



Invention Strategies

Brainstorming = Writing Success

Many people foolishly consider brainstorming or invention exercises a waste of time. By spending a few minutes working with a scratch piece of paper, you can find better quality and more feasible topics. Invention exercises allow you to create numerous topic ideas in a no-pressure environment, and when you generate more ideas, you possess a greater tendency to find a topic you enjoy.

Reliable Invention Exercises

1. Clustering
2. Listing
3. Free Writing

Unreliable Invention Exercises

1. Reading your horoscope
2. Throwing darts at your syllabus
3. Running with the first idea that comes to mind

Types of Brainstorming

Clustering

Pros: Excellent way to examine an idea closely
Allows for creativity and tangents
Can explore idea fully before writing

Cons: Always need a 2nd cluster for detail
Risk of tangents taking over
Not great if unsure of how to start



Listing

Pros: Wonderful method for diverse topic generation
Provides instant feasibility feedback of topics
Tends to produce multiple topics with possibility

Cons: Danger of early evaluation
Clear limits needed
Too many topics may cause frustration

Free Writing

Pro: Realize what you know
Creative ideas slip out
Generates numerous examples

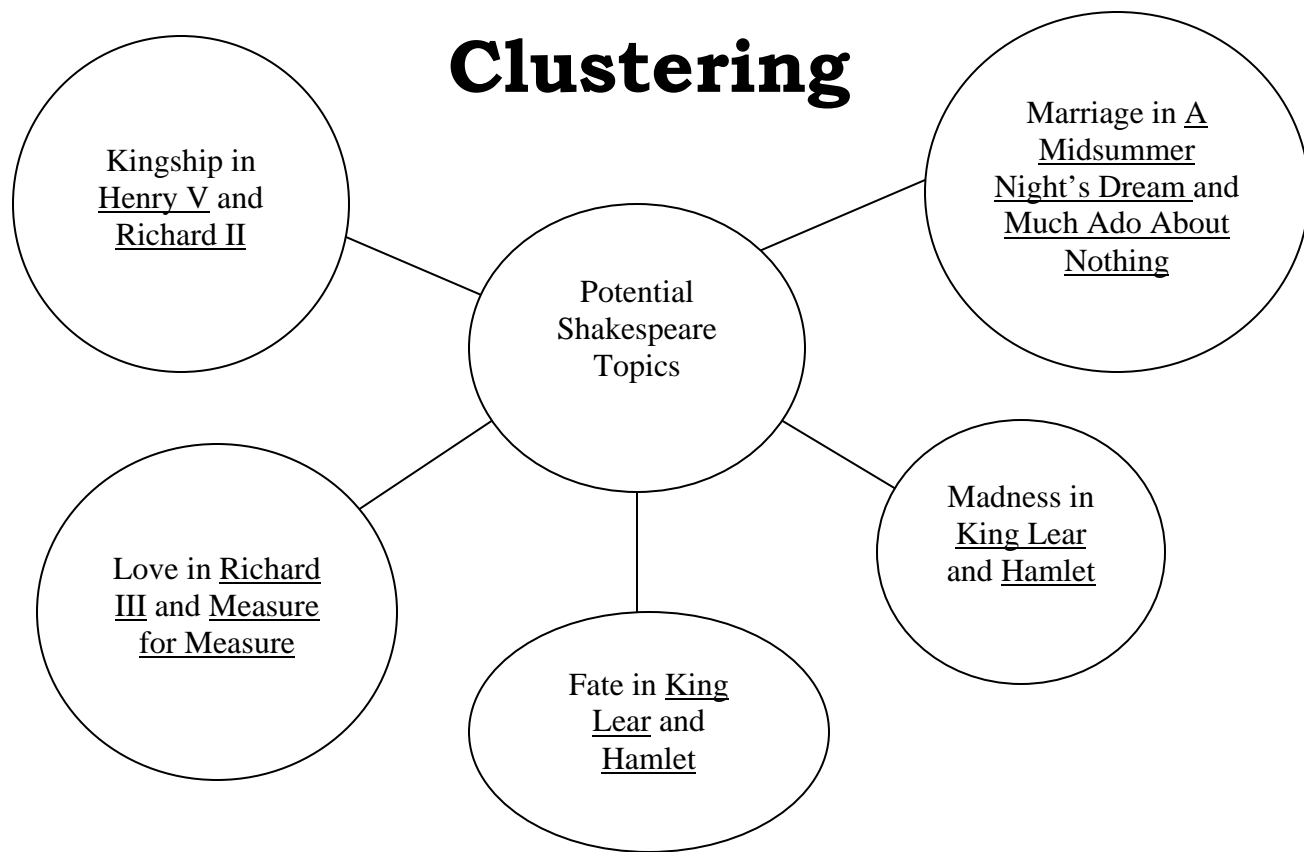
Cons: Must remain aware of length
NOT a first draft
More examples need more structure

