**BRAINSTORMING AND OUTLINING MODULE**

A productive brainstorming session is key to a client’s ability to build a cohesive argument from a strong foundation of ideas. Clients often come to the Writing Center because they have an idea about which they want to write, but they are not sure if they know how to structure, expand, or even articulate that idea. A strong brainstorming session can help clients to strengthen or harness their ideas into a topic that will effectively address the assignment.

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| **Before the Writing Begins: Four Steps to Brainstorming Success** |

1. Identify, map, and prioritize **expectations for the paper**.
   1. Read the assignment sheet together. Identify or write down the requirements.
   2. Ask if there are related notes or handouts or grading expectations that are not outlined on the

assignment sheet. Take time to get the **full picture of the professor’s expectations**.

* 1. Ask if the client has had feedback from this professor on previous assignments that might help

understand expectations for this assignment.

* 1. Assess the grading rubric together. Be sure that you both understand how the professor will evaluate the paper.

1. **Relate the assignment to the course.**
   1. How does the assignment topic relate to the course theme?
   2. During class discussions or lectures, how has the professor used the language in the assignment sheet?
   3. What are the professor’s goals for this assignment in relation to the goals or the course? Previous assignments or readings?
2. Learn **what your client understands about the assignment.** 
   1. Start a discussion about the key ideas on the assignment sheet.
   2. Take notes on the language and phrasing of the key concepts in your client’s words.
   3. Act interested in the topic to engage the client in fluent discussion.
   4. Say back to the client the key ideas h/she seems ready to explore.

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| **Preliminary Brainstorming Strategies: Helping the Client Get Started** |

**Talk Writing:** Ask the client a series of questions. These questions can range from very basic to more complex. Remember to ask for clarification and definitions. Take careful notes that capture your client’s language.

Basic rhetorical questions: Use the 5 Ws and the H: The who, what, when, where, why, and how questions as they relate to the client’s idea.

* What is at stake or in question here?
* Who is involved? Impacted?
* Why is this topic or idea important?
* When was this source material written? How might this matter?
* Where is this topic of import? How might this matter?
* How is this argument or topic being explored? Why this way?

Your goal is to move your client toward **analysis.**

**What is Analysis?**

Analysis means collecting, interpreting, and generalizing data. When you write papers, analysis means interpreting your evidence to correspond to your argument.

**Asking Questions**

Locate a specific example or piece of evidence. Asking questions about the evidence will help you successfully analyze.

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| **Type of Question** | **Example Questions** |
| **Explanation**  How did/does something work?  Why did something occur?  What are the components of the piece? | * How do the painting’s colors contribute to your interpretation of the painting’s meaning? |
| **Interpretation**  What does something mean? | * What does this historical document suggest? * What is the theme of the story? |
| **Evaluation**  Is/was something valuable? Why? How?  Is/was something effective? Why? How? | * Did the government policy achieve its goals? Why? Why not? How? * Were the director’s choices about lighting sound? Why Why not? How? |
| **Implication**  What is the impact?  Why is something important? | * How did the failures of a team’s defense lead to a loss in the playoffs? * Why is the president’s choice for Supreme Court justice notable? How will the choice affect the Court’s majority? |

Tailor your questions to the assignment requirements. Pay attention to the assignment sheet’s verbs and directives. For example, if the assignment requires students to analyze, ask interpretive questions or questions that require the client to explain evidence. If the assignment requires students to synthesize, ask the client to draw connections between items. Ensure that the ideas generated respond to the assignment.

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| **Generative Brainstorming Activities: Helping the Client Expand and Make Connections** |

The goal of generative brainstorming activities is to **encourage clients to generate writing** and to understand connections between different parts of developing arguments or topics. The following methods can help clients get words on the page.

**Focused Freewriting**: Freewriting involves setting aside three to five minutes for your client to write continuously and rapidly about the assignment topic or about one specific question or subtopic generated during brainstorming. This works best when clients have an idea about which they wish to write, but are not entirely sure what they want to argue and when clients are prompted to write about a specific part of their assignment (instead of, say, freewriting about an entire novel).

Before asking clients to freewrite, focus on one of the following:

* A quotation or piece of evidence from the text.
* A pattern or theme identified by the professor or during class discussion.
* A question about the text that a client finds particularly interesting.
* The relationship between two pieces of evidence or two ideas.

