an outline.