

Heuristics

DEFINITION

Heuristics are techniques that help you discover and clarify ideas. They help to “set the mind in motion, encourage thinking, stir memory, and coax imagination.”

- 1. Brainstorming:** Generate ideas on a particular subject without evaluating or reviewing until after the process. Creativity and volume are the primary goals.
This is a good first step to get ideas flowing especially if you worry about making sense in whole sentences or paragraphs.
- 2. Listing:** Make a list of ideas/things/experiences related to the writing assignment.
This is similar to brainstorming and can also help you to organize or prioritize ideas.
- 3. Freewriting:** Write continuously for 5-10 minutes about a specific topic without worrying about grammar, punctuation, spelling, or how your ideas sound. Remember to keep the pen moving repeating a word or phrase if you are stuck.
This is a good warm up or can help you to develop an essay. (See Freewriting and Looping handout.)
- 4. Looping:** Read over what you’ve written in your freewrite and look for a “hot spot” – an especially interesting or key idea in your writing. Now, write that idea – word or phrase – at the top of a blank sheet of paper, and freewrite again.
This is especially helpful for developing specific examples or explaining ideas more clearly and fully. (See Freewriting and Looping handout.)
- 5. Clustering:** Write a key word related to your assignment, discussion or freewrite in the center of a sheet of paper (or on the chalkboard). Draw a circle around it, add small branches around the circle with more specific related ideas written on each branch.
This is good if you are visually oriented. It is a particularly good technique to use when starting a paper because it can help you decide what to write about a topic, see the relationship among ideas, organize a first draft, and come up with new ideas.
- 6. Cubing:** Look at your topic from six different sides by using freewriting or discussion.
 - Describe it. Look closely and tell what you see.
 - Compare it. What is it similar to? Different from?
 - Associate it. What does it remind you of?
 - Analyze it. Tell how it’s made. What are its parts? What is it a part of?
 - Apply it: Argue for or against it.
 - Place it. In what settings do you find it?*This helps you to develop specific aspects of an essay, enriching the argument and making the essay more interesting to read. (See Cubing handout.)*
- 7. Branching Outline:** Choose one main idea and write it down. Write a couple points that support that main idea underneath connecting with a straight line. Elaborate on each point connecting in the same way. The outline will look sort of like a pyramid or family tree.
Like clustering, this helps you to organize ideas and see how they are related to each other.