**Charting**: If a client has many ideas but fails to see a relationship between the ideas, attempt to organize the ideas using a chart(s). Flow charts, T-charts, and web diagrams are three different ways to show relationships between pieces of information. When creating a chart, remember to help the client understand **how they will independently use their chart to generate an outline or working thesis statement.**

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| **Brainstorming with Source Material: Responding to Other People’s ideas** |

The best brainstorming sessions focus on **evidence** and **argument.** Follow these four steps to help clients engage with source materials and focus on argument.

**1. Analyze other people’s arguments.**

What makes an argument?

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| Conclusion = Premise + Premise + Premise + Premise + Counterargument/Refutation |

Help clients map the premises and conclusions in their source material. Identifying premises and conclusions is the first step to creating an original argument in response.

EXAMPLE:

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| ***Romney’s speech about the Keystone XL Pipeline*** | |
| ***Premises*** | * *Keystone creates jobs* * *Keystone improves the economy* * *Keystone reduces overseas oil consumption* |
| ***Conclusion*** | * *Keystone should be constructed.* |

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| ***Obama’s speech about the Keystone XL Pipeline*** | |
| ***Premises*** | * *Crude oil damages the environment.* * *We should spend money on renewable energy since it is cleaner.* * *Investing in renewable energy creates jobs.* * *Investing in renewable energy decreases foreign oil dependence.* |
| ***Conclusion*** | * *Keystone should not be constructed.* |

**2. Help clients respond to the arguments.**

Clients will struggle to understand that they need to respond, and not just summarize, the author’s argument. Practicing responding in the appointment will help clients understand the type of position that they will need to take in their papers. The following chart illustrates different stances that writers can take in relation to the source material.

**Options for Response to Author’s Argument**

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| **Agree** | **Agree in Part** | **Disagree** |
| New/different evidence supports the claim  No other conclusion is logically possible. (Rebut the counterargument).  Evidence is authoritative or matches examples/personal experience.  An analogy or comparison effectively supports the claim. | A qualified, more specific position exists  Argument holds under reservation(s)—my position only applies under specific circumstances.  Claim only follows with probability (inductive reasoning) not with necessity (deductive reasoning) | Evidence is false  Claim does not follow logically from the evidence.  Logic is circular: The claim is the same as the evidence!  Claim is too broad/accounts for too much.  Argument creates a false dilemma—it’s not a black and white situation. |

**3. Play devil’s advocate with client to deepen brainstorming conversation.**

To encourage your client to solidify her response to source material, suggest rebuttals and counterarguments to her claims. Take notes as you do so. The following are examples of counterarguments to clients’ claims.

**AGREE** *Supporting comparison—*

***Response:*** *I agree with Obama’s claim because if the pipeline broke, it might inflict major damage to the Sandhills Wetland and the Ogallala Aquifer.*

***Counterargument:*** *The pipeline’s potentially negative environmental impact could be decreased if the pipeline were rerouted so that it did not flow through such fragile natural habitats.*

***AGREE IN PART*** *Qualify—*

***Response:*** *I agree that the pipeline would create 20,000 jobs, but since the project is a partnership of American and Canadian workers, I believe that only about 10,000 jobs would be created in America.*

***Counterargument:*** *Adding 10,000 American jobs to the economy is still an achievement, and we should accept economic growth opportunities when they arise.*

***DISAGREE*** *Claim doesn’t follow evidence—*

***Response:*** *We can invest in renewable resources and still build Keystone. These are not mutually exclusive goals.*

***Counterargument:*** *The U.S. needs to take a strong and unified stance on sustainability investment. Building the Keystone pipeline would ideologically undermine attempts to improve the U.S.’s commitment to renewable resources.*

**Exercise:** Choose one of the three claims above and suggest a question or two that could result in an additional counterargument.

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| **Outlining: Organizing a Logical Argument** |

The most effective brainstorming sessions end with a working thesis and a developing outline that organizes the client’s initial ideas for further exploration through research.

**Working thesis statement with skeletal outline**

Working thesis statement: In order to control, and eventually eliminate, pollution, at least twenty-five percent of the federal budget should be spent on helping upgrade businesses to clean technologies, researching renewable energy sources, and planting more trees.

First Paragraph: Pollution needs to be controlled and eliminated.

Second paragraph: U.S. needs to make significant investment (25% of federal budget) in anti-pollution efforts.

