

Popular Brainstorming Methods

There are many methods people use to get their ideas out on paper before attempting to write a full-length essay or research paper. While such “pre-writing” may seem daunting at first, anyone may use these techniques effectively, no matter where they are in their writing development. Try several of them to discover which work best for you and your writing style.

Brainstorming by Free-writing

This technique is exactly what it sounds like: you just start writing! Set aside some time when you can sit and write down anything and everything you can think of about your topic. You can make a list of your ideas, begin the rough draft of an introduction to a paper, or jot down quotes from your source that you want to cite (use) in your essay. Free-writing can produce almost anything, so be prepared to do a *lot* of rethinking, revising, and editing of what you write. Sometimes, when you look back over your free-writing exercise, you will notice a clear thesis or main idea that you can use in a later version of the paper. Highlight these ideas, take out the pieces you don’t like, and try to construct a rough draft, list, cluster, or outline of your ideas for the assignment.

Brainstorming by Listing

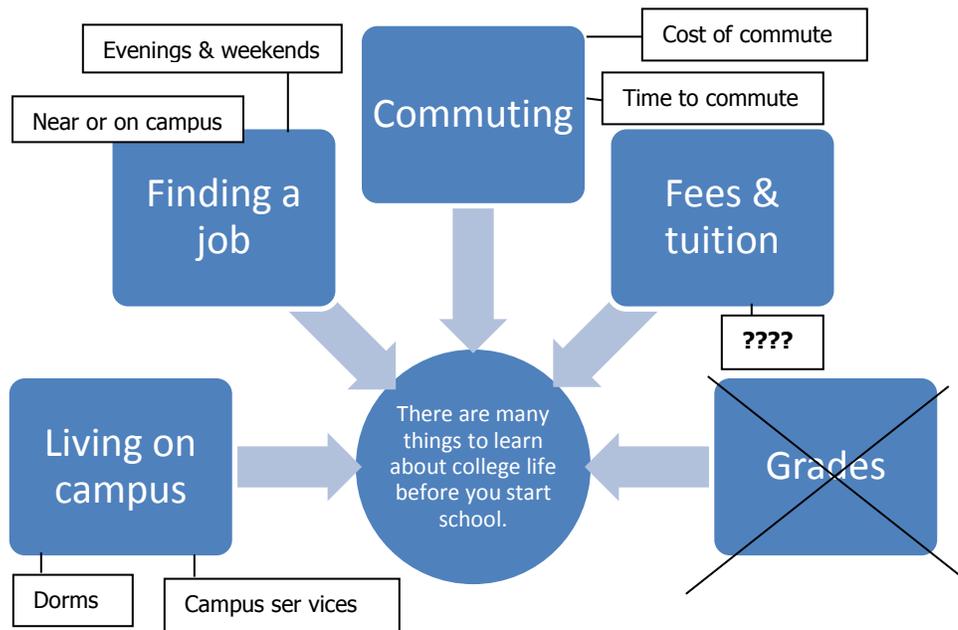
This technique is good if you are trying to figure out what exactly you know and believe about a certain topic. Think of this method as a form of free-writing; write down everything that comes to mind, or what you have researched, in the form of a list. A list can also include questions to explore further before writing the essay. Try this method to help plan what needs to be done to complete your assignment and support your thesis completely.

Brainstorm list

- *College—not only education but also social interaction and chance to try out different ideas.*
- *Finding a job*
- *What services are offered on our campus?*
- *Transportation & commuting*

Brainstorming by Clustering

Though it is one of the more unusual methods to *look* at, clustering can help you see how your ideas connect and how to arrange the ideas you wish to present in your essay. You use clustering to group facts and ideas and show how they relate to your main idea (thesis).



Write your thesis somewhere near the middle. Then, arrange the ideas you wish to develop around it. Note any that need more research and cross out any that don’t seem to relate clearly.

Clustering can also point out trouble spots that need further development to make them complete and convincing; you want to develop each point about evenly.

Brainstorming by Outlining

Outlining can be used all by itself or to further organize a free-write, list or cluster. It can help you figure out *where* you want to include portions of your argument, quotes from outside readings, or anything else. You can also choose an overall pattern of organization, such as problem/solution, chronological, or cause/effect and work it into your outline.

The example to the right demonstrates an *informal* outline.

Brainstorm by informal outline

Intro: Hook + background about college life. Add my thesis at the end.

Paragraph 1: problem of where to live: explain about living on campus (dorms, campus services)

Paragraph 2: problem of finding a job in college: explain advantages & disadvantages (on or off campus, evenings or weekends, days).

Paragraph 3: problem of getting to and from classes & work: explain about commuting (costs of gas, insurance, car maintenance or bus fare, bus schedules, bicycle, time spent driving or riding a bus)

Paragraph 4: problem of costs: explain costs (fees, tuition, transportation, cost of living) and kinds of financial aid

Paragraph 5: Conclusion—I'm looking forward to solving all these problems and having fun.

If you are comfortable with *formal* outlining, you can use that format instead:

Brainstorm by formal outline

- I. Hook + background about college life. My thesis.
- II. Living on a college campus
 - A. Dorms
 - B. Campus services
- III. Finding a college job
 - A. On or off (near) campus
 - B. Evenings & weekends
 - C. Days
- IV. Transportation
 - A. Cost of commuting in a car (gas, insurance, maintenance)
 - B. Cost of bus
 - C. Time driving back & forth
 - D. Time waiting for bus—bus schedule
- V. College costs
 - A. Tuition
 - B. Fees, health, parking, transportation
 - C. Dorms or apartment rent
 - D. Groceries
 - E. Laundry
 - F. Books
 - G. Personal
 - H. Entertainment
- VI. Conclusion: Make wise choices and have fun

Remember, as with all pre-writing and drafting, anything you write in an outline is *not set in stone*; you can go back at any time and change something if you feel it no longer fits with the essay you are creating

No matter which type of brainstorming you use, remember to set aside enough time so that you don't feel rushed.

Contributed by Elizabeth Trefzger

