



# Invention

## **What is invention?**

Invention (also referred to as brainstorming) is the stage of the writing process during which writers discover the ideas upon which their essays will focus. During this stage, writers tend to overcome some of the anxiety they might have about writing a paper, and in many cases, actually become excited about it. Although invention usually occurs at the beginning of the writing process, exercises aimed at facilitating invention can be helpful at many stages of writing. Some of the best writers return to this stage a number of times while composing drafts of their essays.

## **Some Invention Techniques:**

**Freewriting:** Read through your assignment and choose a topic, theme, or question that comes to mind. Write for 10-15 minutes in response to this idea – do not lift your pen from the paper or your hands from the keyboard. When you are finished, read through your draft and underline or circle ideas that might lead you to a thesis for your paper. Consider asking a classmate or friend to read what you've written and ask questions about your ideas and topics.

**Looping:** After freewriting, read through what you have written and underline a phrase or sentence that you think is particularly effective or that expresses your ideas most clearly. Write this at the top of a new sheet of paper and use it to guide a new freewrite. Repeat this process several times. The more you write and select, the more you will be able to refine your ideas.

**Talk to Yourself:** Some people often find themselves saying, "I know what I want to say. It's just that I can't figure out how to put it in writing." If this is the case for you, try dictating your thoughts on tape or a digital recording device. After several minutes, listen to what you've recorded and write down ideas you want to incorporate into your paper. If you don't have a recording device, ask a friend to write down some of the main points you make as you talk about your ideas.

**Listing:** List all the ideas you can think of that are connected to the topic or the subject you want to explore. Consider any idea or observation as valid and worthy of listing (go for quantity at this point). List quickly and then set your list aside for a few minutes. Come back and read your list and then do the listing exercise again.

**Using Charts or Shapes:** Use phrases or words that are central to your topic and try to arrange them spatially in a graph, grid, table, or chart. How do the different spatial representations help you see the relationships among your ideas? If you can't imagine the shape of a chart at first, just put the words on a page and draw lines between or around them.



**Break Down the Assignment** Sometimes prompts are so complicated that they can seem overwhelming. Students often ask: There’s so much to do, where should I start? Try to break the assignment down into its constituent parts: a) *the general topic*, like “The relationship between tropical fruits and colonial powers.”; b) *a specific subtopic or required question*, like “How did the availability of multiple tropical fruits influence competition among colonial powers trading from the larger Caribbean islands during the 19<sup>th</sup> century?”; c) *a single term or phrase that seems to repeat in the material you’ve read or the ideas you’ve been considering*. For example, if you have seen the words “increased competition” several times in the class materials you’ve been reading about tropical fruit exports, you could brainstorm variations on the phrase within the context of those readings or focus on variations of each component of the phrase (i.e., “increased” and “competition”). Once you have identified the major parts of the topic, try to figure out what you are being asked to think about in the assignment. What questions are you expected to answer? Are there related questions that need to be addressed in order to answer the primary questions? If so, what are they?

**Defining Terms:** In your own words, write definitions for key terms or concepts given in the assignment. Find other definitions of those terms in your course readings, the dictionary, or through conversations and then compare the definitions to your own. Keep these definitions in mind as you begin to write your essay.

**Summarizing Positions:** Summarize the positions of relevant authors from your course readings or research. Do you agree or disagree with their ideas, methods, or approaches? How do your interests overlap with the positions of the authors in question? Try to be brief in your descriptions. Write a paragraph or up to a page describing a reading or a position.

**Topic Swap:** Get together with a group of classmates and have each person write down her or his tentative topic or thesis at the top of a blank sheet of paper. Pass the sheets around from left to right so that each person can write down a thoughtful question or suggest related ideas to think about.

**Compare / Contrast Matrix:** If your assignment asks you to compare or contrast two concepts, texts, subjects, etc., try to organize your thoughts in a compare/contrast matrix by focusing on the attributes you will consider in your draft. These attributes should establish the key points of comparison or contrast with which you will deal in your essay.

	Element 1	Element 2
Attribute 1		
Attribute 2		
Attribute 3		