

Brainstorming Strategies

Especially good for personal essays

Know thyself - If I were to write a biographical sketch of you, what would I write? If I were interviewing you on your favorite topics for the newspaper, what topics would I ask about? What would a friend say that you like to talk about?

Metaphorical Description – Use metaphors to think more deeply about your subject or theme and generate material about your subject. [Ask me for metaphorical prompts.](#)

Direct Writing – Take a set amount of time (e.g. one hour); write a quick draft using the first half of the time and spend the second half revising

Describe what you want – Describe the qualities that you want in your final essay. Or describe what you definitely don't want.

Write from objects – Find objects or family artifacts. Journal on their meaning and let the story of the object grow into a story about a person, place, or deep feeling

Stories – You use the topic to prompt stories that might bring you insight into the subject matter. You ask, “What are my memories and experiences that somehow relate to the French Revolution?” Try to get a list of 15 to 20 stories related to your topic. Which is most intriguing?

Scenes – Focus on individual moments and images. What places, moments, sounds, moods, or images come to mind when thinking about the topic? This is particularly useful if you are analyzing a work of art, novel, film, play, etc.

Portraits – What people come to mind when you think of a topic? What's the relationship between your 3rd grade teacher and the French Revolution? Why do you make this association? What insight or idea is in that association?

Especially good for academic essays

Freewriting – Write consistently what comes into your head, with only minor pauses to sort through the thoughts that are crowing your mind

Open-ended writing process – Freewrite. Highlight the “center of gravity” in what you wrote. Use this to start of a new freewrite. Keep this going until you find something you believe in.

Questioning - identify your subject in a sentence or two. Quickly write responses to a series of questions. If you draw a blank, skip the question and move on. [Ask me for sample questions.](#)

First thoughts – Spend at least 15 minutes jotting down all the thoughts and feelings about a topic once you get an assignment. These can be memories and feelings and impressions. They don't have to be good, just uncensored.

Dialogues – If you have two or three conflicting feelings, write a dialogue between people standing up and arguing different points of view. Just keep them talking in regular speech.

Narrative thinking – Tell the story of your thinking in story form. “I first thought this and then got this idea and then...”

Errors – Write down things you know are not true but that sound plausible

Prejudices – write down your biases about a topic. Play with taking your own biases to an extreme or taking the opposite view. What opinions would that produce?

Cliché’ Writing – Writing intentionally clichéd pieces to give students first hand experience with the problems. You can have a competition for the worst (best) intentional use of clichés.

Outlining Strategies

There are a number of ways to outline your essay. Try one of these when you are ready to plan out your essay.

Organizing a Freewrite – Pick your main points from a freewrite. Re-write them in complete sentences. Is one of these naturally bigger, broader, and standing over all the rest? This is your thesis. If not, can you come up with a big, broad statement that encompasses and connects everything you want to say? Once you have your thesis, put the rest of your points in a logical order.

Clustering – Write all the concepts or ideas related to your topic on note cards, post its, or put them into text boxes on the computer. (You can use free concept mapping shareware for this). Cluster similar ideas together. Name the clusters with another note card, post-it, or text box. Use the resulting map to organize your essay. Many of your sub-categories should be examples or other evidence. Many of your sub-sub categories should be facts or details.

Listing – As fast as you can, list your ideas beneath the name of your subject. Put an asterisk next to the most important items. Number them in the order of importance. Group the items on the list in related groups. Cross-out ideas that don’t have value. Add new items as needed.

Scratch outline – Take a list as described above and plug them into a standard outline structure: thesis, concessive, first reason with support, second reason with support...conclusion

Chunking – Determine your main headings for your essay. Write under each heading as if it was its own essay. Stitch these together with transitions and an overarching thesis

Formal topic outline – Use Roman numerals and letters with the names of topics and examples

Formal sentence outline – Use Roman numerals and letter with complete sentences