When using Invention Exercises

1. Approach the activities with the intent to find something useful.
2. Focus on quantity over quality.
3. Test a topic's value with reporter's questions.
(who, what, when, where, why, how)
4. Use the activities with the intent to produce a working thesis.
5. After using invention exercises, always use an outline for organization.



Clustering



Listing

A. Random Topics

Graduation
Moving to Minnesota
The Grand Canyon

B. A Controlled List

Epiphany and “Cathedral”
Darkness and “Araby”
Symbolism and “The Lamb”

C. A More Controlled List

Youth in “Tintern Abbey”
Color in “Tintern Abbey”
Nature in “Tintern Abbey”

Free Writing

I’m supposed to examine the symbolism in one of the novels we have read this semester. We’ve read The Jungle, Native Son, Ceremony, and Invisible Man. I didn’t enjoy The Jungle, so that’s out. I want to enjoy this project. If I talked about Native Son, I could mention the scene with the rat and what the Daltons’ name means. In Ceremony, I noticed all the colors. Silko used blue and yellow to show healing and spiritual growth. I could talk about the different colors of pollen and how the character changes after the author describes the colors in a scene. If I wrote about Invisible Man, I could discuss the importance of the lights at the end and what the scholarship meant. I should probably include the main character’s relationship to his grandfather and the grandfather’s dying words.

I have the most information on Ceremony, and I enjoyed the novel. Now to come up with examples. . . the blue and yellow pollen in the legends throughout the story and the pollen Tayo uses when he’s tending the cattle later . . . the color of the seedpod at the end of the novel . . .

Script for Invention Exercises Workshop

Brainstorming = Writing Success

Students frequently consider brainstorming or using invention exercises a waste of time, but these activities take only a few moments and improve topic and draft quality significantly. The first reason to use these activities involves the fear of the blank page. Many writers have trouble getting started. They spend hours staring at their computer screens or notebooks and become frustrated when they feel they are wasting time. Invention exercises help to relieve this stress by providing you with a place to start. These activities encourage writers to think about their topic in an environment free from assessment and promote creativity. When you use invention exercises they produce better, feasible topics and establish a working thesis earlier than writers who start drafting.

Although everyone possesses his/her own style of writing and selecting topics, a few standard brainstorming activities assist almost every writer. Three popular methods are clustering, listing, and free writing.

Types of Brainstorming

Clustering

This activity, also called the bubble method, allows you to examine an idea closely because you can explore the idea thoroughly in a brief amount of time. If you are uncertain of a topic, clustering serves as an excellent way to see if your idea will support the length required of your assignment or to determine what ideas you will need to sustain with research. This method easily supports creative tangents, and with this method, you might begin with one topic in mind and end up with a paper topic that is completely different from where you started. After examining your ideas, you easily select a topic and begin to organize your examples.

Although clustering works for many writers, be aware of the caveats. When using clusters you always need at least two. The cluster you see on the back of this handout is an example of a beginning cluster. At this stage, you are generating ideas, but you are not exploring them thoroughly. You will need a second cluster to decide what examples you use. Clustering may not work if you are unsure of how to start a paper or if you explore tangents and forget about the requirements of your assignment. Overall, clustering allows you to examine ideas before moving on to organizing your ideas.

