

Brainstorming and Generating Ideas

Brainstorming and generating ideas are critical parts of the writing process. As a first step, you always want to know:

- What am I interested in exploring?
- What do I already know?
- Why am I interested in this topic?

Here are a few tools you can use along the way.

Clustering

Clustering is a generative, open-ended, non-linear, visual structuring of ideas, events, and feelings. It is a way of mapping an interior landscape as it begins to emerge. It is based on a beginning knowledge of how the two sides of our brain process what we know. For most of us, each hemisphere processes information in radically different ways. This difference is most easily explained by a look at two words often thought to be synonymous: order and structure. Order, on the one hand, comes from the Latin *ordo, ordini*: “in a straight row,” “in a regular series.” Order implies linear, rule-governed activity and is imposed upon. Structure, on the other hand, comes from the Latin *struere*: “to heap together.” Structure emerges from within. Clustering, then, affords the writer time to freely make associations and allow ideas to emerge, rather than be forced upon.

- Clustering should help you find and generate ideas and, having found them, to structure and restructure them long before any ordering actually takes place.
- Clustering is a technique for collecting thoughts around some stimulus, for finding a focus, and for allowing a sense of the whole configuration to emerge even though all the details are not yet apparent.
- Clustering is a technique for engaging and utilizing the raw materials of one’s experience and giving them a tentative shape. In short, it is a discovery process.

Clustering Directions

1. Write a key word on the upper third of the page, leaving the lower 2/3 for writing and circle it.
2. Now get comfortable with the process by letting your playful mind make connections. What comes to mind? Avoid judgments. There are no “right” or “wrong” responses. Add arrows and more circles.
3. Continue jotting down associations and ideas triggered by the word for a minute or two. Don’t inhibit yourself.
4. You will know when to stop clustering through a sudden, strong urge to write. When you feel a shift, you have something to write about.
5. Begin writing. When you feel stuck, write about anything from the cluster to get started.

Cubing

Now that you have an idea on which to write, engage in a fun invention exercise to get the ideas flowing. Consider a cube with each of the six sides having a rhetorical strategy. Take an idea from the clustering exercise and develop ideas for each of the rhetorical tasks. This way, you “playfully” achieve strategies of analysis.

- Describe it:
- Compare it:
- Associate it:
- Analyze it:
- Apply it:
- Argue for or against it:

Picture Play: Listing Exercise

Select a photograph from a magazine, art book, or other text. The purpose of this assignment is to develop skills in looking for details (exploration) while having fun doing so. It’s an assignment that transfers into recognizing the power of details to explain, describe, and convince a reader.

Listing Exercise: Study the above mentioned photo for a period of time, and then begin listing 25 details about the photo. You may play the memory game or create the list as you’re looking at the photo. The purpose of the exercise is to generate details. Have fun!

Strong: Select one detail from the listing exercise and allow your mind and pen to drift. Just write what comes to mind.

Clustering: Take one recurrent theme from the freewrite and follow directions given above.

Application To Your Inquiry

Now, let’s consider how to apply these exercises to your inquiry/writing/synthesis project. First, keep a writer’s log/journal/notebook and use it for keeping and collecting ideas. In your notebook, frequently engage in these pre-writing activities as they keep you limber and ready for the writing workout. You might begin with a listing exercise in which you quickly list all that you’ve already written about. Or you might engage in a clustering exercise to develop an idea for writing. After you’ve decided on a topic, begin to explore what you already know through listing sub-topics and engaging in the cubing exercise in your notebook. Cubing can not only support the generation of ideas, but can also elicit topics for further research.

Remember, you want to buoy your ideas with supportive and concrete examples, and cubing helps. You’ll want to integrate outside research, other voices, and data to develop your ideas as well. Providing an extensive explanation and evidence ensures your credibility. In this way, these

exercises can be invaluable in your inquiry process as they allow your mind to wander and wonder with playful activity.