

# the Writing Centers at Saint Mary's

Winona and Minneapolis

## Writing Process: Brainstorming

Are you struggling to choose a topic, narrow your topic, or just get started with writing? This handout provides brainstorming strategies to help you address “writer’s block” and move forward with your writing process. Brainstorming can help you when you don’t have enough information on your topic, as well as when you feel like you have too much information and can’t narrow it down. There are many different ways you can brainstorm, a few of which are described below.

### Freewriting

Freewriting involves putting pen to paper (or hands to keyboard) and writing the first thoughts that come to mind, without stopping. When freewriting, don’t worry about grammar, style, and other surface-level issues. The only goal is to generate ideas, and coming up with these ideas will be easier if you silence your inner critic.

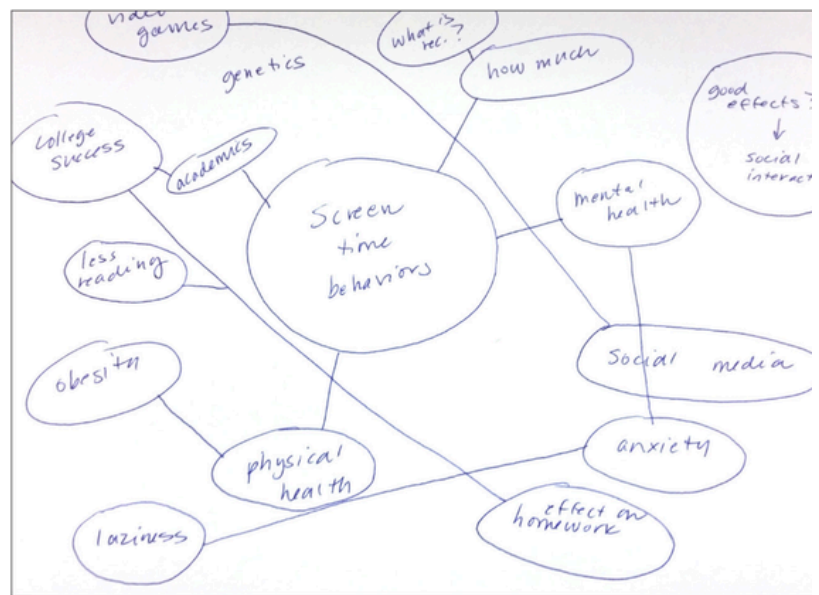
Many writers find it helpful to set a manageable time limit, like 15 minutes, or a space limit, such as three pages of handwriting. Just remember to keep writing, even if what you write down doesn’t seem relevant.

When you’ve finished your time or space goal, read through what you’ve written. Have you developed any new insights on your topic? Highlight these passages or, if you’re typing, cut and paste them into your draft. Even if you don’t experience an “aha” moment, freewriting can be a helpful way to confront writer’s block and start writing.

### Mind Mapping

Sometimes called clustering or webbing, mind mapping is a way to connect various ideas surrounding your main topic. It’s a great strategy for creating order out of what can seem like chaos. Here’s how to create a mind map:

- Write your main topic in the center of your sheet of paper and circle it.
- Outside of this circle, in any open space on the page, quickly write down concepts related to your main topic. Keep writing, even if some concepts seem less relevant than others; you can eliminate some of these concepts later on in the process.
- At this point you will have a lot of concepts on your page, so the next step is to cluster these concepts. When you see terms that seem related or associated with each other, circle them and draw a line connecting the circles. When you run out of related concepts in this group, start with another concept and look for related ones, circling and connecting them.
- Repeat this process until you’ve circled all of the associated terms. Note that you don’t have to circle every item.



Now that you’ve completed this activity, you’ll be able to step back and see a “map” of your topic. You’ll hopefully have some new ideas for how to approach your paper, including connections between related concepts that you hadn’t seen before.