New Mexico Highlands University Dr. Briefs

Discovering Ideas

As a smart writer, you can discover what you want to say in two important ways. The first is passive. As soon as you get a paper assignment, mark on your calendar the dates you'll begin working on that paper. (Projects you carry in your head get forgotten, but projects you write on your calendar get done.) Then find a folder and begin collecting ideas to put in it. Don't wait until a couple weeks before the deadline to begin collecting material. Spend a little time *now* deciding what you want to write about (and getting your instructor to approve your topic). Create a tentative thesis statement and jot down the main points you think you'll want to cover in your paper. You can do this in a day or two. Now just let your paper idea simmer in the back of your mind for several weeks until the project starting date you put on your calendar. An amazing thing will happen. Ideas and outside material for your paper will come to *you*. As you're brushing your hair, riding your bike, standing in line, dropping off to sleep, ideas for your paper will pop into your mind, seemingly out of nowhere. As you're reading the newspaper, listening to your professors, talking with friends, browsing through a magazine at the checkout counter, watching the evening news, you'll keep running into outside material that's perfect for your paper.

You're ready for these ideas and outside material: you carry a small notebook or index cards, and you jot them down, one per page or card. You clip or photocopy newspaper and magazine articles. Every evening, you file your new material safely away in your folder. Now the date comes to sit down and actually begin researching and writing. You open your folder and find to your delight that you already have a big collection of good material to work with. You sort it into topic piles and label each. You decide whether they all support your tentative thesis statement; if not, you create a new thesis statement. You drop the piles that don't support it, and you arrange the remaining piles into logical order. From those piles you can create a working outline. It will now be clear to you what additional research you'll need to do.

The second way you discover what you want to say is active, requiring you to sit down and deliberately generate ideas using the discovery techniques of experienced writers. A toolbox of these techniques follows. You can use them at each stage of the writing process: to help you take inventory of what you know about the subject, to help you narrow your topic, to help you come up with a thesis statement, to help you discover and develop supporting ideas, and even to help you come up with a conclusion and title.

Brainstorming: (a vertical list). Most people love making lists: shopping lists, wish lists, guest lists. Lists are powerful, first because they are nonthreatening and fun; second because they get creative ideas pouring out thick and fast; and third because, once written, they inspire us and commit us to action. Brainstorming is a special kind of listing. In brainstorming, you list everything that pops into your mind: words, images, and ideas. You list not only the ideas that seem sensible but *all* the ideas that occur to you, no matter how silly or preposterous. Creative thinkers know that off-the-wall ideas frequently turn out useful. Once you've finished brainstorming, go back and highlight the ideas that "light up" for you, that make you feel a little excited. Now look at your highlighted ideas: do you see connections among them? Say you're brainstorming the word *television* and your highlighted words are *Sesame Street*, children, educational, and *The Discovery Channel*. You might decide that you're interested in writing about the educational side of television. Brainstorming is such a productive technique for coming up with great ideas that it is used routinely in the professional world, from the movie location to the corporate boardroom. You can also use different colors of highlighter for different "themes" that you find in your list. For example, if you brainstorm the word *television*, you might find that the items in your list could be grouped into these themes: entertainment, pharmaceutical ads, education, couch potato, soap opera. You could then decide which of these themes "lights up" for you the most. You could even try joining two of the themes. In any case, it will now be easy for you to pick a paper topic!

Clustering: (a diagram that looks like a spider web.) Clustering (also called Mapping, Webbing) takes brainstorming a step further, showing relationships among ideas. Write your subject in the center of a piece of paper, circle it, and then, in a cluster around it, write down all the related words that pop into your mind, attaching each to the central word with web-lines. As you go, you'll find some of your new words bringing

further words to mind; these become starting points for new clusters of ideas. Sometimes you can come up with very interesting, fresh paper ideas by drawing a web-line between words on different sides of the cluster. Look over your cluster. Which parts of it light up for you? There's your paper idea.

