

05.1 The Writing Process: Generating Ideas

Pre-Writing

The Writing Process doesn't start when you begin drafting sentences and paragraphs. It starts much, much earlier than that, with a stage called *Pre-Writing*. Before you attempt to write a draft (let alone a finished paper), there is much work to do. You must first come up with ideas and “raw material” for your writing, and then you must organize and plan what you are going to write. The type or amount of planning will depend on what works for each writer for a particular type of composition. A longer document making an argument needs much more—maybe even a formal outline or idea map (5.2). A shorter, less formal, or more personal piece may require little planning. Without completing these first two steps, you may find it extremely difficult to compose an organized piece of writing that has sufficient development and detail.

Generating Ideas

The first step in The Writing Process is generating ideas. Just as when people who build or manufacture things first must gather raw materials, writers must also gather information and facts with which to work. Obviously, the types of ideas that you might generate are different, depending on which kind of writing you are doing. A narrative essay, for example, might require you to remember sights, sounds, and smells, the details of a particular conversation, or what a particular experience felt like emotionally.

For a comparison-contrast essay, however, you might need to recover many descriptive details about the things you are comparing. Likewise, if you are writing an argumentative essay, you will likely spend much of your time gathering facts and evidence related to the claim you are making in the essay, and thinking about the best order in which to present those facts.

There are many methods that writers use to generate ideas; as you explore the following methods, you should choose the one that works best for you.

Freewriting

Freewriting is an idea-generating technique that many writers use. It is an easy way for you to get comfortable writing, to get past any inhibitions you might have, and to discover things about your topic that perhaps you have not considered. The technique itself is fairly simple: it consists of writing *without interruption* on a given topic for a set period of time, committing everything that comes to mind to paper without editing or revision. There is only one rule for freewriting: once you start, do not stop writing, even if your thinking wanders from your original topic. Just “go with the flow” and see where it leads you. If you become aware of a shift in focus and want to return to your original idea, feel free to do so. But if you want to continue on a tangent, do that instead—and see what comes up. You may surprise yourself with some original insight or idea you didn't know you had in you.

To start freewriting, first select your topic. Start a new document on your computer (or simply on a piece of paper), and put your topic at the top of the page. Now set a timer for a set period of time—start with 10 minutes—and write down or type out everything that comes to your mind related to that topic, without stopping, until the timer goes off. Don't concern yourself with formal or "correct" language, sentence structure, paragraphing, or punctuation. Just focus on getting as many ideas out and on paper as quickly as you can. Try not to censor yourself. Freewriting is about quantity, not necessarily quality. Whatever you do, however, *keep writing* until the timer goes off.

Once you have finished, carefully review what you have written, looking for passages that might be useful as you move forward. Can you identify ideas that are new to you? Something you hadn't thought of before? Something you didn't realize you remembered? What parts of the free-write are most interesting to you?

Focusing on the most interesting or surprising parts of the freewrite, and perhaps even free-writing again on those specific parts of your first attempt, might be a way to generate even more ideas for your writing project.

Exercise: Freewriting Practice

Try to freewrite for 7-10 minutes on each of the following topics:

1. The positives and negatives of living in your particular neighborhood.
2. The best or most important meal you ever had.
3. What you imagine that your life will be like ten years from now.

Looping

Looping is a specific kind of freewriting, where the writer freewrites on two or three related topics in rapid succession, *usually devoting a shorter amount of time to each topic*. To use looping, set up three sections in a computer document, or divide a sheet of paper into three sections (one under another). Put a broad, general topic at the top of the page, and a successively more narrow topic on each subsequent section. Here's an example:

Section 1: Impressions on the college experience (broad)

Section 2: Impressions of living on campus (more narrow)

Section 3: Things you like or dislike about your roommate (much more narrow)

Now, devote 5 minutes to freewriting on each section of the topic—again without stopping.