Third paragraph: Upgrading businesses’ practices to clean technology and planting more trees are efficient ways to immediately decrease pollution and environmental waste.

Fourth paragraph: U.S. needs to invest in research, too. We will only decrease energy dependence by researching alternative energy sources.

Conclusion (Implications): Wisely investing a significant portion of the federal government will help the U.S. lead the world in environmental sustainability and, eventually, control pollution.

**Develop outline**

Developing this type of outline can help your client assess whether or not s/he has enough evidence. Begin

sorting evidence according to topic, and use the synthesis of this evidence and transitions to richen your topic

sentences.

Working Thesis Statement:

In order to control, and eventually eliminate, pollution, at least twenty-five percent of the federal budget

should be spent on helping upgrade businesses to clean technologies, researching renewable energy sources,

and planting more trees.

I. Due to its catastrophic effects, pollution is a problem that needs to be controlled and, ideally, eliminated.

--“Pollution contributes to significant health problems in children, pregnant women, and the elderly”

(Paulus 6).

--“Asthma in young adults has increased 150% in the last fifty years. Many researchers attribute this

increase to air pollution” (O’Brien 34).

--“Higher water temperatures cause stronger tropical storms in both the Pacific and the Atlantic. In the

past five years, devastating storms around the world have cost thousands of lives and hundreds of

millions of dollars in damage” (Lin 2).

II. In order to avoid the risks pollution poses, the U.S. needs to make a significant investment. Dedicating twenty five percent of the budget to anti-pollution efforts would both create resources to promote significant changes and send a message that the U.S. is fully dedicated to decreasing pollution.

--“Currently, the U.S. dedicates 10% of its federal budget to anti-pollution efforts” (Wilson 23).

--“In order to fund more extensive anti-pollution efforts, the U.S. needs to increase its investment” (Wilson

23).

III. Upgrading environmentally harmful infrastructure and planting trees are two seemingly different methods for curbing pollution, but, with increased federal funding for environmental initiatives, the U.S should implement both projects as soon as possible.

--“More and more, companies seek resources to decrease carbon emissions” (Teller 3).

--“Consumers are increasingly concerned about the impacts that their favorite companies have on the

environment. Inevitably, companies have begun responding to these concerns, and thus, the clean

technology sector is one of the fastest growing sectors in the U.S.” (Teller 3).

--“Planting trees is an easy and efficient way to beautify areas and to create more environmentally

friendly urban environments” (Holmes 23).

--“When we increase the number of trees in an area, we also increase the air’s cleanliness” (Homes 22).

IV. The future of sustainable initiatives depends on increased funding for researching renewable resources. In order to create an effective anti-pollution campaign, the U.S. must fund more research.

--“Increasingly, industries demand research detailing the costs and benefits of sustainable business

practices” (Mark 6).

Conclusion:

Wisely investing a significant portion of the federal government budget will help the U.S. lead the world in

environmental sustainability and, eventually, control pollution.

**Exercise:** Using the following evidence and skeletal outline, describe how you would work with the client to

develop the outline and draft a working thesis statement. Describe your process (what would you do first, next,

etc.)

Research Notes

“Young adults are more likely to binge drink, or drink more than is recommended by the Food and Drug

Administration, when their friends or close relations binge drink” (Peterson 34).

“It is likely than many different genes are involved in genetic predisposition to alcoholism” (Horner 3).

“The earlier a person begins drinking, the more likely he is to develop a physical dependency on alcohol”

(Mikal 23).

“Binge drinking at a young age can lead to physical dependency on alcohol, which can lead to alcoholism”

(Mikal 21).

“Drinking too much on a regular basis over an extended period of time can contribute to a physical

dependence on alcohol” (Bono 8).

“Recently, doctors have begun studying the psychological, social, and environmental contributors to alcoholism” (Moore 2).

“Identifying psycho-social and cultural contributors to alcoholism can help people who are genetically pre-disposed to alcoholism better understand their attractions to alcohol use” (Davis 34).

“Social pressure is one of the most powerful contributors to alcoholism relapse” (Davis 35).

Skeletal Outline

1. Researchers have long accepted the fact that genetic factors contribute to alcoholism.
2. Focusing solely on genetic contributors to alcoholism could hinder people’s abilities to prevent the disease and to seek help.
3. Examining the psychological and social factors that contribute to alcoholism can help people diagnose, manage, and survive the disease.

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