

INVENTION TECHNIQUES

FREEWRTING is the practice of writing as freely as possible without stopping. It is a simple but powerful strategy for exploring important issues and problems. The only absolute requirement for freewriting: **DON'T STOP**. Time yourself. Five, ten, or fifteen minute intervals usually work. Just keep that pen (or those fingers on the keyboard) moving. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, or even making sense. You don't have to finish sentences here, and no one has to read it but you. If you can't think of anything to say, write "I can't think of anything to say" again and again—until you do. And you will.

LOOPING is an extended or directed form of freewriting that alternates freewriting with analysis and reflection. Begin looping by first establishing a theme or topic for your freewriting; then freewrite for five or ten minutes. This is your first loop. After you have done so, reread what you have written. In reading your freewriting, look for the center of gravity or "heart" of your ideas—the image, detail, issue, or problem that seems richest or most intriguing, compelling, or productive. Write a sentence that summarizes this understanding; this sentence will become the starting point of your second loop. Repeat the process. You can create as many loops as you want (or need). When you loop, you don't know where your freewriting and reflection will take you; you don't (or you shouldn't) worry about the final product. The goal of freewriting and looping is not to produce a draft of an essay but to explore your own ideas and to discover ideas, images, and sometimes even words, phrases, and sentences that you can use in your writing.

BRAINSTORMING, like freewriting and looping, is a simple but productive invention strategy. When you brainstorm, you list as quickly as possible all the thoughts about a subject that occur to you without censoring or stopping to reflect on your ideas. To brainstorm effectively, take a few moments at the start to formulate your goal, purpose, or problem. Then simply list your ideas as quickly as you can. You are the only one who needs to be able to decipher what you've written, so your brainstorming list can be as messy or as neat as you like. You can also brainstorm at the computer. Brainstorming can enable you to discover and explore a number of ideas in a short time. Not all of them will be worth using in a piece of writing, of course. The premise of brainstorming is that the more ideas you can generate, the better your chances of coming up with good ones.

CLUSTERING emphasizes spontaneity in many of the same ways freewriting, looping, and brainstorming do. The goal of all four strategies is to generate as many ideas as possible to discover what you know and what you might explore further. Clustering differs, however, in that it uses visual means to generate ideas. Some writers find that it enables them to explore their ideas more deeply and creatively. To cluster effectively, start with a single word or phrase. If you are responding to an assigned topic, choose the word that best summarizes or evokes that topic. Write this word in the center of a page of blank paper, and circle it. Now fill in the page by expanding on or developing ideas connected with this word. Don't censor your ideas or force the cluster to assume a certain shape. Simply circle your key ideas, and connect them either to the first word or to other related ideas. Your goal is to be as spontaneous as possible.

DAILY JOURNALS OR WRITER'S NOTEBOOKS are excellent places to explore ideas, reflect upon your readings and experiences, and discover plans for new essays. Keep one with you. How many times has that great idea hit you as you are drinking that cup of coffee in the morning or pouring over some history homework? And if you keep this thing with you, then you know where all your notes are when you get ready to write your essay.

Exploring Ideas, or "What Now?"

The above methods work quite well when you are trying to get going on a paper, and, believe it or not, they also work well once you've developed a draft but find you are lacking some focus or sufficient evidence. And you can use these methods as you are generating a draft to move past writer's block. You can cluster a paper you've already begun. And/Or you can do a series of focused freewriting sessions to get yourself focused, generate further evidence, or create links in logic your reader may not yet see. In other words, you can use these techniques to decide what you want to say before you say it *and* how you want to say it once you've figured out what to say. These techniques work!

But so do these. What follows are some techniques you can use to create portions of drafts, thesis statements, introductions, conclusions, and even titles.

GENERATING LEADS is one method Donald Murray, a former journalist and an important scholar in composition studies, suggests. In order to focus ideas (at any point in the writing process), Murray recommends you generate no less than twenty possible titles for the essay you are working on. The technique works in many of the same ways brainstorming works, but here you are creating the list with a more specific goal in mind. This really can be your title. You'll have lots of less-than-thrilling titles, and you may have some silly ones, but that's okay and that's part of the fun. Just get these down as fast as you can. The only rule here is to keep the focus of your paper in mind as you generate these. You may have several key words in your paper that you keep returning to. If you find your titles swerving too far from the original subject, pull yourself back by focusing on these three words again. Or maybe the new direction seems exciting. Go for it. This is part of the fun on invention activities like these. Take Murray's advice: "Be wasteful. Promiscuity is virtuous in title writers. The more titles you draft, the more interesting combinations you will have to consider" (*A Writer Teaches Writing* 26).

THE JOURNALIST'S QUESTIONS can help you get started on your essay, but they may also be a useful way to flesh out your evidence. Many times, inexperienced writers don't offer enough detail for the reader to "see" the evidence before offering an analysis of this evidence. Presenting evidence effectively is a careful balancing act. You don't want to offer the evidence in so much detail that the reader misses the point (that is, the way it works to support your thesis), and you don't want to offer so little detail that the reader is left to guess. So if you find any piece of your evidence to be a bit too sketchy, you might ask yourself these questions about it: (1) Who is involved? (2) What issues are involved? (3) Where did these issues begin? (4) Where does this event/action/information seem to be most important/heated/interesting? (5) Why is all this going on? (5) How might (should) all of this end? Write these answers down. Freewrite the answers. Brainstorm them. Cluster them. Just get them down on paper.

The big question (not one of the journalist's questions, but important nonetheless): How does this support my thesis? Always, always ask yourself this question when you are revising a draft.

THE DISCOVERY DRAFT: The purpose of the first draft is to discover. It is not a final draft; it is more of a pre-draft (or a practice draft, test draft, experimental draft, etc.). The element that distinguishes it from the fragments of writing that have gone before is that the writer pushes it to the end, even when there are holes or parts of the writing that clearly do not work. By writing the first draft the writer is able, from that point on, to work with the completed whole.

A FINAL WORD: Some techniques will work better for you than others, and some techniques will work better for certain kinds of literacy projects than they will for others. Try out several, and see which one works best. And don't forget: you can use these techniques to get started on a draft, but you can also use them to revise a draft, get those ideas flowing again when you hit a wall, generate links between evidence (links you intuitively know are there but you don't quite know how to articulate), and flesh out evidence that isn't quite as clear as it should be. In short: as you write, you are always discovering what you want to write. Very few writers know exactly what they want to say before they say it. As Murray explains, "You can't write writing. Effective writing is produced from an abundance of specific information. The writer needs an inventory of facts, observations, details, images, quotations, statistics—all sorts of forms of information—from which to choose when building an effective piece of writing" (10). And each bit of information breeds another. According to Murray, "two and two, in writing, add up to seven" (11). So you write to know what you want to write and you write to figure out how to write, and the more you write the more you discover you want to say. In fact, you write to learn and you write to teach.

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