

BRAINSTORMING STRATEGIES

The Writing Process

ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC SUPPORT



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WHERE TO BEGIN?

Writing an essay can be a fairly daunting task. Sometimes it can be hard to know where to even start. If you are having trouble coming up with ideas, there are a number of prewriting or brainstorming strategies that can help set you on the right track. These strategies are equally useful if you already have a good idea of your topic as they will help keep you organized as you begin the writing process.

As you will be able to see from the varying ideas generated by each of the following examples, each strategy can produce different results, so **it is best to combine two or more strategies to fully explore your topic.**

The most important thing to remember is that **no two writers have the same process**; you have to **find what works for you!**



PREWRITING:

Prewriting, or brainstorming, is the process of generating ideas before you start writing your essay.

Below are several examples of prewriting strategies that can help get you started if you don't know how to start your essay. These simple activities are designed to get your creative juices flowing so that you can form solid arguments to support your topic.



WHY SHOULD YOU PREWRITE?

It may be tempting to skip the prewriting process altogether and jump straight to writing your essay. While this approach may work for some writers, for most, it is extremely beneficial to do some preliminary writing before launching into a task as complicated as writing a fully developed essay.

Sometimes, when you have a lot of good ideas that you want to explore in your essay, it can be easy to rush into your development without pausing to think about *how* you should articulate those arguments. This can turn good ideas into sloppy, incoherent, and ultimately unconvincing arguments.

Although prewriting may seem time consuming at first, it can actually help you save time in the long run by taking care of some of the more difficult organizational aspects of writing before you even begin writing your essay proper.

EXAMPLES OF BRAINSTORMING STRATEGIES:

There are many different brainstorming strategies that can help you come up with new ideas and help you begin to turn those ideas into well-structured arguments.

Below are several prewriting activities that explore the topic of online learning.

1. Freewriting:

Freewriting is a great way to get past writer's block. Freewriting is exactly what it sounds like—unrestrained writing. **Freewriting basically means writing anything and everything that pops into your head.**

This strategy works great if you have a general idea of what your topic will be or even if you do not have a topic in mind at all. Sometimes writing the first things that come to mind can spark an idea for an interesting essay topic

There is no need to worry about using proper spelling or grammar or being coherent. Do not check your work over as you go, just keep writing everything that comes to mind.

Keep going for at least five minutes—you can set a timer if it helps.

Tip: If you can't think of anything else to write, write that down! Don't abandon the effort when you reach a mental jam: writing "I'm stuck" or "what else?" over a few times might prevent you from losing steam until you come up with another idea.

Revising Your Freewriting:

When your allotted time runs out, review what you have written to see if any of your sentences could be useful for your essay.

If your freewriting does not produce anything useful, try repeating the activity exploring your topic from a different angle.

From here, you can highlight useful sentences that you might be able to elaborate upon and turn into arguments. You might also consider crossing out repetitive or extraneous material that won't be useful to your essay.

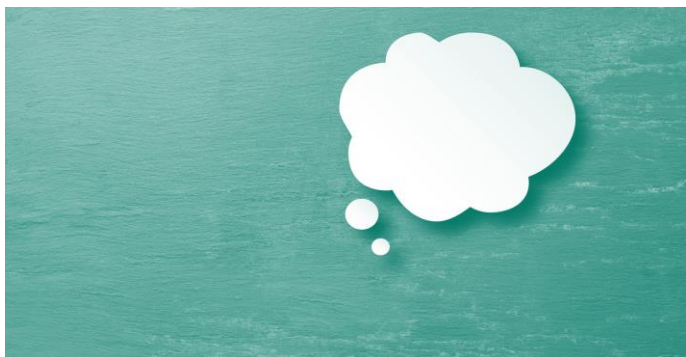
Some of your ideas might serve as a basis for your principal argument (**thesis**) or your main supporting arguments (**topic sentences**), while other smaller ideas might work better as specific **examples** to elaborate upon your topic sentences. You may also come up with ideas that oppose your main argument, such **counterpoints** might help round out your argument.



Here is an example of freewriting based on the idea of in-person learning:

This example has been revised using pink highlighter to indicate the rough thesis, blue highlighter for the main supporting arguments, green for more specific examples, and yellow for counterarguments.

Online learning is really different than in-person learning. There are a lot of reasons why people like online learning better, but I like learning in person much more. I find the learning environment is better in person. It's really easy to get distracted at home because my parents work from home and my cats like to walk across my keyboard while I am working. I do like seeing my pets all the time though. When you're online, lots of things can go wrong—there might be connectivity issues, the professor's audio might start cutting out and you end up missing half of what they're saying. In person learning is more engaging. You can see all your classmates and your professor—and not just from the neck up! It's easier to ask questions without having an awkward delay—although online learning sometimes gives you the chance to post questions/comments in the chat or rewatch lectures which can be really convenient. But still, I think in-person learning is more beneficial. It's really helpful to get a change of scenery—I'm really sick of staring at my bedroom walls! Speaking of which, my eyes hurt from all the time I spend on my computer, and I've been getting a lot of headaches lately. I'm stuck. What else? What else? There are a lot of cool things to do on campus, like club events and activities. Being in class can make it easier to make new friends and develop a support system for studying. But then again, online learning can be really convenient for people. It's easier to make it to class when the weather is bad and people can join from different parts of the province, country, or even the world.



