

Generating Ideas: Brainstorming Techniques

Freewriting



Practice freewriting for a timed period (e.g., 15 minutes). Write whatever comes to mind. If the thought comes to you that you do not know what to write, then write that down, too. Don't worry about fragments and grammatical errors. The idea is to simply keep words flowing onto the page.

You can also try looping your freewriting. Review what you have written and extract any thoughts or phrases that stand out. Copy and use them as springboards for new freewrites.

This can be a helpful early brainstorming exercise if you make your topic the focus of your freewrite. It can also help to get creative juices flowing at any point in the process if you are experiencing writer's block!

The Journalist Approach: Asking Questions

The purpose of this brainstorming approach is to generate a list of questions about the topic. You can write your topic at the top of a page and list the subheadings of who, what, where, when, why and how, or you can use a more visual approach called *starbursting*. To try starbursting, draw a six-pointed star in the middle of your page and write your topic in the centre. On the inside of each star tip, jot the question categories. Next, generate questions and record them on the corresponding tips.

As you engage in this exercise, try not to find the answers as you go along. Instead, concentrate on producing as many questions as you can. A comprehensive list of questions will lead you to a more complete understanding of the topic and a better sense of the aspects that your paper should address.

Here is another example. Suppose that your instructor has asked to write about political conflict in the Middle East. You could begin by asking yourself the following questions:

- **Who** is involved in the conflict?
- **What** issues most clearly divide those engaged in this dispute?
- **When** did the troubles in the Middle East begin, and how have they developed over time?
- **Where** does the conflict seem most heated or violent?
- **Why** have those living in this area found it so difficult to resolve the situation?
- **How** might this conflict be resolved?

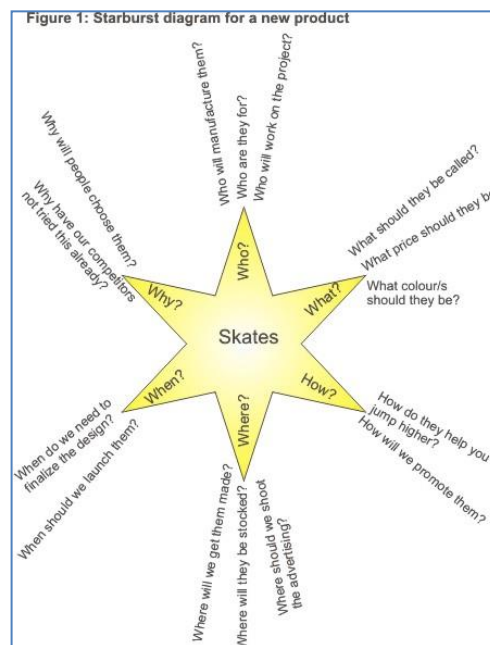
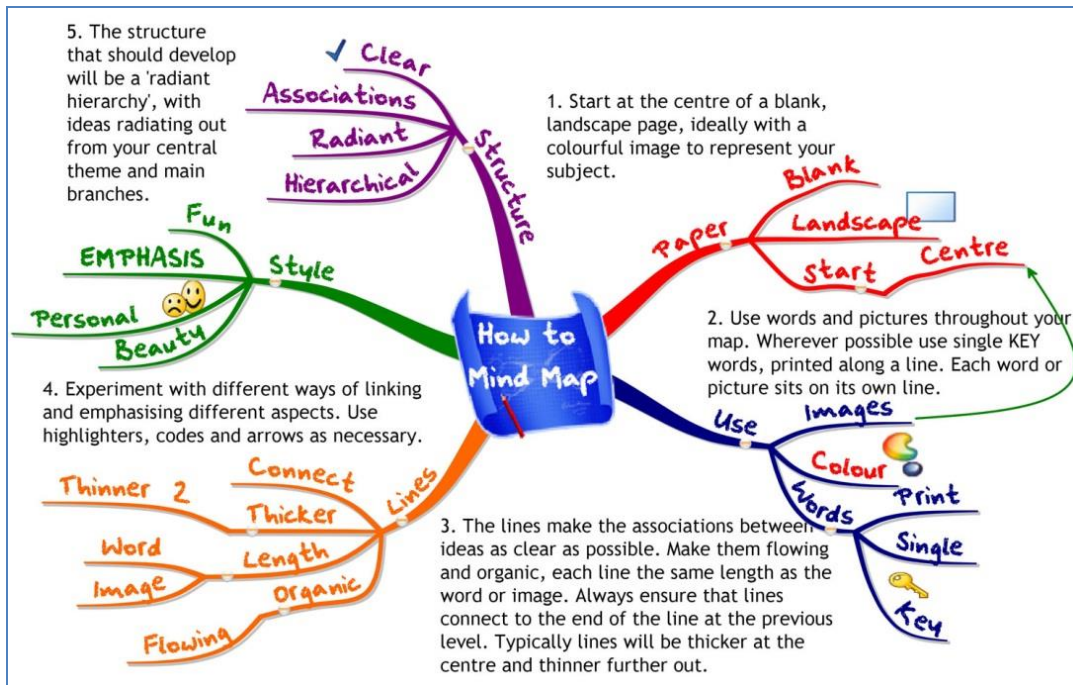
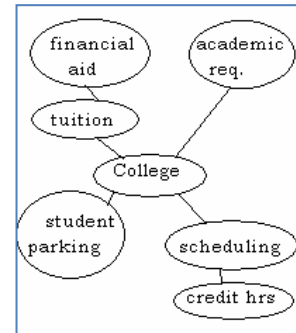


Diagram credited to Mind Tools

Mind Mapping (also referred to as Clustering or Webbing)

Write your topic in the middle of your page and circle it. As you think about and research the topic, jot subtopics around your central theme and draw lines to show connections between words and ideas.

Mind maps can help to summarize information, draw connections between ideas, and organize thoughts. The diagram to the right shows a simple method of mind mapping or clustering. For a more detailed approach, read the Mind Tools diagram below or consult www.mindtools.com for tips on how to get the most out of this technique.



Reverse Brainstorming

While this technique is not suitable for all types of papers, but you might try reverse brainstorming to broaden your understanding of the various sides of a debate. Too often in argumentative papers, students fail to adequately acknowledge opposing viewpoints. This technique can help you to more firmly grasp on your own position by considering other angles.

To try this technique, follow these steps:

- Write down the argument, question or issue that is central to your paper.
- Reverse the question, problem or argument by asking: "What is the opposing viewpoint?" or "How could I achieve the opposite effect?"
- Brainstorm that opposing viewpoint or argument.
- Once you have brainstormed ideas from the reverse angle, flip back to the original argument or problem.

