

The Benefits of Brainstorming for the Freelance Writer

Brainstormed by Curtis Jerry Smothers.



At the risk of torturing a metaphor, one could say that brainstorming is the best way to "blow away" writer's block. Brainstorming is rather like an internal conference where the writer throws out ideas that lay undeveloped but are jotted down, captured, and allowed to grow.

Here are some tips that have helped me through the times when my "writer's well" seemed dry. They are presented in no particular order because brainstorming is a rather disorderly process:

Preventing the "false start"

Use brainstorming as a way to scratch the itch that urges you to "get on with it." The "false start" is nothing more than an attempt to arrive at a finished writing product well before your ideas or thesis are developed. Writers know that there is something salutary (and even cathartic) about seeing the ideas in the imagination morph to the printed word, even if the ideas die at birth in the wadded-up paper next to your typewriter or printer.

So the advice here is simple. Engage in brainstorming for its own sake. It is a time saver and rounds up all your ideas, even the ones that are off-track. It scratches that itch and prevents the infectious false start.

Let chaos reign

You may have attended group brainstorming sessions when a moderator stands in front of the group and writes down every idea that is thrown out, no matter how ridiculous or off-point. Comedy writers do this for a living. Also, jurors who are contemplating the guilt or innocence of an accused use brainstorming with especially serious consequences. This chaotic process somehow comes together with the best verdict they can produce.

When brainstorming for writing, then, use a process I like to call “chaotic focus.” The chaos is the product of ruling out nothing; the focus comes from knowing your subject, based on your own experience, research, and your unique perspective. Perspective, in the end, is what makes writing your own and welcomes your reader to your world.

Write it down and use pen and paper!

Whether you’re a “bubble head”, a “bullet freak,” or an anal-oriented outliner, you’ll need to write those ideas as fast as they arrive. “Good” ideas are like fireworks: We get them and have an “aha!” moment, but if we don’t jot them down right away, they become lost or blurred. (Some writers carry a notebook with them constantly.)

The advice here is to actually use a (gasp!) pencil or pen and write your ideas. There is something like a “bonding” moment that occurs when the “motor memory” of writing is married to whatever brain synapses produce good ideas.

Then Get it organized!

The terms “bubblehead,” “bullet freak” and “anal-oriented outliner” mentioned above have to do with the methods various writers use to get their work

organized. Depending on what the writing task at hand is, each method serves its purpose:

Bubbles help to “pop” writer’s block.

Use a pen and paper and write down everything you would like to cover in your writing piece. On the sheet of paper put your “big ideas” towards the top, your “supporting ideas” towards the bottom and your “I think these are relevant ideas” in the middle. Draw a circle around each. Those are your balloons. For most writers, the “bubble” brainstorming process easily morphs into the first draft either through “connecting the balloons” or just keeping the balloon chart handy as a sort of “writing coach.”

Bullets, like balloons, are statements of what the writer wants to cover and accomplish in end product.

Bullets are amenable to the pen-and-ink or the word processor. The advantage of the word processor is that the writer can rearrange the bullets into a semblance of order as a continuing writing prompt.

Outlines are the academic equivalent of “Eat your peas; they’re good for you.”

The same students who are forced to read Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” usually have to undergo the agony of formal outlining before they can begin their paper on perhaps the gloomiest book ever written. The problem is that most students begin their outline with the Roman numeral I, stare at it, and get their first dose of writer’s block, even before they write anything. Here’s my advice on outlines:

Use formal outlines only when necessary. Usually well-ordered bullets will do the job.

Prepare your outline from your bullet list, but make sure your bullet list has main points and sub-topics. If you must use a formal outline, be sure to follow its structure and sequence. Otherwise, why outline?

If, on the other hand, you find yourself veering off track, then veer off track. It might be worth your while, though, to go back and look at your whole outline and “go back to the drawing board.”

So the intrinsic value of brainstorming is to bring order out of the chaos of ideas roiling around in the writer's head. Highly skilled and talented writers undergo the brainstorming process inside their skulls and can regurgitate a finished product. But, as they say, on TV, "Don't try this at home." Otherwise, you might be the victim of the time-wasting and failure-ridden "false start."