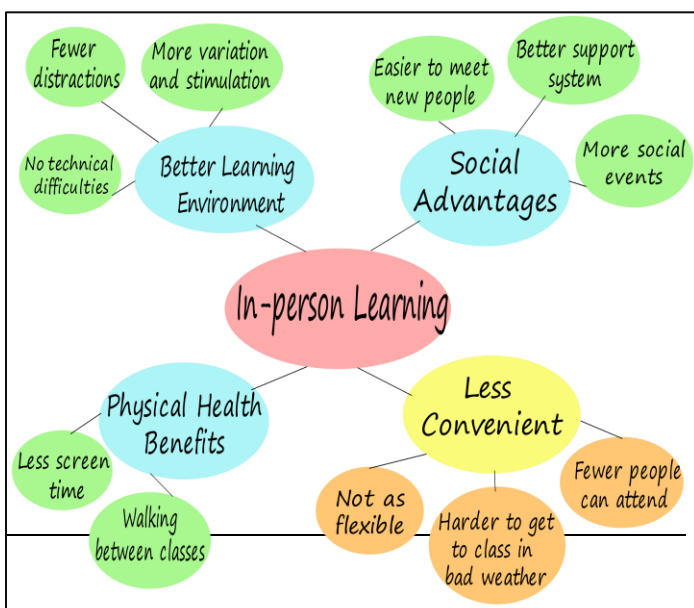
2. Thought Web:

A thought web is an excellent strategy to help you visualize connections between your ideas. To create a thought web, begin by writing a general topic in the centre of your page. Attach more ideas to your central idea, moving outward as your ideas become more specific.

Thought webs allow you to explore how a general idea can connect to several, smaller, more specific ideas. The general ideas (larger ovals) correspond to potential topic sentences, while the more specific ideas (smaller circles) can function as examples to support them.

Tip: Some ideas may lead to a dead end (i.e., no other ideas branch off from them), in that case, you might consider trying to approach your main topic from a different angle.

Here is an example of a colour-coded thought web based on the idea of in-person learning:



3. Word Association:

Another helpful way to explore your ideas is through simple word association. Word association consists essentially of jotting down any words that come to mind concerning your topic.

These do not have to be fully formed ideas; it is often easier to write a single word or a short phrase that you associate with your topic than trying to fit it into a completely sentence. Unlike during the construction of a thought web, word association does not need to follow any logical order; the different words/phrases you come up with do not necessarily need to be related to one another.

Tip: When you use this approach, be sure to move on to the next stage of your writing fairly quickly or else you might forget why you jotted down certain words. Sometimes jot notes will not make much sense later on!

Here is an example of word association based on the idea of online and in-person learning:

Online Learning:

- Distracting
- Lonely
- Convenient
- Comfortable
- Boring/No stimulation
- Flexible
- Always sitting down

In-Person Learning:

- Engaging
- Focused
- Social
- Not as convenient
- Not as many options
- Better for mental health
- Fun campus experiences/memories
- Better for your eyes

4. Pro-Con List:

If your topic has multiple sides to be considered and you are unsure which side you want to support, a pro-con list can help you decide.

This strategy is especially applicable for **argumentative essays** that are designed to defend a debateable subject.

To make a pro-con list, choose a side of the argument (if you are leaning toward one side, it may be best to go with that one). Then, make a table with two columns—one for all of your positive supporting points (pros) and one for all of your negative detracting points (cons).

When you are finished, count the number of pros and cons to see which position you are more prepared to defend.

The table on the right is an example of a pro-con list exploring the benefits of in-person and online learning form the in-person side.

As you can observe, the person compiling the list came up with more pros and fewer cons for in-person learning.

It stands to reason then, that they should write an essay in favour of in-person learning since they have more arguments in favour of that side.

AFTER PREWRITING:

Once you have completed your prewriting exercises, it is time to use the ideas you came up with to create an outline for your essay. For more information on how to create an outline, see the “Introduction to Outlines” handout.

In-Person Learning	
Pro	Con
1. More stimulating learning environment	1. Less accessible for people who live far away
2. Easier to stay focused (designated learning space)	2. Less convenient during bad weather
3. Fewer technical difficulties	3. Less flexible for people with busy schedules
4. Improve your mental health	4. If you can't make it to campus, you have to miss class
5. Easier to make new friends	5. Miss out on certain technological advantages (ability to pause/rewatch lectures, chat function, etc.)
6. Better support system for studying	6. Can't take advantage of the comfort of being home
7. More opportunities for social events	
8. Better for your eyes (less screen time)	
9. More activity and fresh air (between classes)	

Sources:

(MLA 8th Edition)

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