Listing

A second brainstorming exercise is listing. This activity provides the ability to produce diverse topics in minutes. To accomplish a list, you merely write down every idea that enters your mind, related to your paper of course, for ten to fifteen minutes. Do not evaluate any of these ideas as you write them down. The point of the exercise is to create numerous ideas; you'll assess each idea later. In the example provided, you see three examples of lists because listing is the most adaptable form of prewriting. The list you produce changes based on the focus of your assignment. In example A, you see a list for a typical narrative essay. This style of list works if you need to write about a significant person or place in your life. Example B reflects an assignment where your instructor has asked you to write about something you've read this semester. This list works because the assignment has a wide focus, and the topics you generate can be examined when you organize your ideas later. In the third example we've provided, you see a list for an assignment, such as an explication of a poem. An extremely controlled list allows you to see what you know about a work and determine if you need to reread the piece or research your topic before moving on to organizational activities.

Despite lists allowing you to see a wide range of ideas, writers need to be cognizant of potential problem areas. A list needs to be limited with regard to how many ideas you create and how long you spend listing. If you create over twenty ideas, you will spend too long determining if the ideas are feasible, and if you set aside an hour to list, you'll end up with excessive ideas or ideas that merely resemble previous proposed topics. In addition, most writers make one key mistake when working with lists; they evaluate their ideas too early. When making a list, decide how many potential topics you want. Five to ten tends to be a good number for most writers, and after completing your list, evaluate your topics for feasibility and enjoyment.

Free Writing

If you don't like clustering or listing, free writing will probably work for you. This option remains the favorite of people, who hate free writing exercises. This activity is not performed on a separate sheet of paper and, instead, occurs in the same environment where you write. Many writers prefer this style when they have no idea of how to get started. This activity lets you establish an informal dialogue between you and your paper. Your writing during this exercise should be conversational, and any ideas you produce should be evaluated at the end of the exercise. Free writing is named correctly; to complete this form of brainstorming, write anything that comes to mind on paper. Allow your thoughts to wander because stray ideas might become creative angles for you to explore during your project. When you look at the example on the back of your handout, you will see a couple of emotional statements as well. If a book makes you angry or cry, feel free to include that as you get started because after a few minutes of what may seem like babbling, you will naturally progress into an exploration of ideas. Once you have written for around thirty minutes, stop. Read what you've produced, and you will see that you have several ideas worth exploring further or assembling into an outline.

Although many writers prefer free writing because they feel closer to the writing process than when they use clustering or listing, a free write is NEVER a first draft. Do not use these ideas as a first draft or you will produce papers with massive problems. Despite the existence of poet laureates, who produce masterpieces on the first try, most writers should always move from a free write to an outline. Because you've created your ideas in such a structure-free environment, you need to organize your examples before beginning to actually write your essay. When free writing, remain aware of the time you spend writing. If you spend more than an hour on this stage, you are doing something wrong. Also, a free write should never be longer than one page. The point of the exercise is to generate ideas, but you may add new examples later.

When Using Invention Exercises

All three methods serve as places to get started. When you are staring at your computer screen, and when you're frustrated enough to pull your hair out, try one of these activities instead of giving yourself an odd hairstyle. As you generate topics, use these methods, and try to hold back your tendency to immediately critique your ideas; you can use reporters questions (who, what, when, where, why, how) to evaluate your potential topics later. These activities are designed to help you find a working thesis to control your outlines and research, and if you approach invention exercises with a positive mindset, you'll be pleasantly surprised by the innovative topic of your next paper.

When writing papers, do not wait until the last minute. After getting your ideas down on paper, stop, and take a break. Even while you're off studying for another class or doing dishes, you are still working out different parts of your paper in the back of your mind. If these ideas have time to come to fruition, your paper will benefit.

In addition to taking time to think about your paper, talking about your essay acts as a brainstorming exercise and helps you to limit your focus and organize your ideas. If the methods we've described don't work for you, or you wish to explore your ideas through discussion call the Writing Center (816-235-1146).