

BRAINSTORMING AS AN AID TO WRITING

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It is a fact of life that our students, especially at the secondary and post-secondary levels, will be required to produce short essays or compositions in a limited period of time. In a testing situation one common complaint is that by the time a student has figured out what he wants to say, there isn't enough time left to worry about such things as organization, sentence structure, or spelling. The following technique, called brainstorming, may help your students use their time more efficiently so that there is time to consider *how* they will write, as well as *what* they will write.

Procedure

Brainstorming is simply spending a short period of time thinking of ideas for a piece of writing and ignoring, for the moment, form and organization. An exercise to teach your students how to become proficient at this can be done in two parts. In part one, the class is working together. Give them a one-word topic and ask them to mention anything that comes to mind. Write all suggestions on the board. When a number of ideas have been collected, the class looks for possible groupings. Discuss then, as a group, how to approach the topic, what to omit, what to expand, etc.

After this teacher-centered exposure, the students can work individually. The teacher has five one-word topics (the more diverse the better), perhaps "skiing," "chocolate," "New Year's Day," "hospitals," and "friendship." Give them the first topic. They have one minute to brainstorm for ideas, writing them down. Stress that form is unimportant for the moment, that getting down thoughts as they occur is all that matters. At the end of the minute, the students put aside their first topic and follow the same procedure with the second, then with the third, and so on. The purpose is to show the students that even very short periods of real concentration can generate a lot of material.

When all five topics have been brainstormed (five minutes), the students exchange papers and read each other's ideas. They should be encouraged to make comments on any or all topics. They then choose the one that they feel would make the most interesting composition and indicate why. When the papers are returned, the students can read the comments of their partners and may wish to discuss them with each other. After the discussion they can choose what they feel will make the best composition (not necessarily the one chosen by their partner). The students then have thirty minutes to write their compositions. Caution them that, with this time limit, they may have to narrow down their topic if they

have too many ideas. The point is that now they have the ideas and can spend the rest of their time concentrating on form and organization.

Conclusion

Brainstorming can be used as a regular exercise in a writing class. It can also be extended to provide a more in-depth pre-writing activity. As your students' proficiency increases, challenge them to do more in the same amount of time, or work up to more complex subjects. Their self-confidence for writing essay examinations in English will increase as their writing ability improves.

THE AUTHOR

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