Brainstorming and mind mapping

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What is brainstorming?

Brainstorming is a great way to make a start on an assignment or to relieve “writer’s block”. It can also be an excellent starting point for exam preparation as it will make you aware of what you already know and what you need to revise on a topic.

Brainstorming can also be called ‘free writing’ and basically involves writing down everything you can think of in relation to a topic or question, without worrying about writing in proper sentences or to a particular format.

It helps you to gather all your ideas onto a single page and allows you to start anywhere and then build on these initial ideas.

Brainstorming also works well in a group. It allows everyone to come together and share ideas, discuss issues and problem solve. You may decide to allocate one person as the note taker, or decide to each write your own notes during the brainstorming session.

Tips for effective brainstorming

• Start with a blank piece of paper.
• Write the main topic or question anywhere on the page.
• Now write down anything at all that comes to mind in relation to this topic or question.
• Write freely and do not worry about order, quality or style, or where on the page you write it. All that matters is that what you are writing is meaningful to you.
• If you feel like it, use colours and/or punctuation marks or symbols like arrows and asterisks to highlight information or main points. You can also use pictures or diagrams instead of words.
• Continue writing until you run out of ideas.
• Now read back over your notes and if you haven’t done so already, circle or highlight any key points. Look for gaps and ideas that could be further explored or expanded on. This is the starting point for your research.
• To make your notes clearer and easier to follow, it is helpful to re-write them as a mind map.
• Remember that you may come back to brainstorming at any stage of your assignment, research or study process. You might be brainstorming an entire assignment, or a single concept or sub topic. Make it work for you!

What is a mind map?
A mind map is an extension of brainstorming that helps you to visually organise your information. They can be used to clearly show how each idea, theme or subtopic, as well as related examples and evidence are linked to the main topic or question. Organising your thoughts into a mind map provides you with clear pathways to follow to help you tackle the task at hand, and makes it easier for you to identify gaps in your research or knowledge.

You can think of your mind map as a road map, with the main topic as your starting point, your main ideas or subtopics as the main roads you will travel along and your explanations, examples and evidence as the smaller roads that branch off to lead you to specific destinations.

Tips for creating a mind map
• Use your brainstorming notes to create your mind map.
• Start your mind map on a new blank sheet of paper.
• In the centre of the page, write the main topic or question.
• Start drawing branches out from the central topic, writing one key point on or at the end of each branch.
• From each key point, draw smaller branches with supporting points (this may be explanations, examples or evidence), on or at the end of each smaller branch.
• Add any additional minor points, examples and/or reference sources at the end of each branch.
An example of a mind map

- Visual hierarchical representation of ideas
- Ideas radiate out from a central topic on branches
- Each branch holds a key associated idea or theme
- Links & relationships between ideas are identified
- Ideas are kept brief, e.g. single key words
- Further branches extend out
- Examples of evidence might be added
- Is like a road map or a tree
- Lines, arrows & numbers are used
- Colours & pictures help

Features:

- To think clearly
- To take stock of ideas & knowledge
- To get ideas onto a single page
- To provide a pathway to follow & extend ideas
- To get started on assessment tasks & projects
- To overcome writer's block

Process:

1. Purpose & benefits
2. Blank paper
3. Landscape
4. Main topic in centre
5. Associated themes/topics/ideas branch out
6. Links, gaps, relationships identified
7. Plan routes

Mind map