Tips for Successful Brainstorming: A Guide for Stumped Students

~ Are you finding yourself struggling with your paper, even if you haven’t written a single word? Having a hard time thinking up the perfect thesis or argument for your final paper? Do you feel the minutes ticking away as you are staring at a blank computer screen? Putting off that paper that’s due in 48 hours because you can’t think of anything to write? Try these quick and easy tips for brainstorming to come up with that perfect argument or paper structure! All you need is a pad of paper (BIG — maybe even legal-sized), a pen, and your noggin! ~

Help! I’m having trouble:

Trying to think of an idea:
• Ask yourself these simple questions:
  o What do I like about the essay topic?
  o What made me think the most when we were discussing the materials in class?
  o Is there anything I didn’t like and want to argue about in my paper?
  o Are there themes that I want to express further?
  o Is there anything I didn’t understand and want to try to figure out or decode?
• Write the answers to these questions down in a list format. Put down anything that comes to mind.
• Now pick one or two items on the list that you find most appealing or interesting.
• Congratulations! You have now found a theme for your paper!

Writing about a specific scholar’s ideas:
• Reread the article(s) that you have been assigned to write about. Read them critically and closely, especially if you have skimmed them in the past (because we all do that!).
• As you read, ask yourself (and take notes!):
  o What do I truly think about this scholar’s arguments? (Ignore what your professor has said for the moment.) If there is anything you dislike or disagree with, note it. This can produce the most juicy and provocative essay material!
  o Why do I feel the way I do about the argument? What are my reasons for feeling this way?
  o Is there anything that the scholar has argued weakly, in your opinion?
Are there any ideas in the scholar’s argument that you would like to see further explored or expanded upon?

How can you expand on what the scholar has to say?

• One thing to remember when you are writing about other peoples’ writing is that you are a legitimate part of the academic discourse. Your ideas matter! Never feel unqualified to comment on a scholar’s writing. If you can come up with a compelling argument, then your opinion will be a legitimate one!
• Be daring and take risks. **It’s ok to be critical!**

Coming up with a good thesis statement, even though I’ve picked a theme.

• Finding a good thesis statement or concrete argument can be one of the biggest challenges of starting a paper. It is easy to come up with something to say, but can be hard to come up with a “so what”. Here are some ideas for narrowing down your argument. Add post-it flags and highlighters to your materials list for this step!

• The number one, best thing you can do to come up with a compelling thesis is to **reread with a theme in mind!** It can be painful, yes, but think about it—you will be refreshing yourself on ideas in the material and finding potential quotes at the same time! Think of the time you will save when you are writing your paper. You will no longer need to look frantically for quotes!

• **Take notes!** This is one of the most important things. Note places where your theme appears and look for connections between these moments. Are there any subthemes or patterns you notice in the text?

• Now that you’ve reread, look at the connections you’ve read and the quotes you’ve noted. Ask yourself:
  o Is there any pattern or connection here that strikes me or bothers me?
  o Are there any tough puzzles or questions in the text that I would like to close read and solve? Any past puzzles that I have solved in rereading?
  o What is the importance of this theme or what is the author trying to say with it?

• Try to formulate your thoughts into a few sentences or an outline of your general argument.

• **Congratulations! You now have a thesis/argument!**

If all else fails:

Create your own writing consultations! Find a friend or “writing buddy” who is willing to talk about ideas with you for 20 minutes or so. It can be even better if your friend knows nothing about the subject. Sometimes talking to another person can help you find great ideas that you never knew you had. Plus, talking to a friend is way more fun than panicking about a paper on your own. 😊

Further Resources

Visit these great websites for more great brainstorming tips!

Dartmouth Writing Center has great tips to maximize reading and come up with great essay topics: [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/ac_paper/topic.shtml](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/ac_paper/topic.shtml)

UNC Writing Center has a really comprehensive page that maps out many different formal brainstorming techniques, complete with diagrams and charts to help you visualize: [http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/brainstorming.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/brainstorming.html)