Branching: (a diagram that looks like a branch lying on its side.) Write your paper topic (or thesis statement if you've already got one) at the far left of a sheet of paper. Draw a line under it extending halfway across the paper. That's your branch. Now draw smaller branches at the end of the main branch and on each one, write a major supporting point. Now each of these smaller branches can in its turn branch off into twigs, as you think of supporting details for each point. You'll be surprised at how quickly the branching technique helps you come up with major supporting points and supporting details for each of those points! But here's another wonderful thing about branching: you can instantly go from the discovering-ideas stage to the organizing-ideas stage. Simply number the small branches and the twigs in the most logical order (after dropping any that don't fit and combining any that repeat). Presto! You have a working outline.

Reporter's Questions: If you wrote for your high school newspaper, you already know this one. Explore your subject with these simple but magical *reporter's questions*: WHO? WHAT? WHEN? WHERE? WHY? and HOW? The clue to making this discovery technique work is to ask each question not just once but many times, as many as you can. Supposing you heard that a pair of young scientists had found a cure to a certain disease. The answer to the first "Who?" is obvious: the duo. But ask "who?" again and again: "Who made it possible for them to go to college so that they could become scientists?" "Who first inspired them to research the disease?" "Who funded them?" "Who were their research assistants?" "Who were the patients participating in the research?" "Who encouraged them when the going got rough?" "Who will benefit from their discovery?" Now you have eight possible topics for your essay.

Rhetorical Modes/Purposes: There are eight or so basic ways our minds can process any fact or thing: we can describe it (DESCRIPTION), tell a story about it (NARRATION), break it into parts for better understanding (ANALYSIS), compare it with other things (COMPARISON), study its causes or effects (CAUSE and EFFECT), argue for it or against it or some aspect of it (ARGUMENT), propose solutions to it or to problems connected with it (PROPOSING A SOLUTION), or judge it (EVALUATION). These patterns of thought are sometimes called the *rhetorical modes*. They usually overlap; for example, if you are writing an article **proposing a solution** to a problem, you will probably also **describe** the problem and discuss its **causes** and **effects**. A terrific way to find a thesis for a paper is to run your topic through the rhetorical modes. Let's say you want to write your research paper about snowboarding, but you have no specific idea what you want to say about it. You go through the rhetorical modes: you could **describe** the typical snowboarding "scene"; you could **narrate** (tell the story of) a snowboarding accident; you could **analyze** the features of a good snowboarding location, the parts of a snowboard, the athletic skills that make a good snowboarder, or the process of snowboarding (**process analysis**); you could **compare** two brands of snowboard; you could explore the **causes** of snowboarding's popularity; you could examine the **effects** of the new sport on sales of skis or on ski resorts; you could **argue** for or against more snowboarding facilities at ski resorts; you could **propose a solution** to one of the risks associated with snowboarding or to the conflict between skiers and snowboarders; you could **evaluate** a new model of snowboard. There you are: you instantly have a dozen ideas to use for your thesis or to use to develop your paper.

Freewriting: A favorite method of creative writers, freewriting mobilizes the powers of your unconscious mind so that you discover resources and relationships that might otherwise never have occurred to you. To freewrite, you simply put your pen to paper and write without stopping for at least ten minutes but ideally fifteen or twenty. You write whatever passes through your mind, without pausing to judge it. If you get stuck and don't know what to say, you write a key word over and over until fresh ideas well up from your unconscious. In the freewriting method called *looping*, you write the idea you want to explore at the top of your page and then freewrite about it. After ten minutes, you read what you've read, find one idea that lights up for you, write it down in a sentence, and then make it the starting point for the next ten-minute freewrite. You repeat the process in loops like this as long as you like. Freewriting is a tremendously productive discovery technique. Twenty minutes of freewriting can give you all the ideas you need for an essay that doesn't require research. You can also use freewriting—like many of these discovery

techniques—in your personal life, for example, to solve a problem or to relieve painful emotions. Write what's bothering you in a single sentence across the top of a page and then freewrite on it, keeping your mind turned towards solutions and healing.