Exercise: Looping Practice

Perform a looping freewrite exercise on two of the following sets of subjects:

1. Your favorite type of music → Your favorite artist → Your favorite song by that artist
2. College students' dependence on technology → Specific technology that college students depend on → Devices you personally depend on
3. The most influential person in your life → Specific characteristics of that person → Benefits / obstacles to your relationship related to one of that person's specific characteristics

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a very common way to generate ideas, and it is particularly effective when *groups* of people get together to consider a problem or question. The core practice behind brainstorming is simple: you simply put as many ideas as you can related to your topic on paper in the form of a list, rapidly and without censorship.

An easy way to start is to put your topic at the top of a piece of paper or on a whiteboard. If you have a team, go around the room and ask for ideas or perspectives on the topic, from really conventional ones to ones that could be considered outlandish or bizarre. Leave nothing out; put it all down on paper, no matter what. Sometimes a very odd-seeming idea will generate something more worthwhile when someone else (or even the contributor) looks at it further. Members of the group shouldn't criticize, judge, or comment critically upon the other things on the board. This could make people think twice about putting an interesting or bold idea into play, for fear of what others might say. The brainstorming session should be a risk-free, censorship-free process that is full of experimentation.

Similarly, if brainstorming alone, you should follow the same procedure. Get every thought you can out of your head, and don't censor yourself. You might even put aside one side of your paper for intentionally "bizarre" or "outlandish" ideas. Confronting something odd may make you think of something that might be useful (or related to something useful).

Exercise: Brainstorming Practice

With three or four of your classmates, brainstorm on the following:

1. Ways to improve English 101 at Coppin
2. Difficulties new students have during their first year at college
3. The relationship between getting a degree and economic success; the benefits and costs of a college education

Questioning

Questioning is a very specific type of brainstorming. As its name implies, this method involves asking a torrent of questions—some simple, some complex. Starting with the topic at the top of a sheet of paper, you or your group write down as many questions about the topic as possible. Just like any other brainstorming session, there should be no filter to your thoughts; asking as many questions as possible, of all kinds, even if you know (or think you know) the answer, is crucial.

Some writers like to start a questioning session by tackling **The Journalist’s Questions**—a simple set of questions all journalists or reporters ask when writing a news story. These questions can also serve as a way to outline basic information about a story, as well as provide a means to asking more sophisticated or meaningful questions about your topic. The questions are:

- **Who** was involved? What were their names?
- **What** exactly happened? What was the conflict, disagreement, or other event?
- **When** did this happen? Was this recently, or further back in the past?
- **Where** did the event take place? Was it confined to a particular area?
- **Why** did this happen? What were the causes of the event or of the conflict or problem?
- **How** did this issue develop? How did it happen?

Asking these questions is the most important part of this exercise: it helps you to discover what you already know (and do not know) about your topic.

Once you have the questions, of course, it often helps to start answering them; putting answers with questions will further clarify the topic. But don’t worry if you do not have the answers to every question (or even a majority of questions!). This is only an exercise meant to get you thinking. If you finish your exercise with many question marks, but few answers, it may indicate that you need to do a bit more research to fully understand what you are writing about.

Many writers do a “looping” questioning exercise to generate ideas. Once they have an exhaustive set of questions and answers, they select a few and ask ever more specific and probing questions on that particular sub-topic. This often helps generate many helpful details for any given writing project.

Exercise: Questioning Practice

Part I: Perform a questioning exercise on the following two subjects:

1. Consider both the *usefulness* and *popularity* of Facebook as a social media tool.
2. Examine the social and economic causes of violent crime in Baltimore.

Part 2: Perform a looping questioning exercise on the following topic. First, generate a broad and exhaustive set of questions, then select a more narrow topic and generate more specific questions:

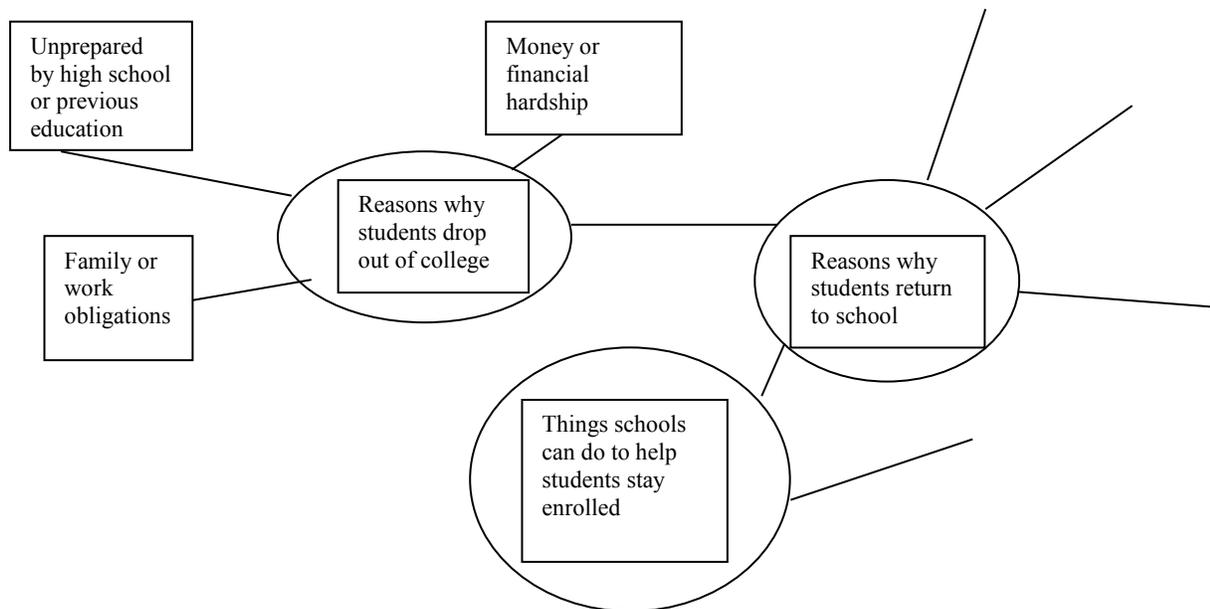
1. The positive and negative influences on African-American youth culture by rappers such as Plies, Gucci Mane, Young Jeezy, and Lil' Wayne.

Branching or Clustering

Branching and *Clustering* are two words for the same thing—brainstorming with a visual map to generate ideas and make connections between concepts. This method is very good for writers who are visual learners: if you'd rather look at a map than have someone write down directions for you, branching and clustering might be your most effective method of generating and structuring ideas.

This method relies on the *visual* organization of ideas. Start with your topic in the middle of your paper, with a circle around it. Once you have done that, draw lines out from the central circle, and add details about your topic either directly on the line or in additional circles.

Here's what a clustering exercise might look like: details, sub-ideas, and related topics branch off the main topic and in turn generate ideas, details, and sub-topics of their own.



Exercise: Branching or Clustering Practice

Perform a Branching or Clustering Exercise on one of the following topics, extending your ideas until you have reached at least two related sub-topics.

1. The experience of attending a Historically Black College or University (HBCU).
2. The effect of smartphones and technology on dating and relationships in the 21st century.

Generating Ideas for the Narrative Essay

Using two of the methods listed above, generate some ideas for your narrative essay in the spaces below. Remember that narratives are comprised of scenes or episodes, and contain events, characters, and dialogue. Detailed *description* of these things is helpful when generating ideas for a narrative essay.

Generating Ideas Method 1: _____

Generating Ideas Method 2: _____

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, occupying most of the page. It is intended for the user to write down ideas generated using Method 2.

Generating Ideas for the Compare-Contrast Essay

Using two of the methods outlined above, generate some ideas for your Compare-Contrast essay in the spaces below. It may be helpful for you to consider the similarities and differences between your subjects in two separate exercises.

Idea Generating Method 1: _____

Idea Generation Method 2: _____

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, occupying most of the page. It is intended for the user to write down their idea generation method.

Generating Ideas for the Argument Essay

Using two of the methods above, generate some ideas for your argument essay. You may find it helpful to spend some time attempting to come up with a general *thesis statement* in one exercise and then using the second exercise to come up with reasons or evidence to support that thesis.

