Goals for this Study Sheet

After having found a topic or been assigned a topic for a paper, the question students often ask is: “Well now what do I do?” Beginning to write a paper can be a daunting task, especially if the topic you’ve been assigned is one that you’re not particularly interested in. Knowing how to brainstorm is a valuable skill that can help get you started in the writing process. This study sheet will cover what brainstorming is, as well as several different methods you can use for a good brainstorming session.

What Is Brainstorming?

Fun fact: The term “brainstorming” was originally used to describe a mental condition of temporary insanity. It was popularized in the legal defense of Harry Kendall Thaw in 1907 after he shot his long-standing rival, Stanford White, and his defense attorney had him plead guilty to the murder on account of a temporary “brainstorm” that caused him to commit the murder.

The purpose of brainstorming is to create an environment for producing and maintaining creative thought. It is essentially an exercise that people can do in order to jog their creative minds for ideas. There isn’t a set way to create this environment, and a lot of methods can be used. However, one factor links them all together: Brainstorming sessions are all about creating a free flow of ideas and creativity. Any method for brainstorming should contain that factor.

Methods for Brainstorming

Brainstorming is an important facet of writing, as writing necessitates the free flow of ideas. Finding a brainstorming exercise that works for you will help a lot with generating ideas for your paper. Many brainstorming exercises exist, but this study sheet will only
cover a few of them. If these exercises do not work for you, try doing some research and to find a method that helps spark your creative thoughts.

Here are some methods to use for a good brainstorming session:

**Think of Your Topic as a Question You Want to Answer**

Writing down your topic in the form of a question can sometimes help spark ideas as to how to answer it. For example, if I’m writing about whether or not space exploration is beneficial and if it should receive funding, I might pose my stance like this: “What makes space exploration a beneficial area to invest funding into?” This causes my mind to start answering my question: expanding our resources is a good benefit...finding a new home for humanity in case something happens to earth is another. Posing your topic as a question can help jog your brain into a problem-solving line of thinking, and can, as a result, produce some ideas for how to begin writing your paper.

**Free Write/List**

If you’ve ever had writer’s block before, you’ve probably been told to do this exercise. Set a timer for 10-15 minutes or so. In that span of time, write everything that comes to mind about your topic. The important thing is to not think too much while doing this. The point is for you to write down everything you know about the topic, without getting caught up on wording, coherency, etc. You can format this any way you’d like: as a jumble of words and sentences vomited onto paper, or perhaps as a list of points with subpoints. You could also format it like a cloud: one idea being the starting point, which leads to another, which leads to two more, and so on.

Another way (and perhaps a more helpful way) of doing freewriting is to write down all of the questions that you would like to answer about your topic. For example: if I’m writing about why I think Tim Duncan is the best basketball player of the past 20 years (sorry LeBron...), instead of just listing/writing all the reasons why I think this, I can write down a bunch of questions that relate to my topic. Like this: What makes a basketball player great? Which qualities are most important in determining “greatness”? Which of those qualities does Tim Duncan posses? What other players could also be
considered great? Why is Duncan greater than them? Once I’m done writing out my questions, I will have an idea of what I want my paper to cover. Doing the research or using my own knowledge to answering the questions will be the start of the writing process for my paper.

**Answer the Five Ws**

This method is a classic, and you might have used it before. Answering the five W questions (Who? What? Where? When? Why?) is a basic step in detailing information about a subject. At first glance, this method may seem too simplistic and not helpful. If I were to use this method for my Tim Duncan paper, I might fall into that line of thinking, especially if I just try answering basic questions like: Who is Tim Duncan? What does he do? Where does he play basketball? Etc. If you get more creative with your questions, and broaden your thinking, you might be surprised how detailed your questions can be. You also don’t have to use the Ws only once; use them as many times as you need! For example: Who is Tim Duncan? What makes him the greatest player of the past 20 years? Where does the line fall between greatness and not-so-greatness? What defines greatness? And so on. Let you creative process flourish!

**In Conclusion**

Hopefully at least one of these methods will be helpful for you in your current state of brain-storminess. The most important thing about brainstorming is to find a method that works for you. If none of these worked, try modifying them to fit your needs, or come up with your own method. Do whatever it takes to get your brain thinking about your topic and how you will tell the world what you have to say.

**Activity Sheets/Links to Additional Resources**

For some assistance getting started with brainstorming, check out our Brainstorming Activity Sheet
For a sample of line-of-thought brainstorming, check out our Brainstorming Infographic