Brainstorming is a fancy teacher term for coming up with suitable topics for your papers! There are a variety of strategies to invent and organize any topic. It is important to note that no one strategy works for every writer. The trick is to try a variety of strategies and find which work best for you! [Jared likes clustering but Gabby likes freewriting!] 😊

Listing
Listing is exactly what it sounds like – duh! You may have made a “To Do” list or a list of courses to take next semester. To try this strategy, list possible paper topics and then identify which have the most promise by using your brain (and a writing center tutor’s brain, of course)!
- Getting tutoring in the writing center helps my writing
- Going to a tutor is convenient
- Visiting the writing center takes time out of my schedule.
- Have my grades improved by going to the WC?

This list could easily turn into an essay about the benefits and drawbacks of going to the Writing Center (notice how there is only 1 drawback – woohoo 😊)! Also notice how this student uses questions in her list. Using questions will help her identify issues to think about or that need to be answered through her writing.

Clustering
Clustering can help you show the relationships between your ideas. To cluster old-school style, all you need is a pencil and paper (and your brain, of course)! To try this strategy, write your potential topic in the center and draw a circle around it. Around the topic, write related ideas and connect them with circles and lines.

More like this: Than this:
Notice how the cluster on the left is specific – this may be the direction of your paper! Usually your cluster will have some sub-clusters that clearly have promise,
and others that do not. That is what should happen! Follow the ones that have a stronger connection. The one on the right might look delicious (unless you have a peanut allergy), but it won’t help you in writing an essay.

Freewriting
Freewriting means to write without stopping (and without worrying about grammar and mechanics – woohoo!). To try this strategy, set aside 10 minutes or so next time you get a paper assignment. Start by writing your topic at the top of your page. For 10 minutes, write whatever comes to mind. Even if you veer off in a weird direction, just keep writing! Here is an example freewrite from Kaitlyn, who is writing an argument paper:

College students should think about the language they use. We tend to use terms like retarded, which most people consider slang. Slang can be harmful. One of my friends has a brother who is intellectually challenged. Mostly he does what the rest of us do, I mean people his age. Marcus likes the same kind of music as me, like Fun and Panic at the Disco. I see how sad my friend Katie gets when people use the word retarded to mean stupid or lame. College students should consider how their words, even slang, affect others.

See how Kaitlyn’s ideas seemed to go off track slightly (as she talks about Marcus and his interest in music) but she just kept writing! The last few lines become much more focused…and these ideas actually became the topic and thesis statement of her paper! Freewrites can help you get your initial ideas down on paper, and help you focus.

Asking Questions
It may seem obvious that when you write a paper, you need to start with questions. However, just like freewriting, asking questions can help you get your initial ideas down on paper. Questioning is like interrogating potential topics before you start to write. Journalists, for instance, ask the 6 W’s when they start a story: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How (yes, the last one isn’t a W – weird, huh)? Here is how one student, Briana, started her paper on the film 8 mile from Eminem:

- Who is portrayed in the film 8 mile?
- What is the message of the film?
- When did the movie take place?
- Where did the movie take place?
- Why did Eminem want to make the movie?
- How did the movie impact college-aged students?

From this, Briana was able to see that the last two questions – the Why and the How – could become an argument paper on how 8 mile impacted college-aged students. She could use the answers from earlier questions for the background section on the film.
Journaling
Keeping a journal is a great way to keep track of your writing assignments. To journal, each time you start a writing assignment, begin by freewriting, listing, or another invention strategy in your journal. After you go through several writing assignments, go back and review your invention strategies. Which worked best for you? Which did NOT seem to work? Why did some strategies work and not others? Keeping a journal can not only help you start each writing assignment, but discover those invention strategies that work best for you!

To get further help starting your writing assignments, make an appointment in the WC!