Idea Generation Method 1: _____

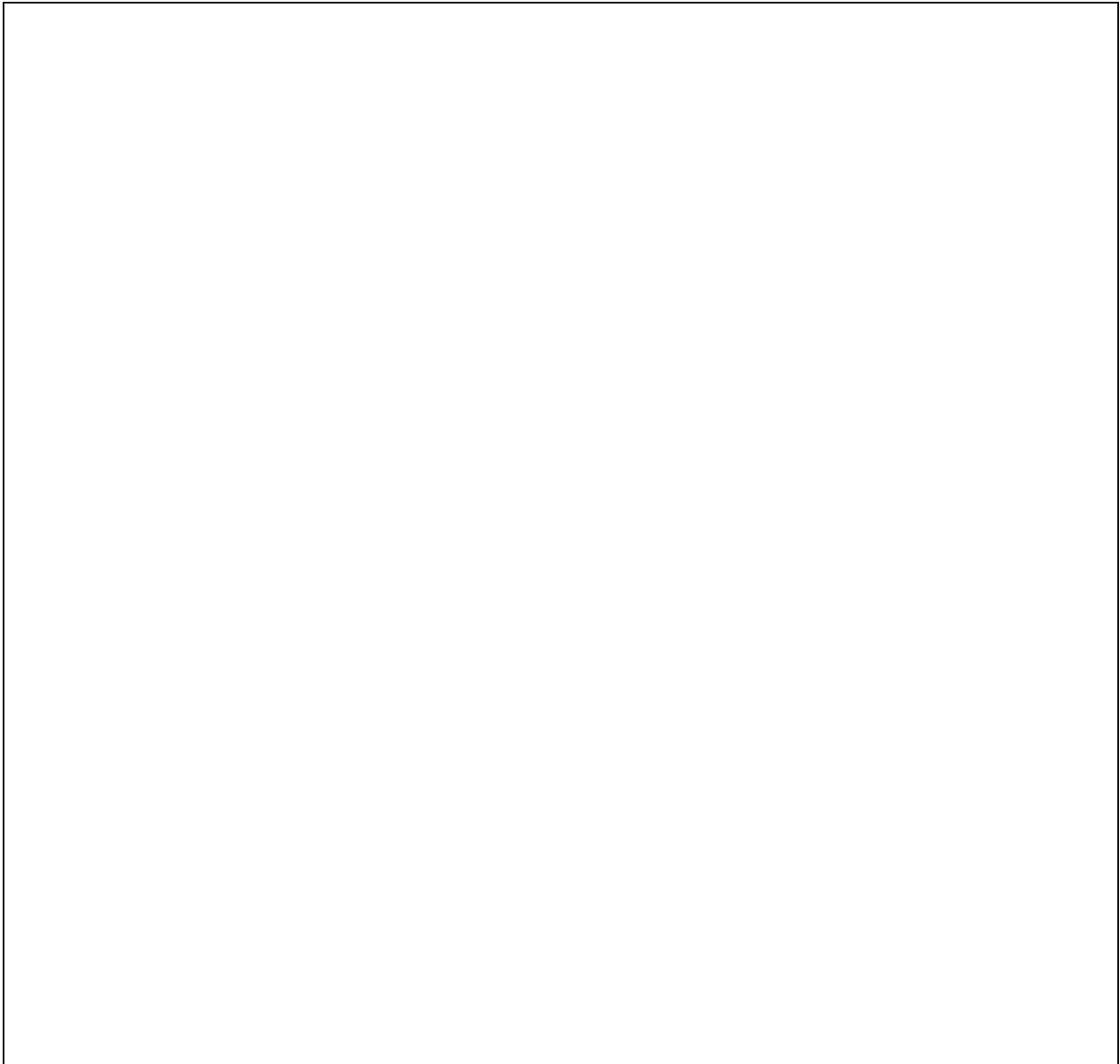
Idea Generation Method 2: _____

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, occupying most of the page. It is intended for the user to write down their idea generation method.

Generating Ideas for the Writing Process Analysis Essay

Using the generating ideas method you find most effective, use the worksheets below to generate some ideas regarding the elements of The Writing Process you followed when constructing each of your three primary writing assignments.

Idea Generation Method 1: _____

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for students to write their ideas for Idea Generation Method 1.

Idea Generation Method 2: _____

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, occupying most of the page. It is intended for the user to write down their idea generation method.