# Factsheet

## Brainstorm

### Basics

To 'brainstorm' is to write down a lot of your ideas before you write an essay, to get yourself thinking about a topic. Brainstorming can be done in groups, but it can also be done on your own. It can be done randomly at first, and then in a more organized way, through things like mind-mapping. Most students find these techniques very helpful when preparing to write an essay, before the researching, planning and drafting stages.

### The academic context

Writing an academic essay can be quite scary at first and many students don't know where to start. Before you write an essay, after you've been set a question, it's important to think carefully around the topic and start to gather ideas about what you're going to say. This applies to essays you write in exam conditions, and also to essays or assignments set as course work.

It's important to have a lot of things to say, and it's also good to know how your ideas fit together. Therefore, brainstorming is a vital academic skill to develop and use as part of your academic toolkit.

### Key features

- Once you have your essay question, brainstorming should be the next step.
- There is no single way to brainstorm. However, a good way to begin is by taking a pen and an A4 or A3 piece of paper and starting to write. Write down any ideas that come into your mind; write them on the paper, anywhere.
- You don't have to use full sentences when you brainstorm – this will slow you down. Individual words and short phrases or sentence fragments are OK. This might get messy, but brainstorming like this is a very good way to collect all your thoughts quickly, before you forget them.
- If you think of an idea, but don't know the English words, it's OK to write in your own language. You can use a dictionary later.
- Once you have all your ideas down on paper, it's time to organise them. This can be done by 'mind mapping'. A mind map is a powerful visual thinking tool. You organize your thoughts and ideas, using various shapes, lines and arrows. You can use your own personal combination of shapes, colour, lines and lettering to map out your thoughts. The technique uses visuals and words that trigger associations in the brain, and this in turn often sparks further ideas.

### Challenges / difficulties

Thinking up ideas from nothing is always difficult. Sometimes, no ideas will come. At other times, we have too many ideas, and can't write them down fast enough.
Sometimes, it's easy to think of ideas in our first language, but we don't know the words in English. This slows us down.
Organizing our ideas can be difficult, because often ideas link to each other in many different ways.

### How can I develop this skill?

You can brainstorm about absolutely anything. Get into the habit of thinking intensely about topics (they don't always have to be academic topics) and making a note of all your ideas. Time yourself and see how many ideas you can think of in, say, three minutes.

### Learning outcomes

Students who have mastered the skill of brainstorming should:

- be able to note down their ideas on a topic quickly and efficiently
- know how to organize their ideas using mind mapping

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- have begun to develop their own personal style of mind mapping, using lettering, colours, lines, arrows, shaped boxes, etc.
- feel more confident about preparing to write an academic essay.

## Theory to practice

**Search for the phrase 'mind map' online. Find some mind maps that you like. Print them out. What features do you like? What do you not like?**

**Answer the following questions:**

1. How are boxes and shapes used in the mind maps? Why do people use different shapes, do you think? How about arrows and lines? How is colour used in the mind maps?
2. Is the text always inside boxes or shapes, or is it sometimes on lines? Why?
3. Do mind maps usually have full sentences, or shorter phrases? Why?
4. Is the text always in lower case, or are capitals sometimes used?

## Ways to get more practice

Challenge a partner to a mind-mapping contest. Pick a topic, set a time limit (say, 15 minutes) and then go for it. When time is up, compare your mind-maps. Points are scored for quality of ideas, number of ideas and creativity.

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