Timelines: Sometimes you can get ideas by running your topic through the timelines, for example, through the **periods of history** or the **ages of life** (prenatal, birth, infant, toddler, child, teen, etc.) or the **seasons and holidays**, or the **times of day** (getting up, morning, lunch hour, afternoon, rush hour, leisure time, evening, bedtime).

Concentric Circles: Start with yourself at the very center and move out in ever-widening circles, asking yourself, "What ideas do I get when I think of this topic in relation to me? to my home/classroom? to my neighborhood/campus? to my town? to my state? to my region? to my country? to my hemisphere?"

Aspects of a Human Being: Run your topic through the various aspects of a human being: the physical, emotional, social, intellectual, aesthetic, spiritual, etc. For example, if your topic is *television*, you might wonder how sitcoms affect teenagers' social lives. Thinking about television and the physical body, you may remember hearing that television's ceaselessly flashing images can cause small children neurological damage. Now you have two possible research paper topics.

Fields of Study: anthropology, art, biology, business, chemistry, economics, education, engineering, forestry, history, languages, literature, nursing, philosophy, political science, sociology, and so on: life is full of fascinating fields of knowledge. Ask yourself, "What connections can I make between my topic (or my thesis statement) and what I've learned in other classes? What examples, facts, and ideas can I bring from these other fields of study to make my paper more interesting?"

Now that you have your toolbox of discovery techniques, here are some suggestions on when to use each tool.

I HAVE TO WRITE A PAPER ON A SUBJECT OF MY CHOICE, BUT I DON'T HAVE A CLUE WHAT SUBJECT TO CHOOSE.

1. Consult your heart. If your paper is for an engineering class, brainstorm a list of the things that excite you most about engineering. What you care most about is what you'll write best about.
2. Use the **concentric circles**, starting with yourself, and brainstorm a list of everything that pops into your mind at each circle. Perhaps when you've gotten to "my town," you'll think of the elderly people on park benches and decide you want to write about the important role your town's park plays in people's daily lives. You could do the same with the **timelines**.
3. **Freewrite** everything that's on your mind these days.

I HAVE A SUBJECT (PLASTIC POLLUTION, CHORAL MUSIC, CELL PHONES, DOLPHINS), BUT I DON'T HAVE A CLUE WHAT TO SAY ABOUT IT.

1. Write your subject in the middle of the paper and cluster.
2. Run your subject through the rhetorical modes (works great!)
3. Try the concentric circles, timelines, and fields of study.
4. Freewrite.

I HAVE A TOPIC IDEA (MUSIC'S EFFECTS ON NEWBORNS, ADVANCES IN BRIDGE-BUILDING IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, PET THERAPY FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM, FRESHMEN AND DWI EDUCATION), BUT I DON'T KNOW WHAT I WANT TO SAY ABOUT THAT TOPIC, WHAT POINTS TO MAKE.

1. Branching is just what the doctor ordered.
2. The rhetorical modes can be very helpful here.
3. Freewriting is terrific here, too.
4. The reporter's questions will suggest supporting points.

I'VE GOT A ROUGH DRAFT, BUT IT'S SKIMPY AND SHORT—I NEED TO DEVELOP IT WITH MORE IDEAS AND SPECIFICS.

1. Freewrite on each paragraph's topic sentence / main point.
2. Explore each paragraph / sentence with the reporter's questions.
3. Cluster on each paragraph's topic sentence / main point

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Get in the habit of using the discovery techniques. You'll find that each brings you new angles on your subject. Soon you'll discover which ones work best for you, and you will be astonished at the speed and ease with which you can generate great writing ideas!

A final reminder: put your unconscious to work for you. **Even when your conscious mind has stopped working on an idea, your unconscious mind keeps right on going.** We've all had the experience of struggling for hours unsuccessfully to solve a problem only to have the solution pop into our mind just as we're dropping off to sleep. Given a mission, your unconscious will go to work for you twenty-four hours a day. So, always get started on your papers as soon as they're assigned. This doesn't mean that you start writing your first draft. It means 1. letting your mind know you expect it to deliver, by labeling a folder to collect ideas in, and 2. giving your mind a solid briefing on its paper mission by trying out some of the fun, stress-free discovery techniques above! 25 July 08