

# Campus Academic Resource Program

## Brainstorming

### This handout will:

- Explain what brainstorming is and its role in the writing process
- Present general guidelines for brainstorming
- Provide a variety of strategies for brainstorming on your own

### What is Brainstorming?:

An important yet often overlooked portion of the writing process, brainstorming is the process of developing several ideas, approaches, or insights to solve a problem or respond to a paper prompt. Brainstorming can be used to either start a new project or to jump start an existing project that you may be stuck on. Brainstorming can also be an opportunity to organize and clarify your ideas before you start writing. You do not have to be brilliant while brainstorming. This is your opportunity to generate ideas without judgement to have a wide variety to choose from when you ultimately start working on your paper.

### The Brainstorming Process: Before, During, and After

**Before:** before you start brainstorming it is important to keep some general guidelines in mind that will help you succeed in generating ideas:

- *Start early:* As soon as you get your prompt or assignment, try to brainstorm the same day. By starting the same day you can get your initial responses and reactions to the prompt.
- *Set time limits:* If you find yourself 15 minutes into brainstorming with pages of ideas, go ahead and review your list. You may already have the best idea on the page!
- *Map your relationships:* Find ideas that overlap or support one another.
- *Identify the prompt:* Note what needs to be answered and considered. (for more information see the Addressing the Prompt handout at <http://carp.sfsu.edu/content/helpful-handouts>)
- *Ask questions:* Note questions you have about your prompt or the content that needs to be included in your writing.
- *Brainstorm at any point in the writing process:* Return to brainstorming whenever you are stuck and continue brainstorming throughout your writing process.
- *Brainstorm individually or in a group:* Brainstorming is beneficial both individually and in a group setting, so do what works best for you.
- *No idea is not good enough:* Write everything down!

**During:** With those guidelines in mind it is time to sit down and start brainstorming! While a wide variety of strategies and mediums can be used to brainstorm, it is important to find the strategy, or variety of strategies, that suits your learning style. There is no “right” way to brainstorm, what is important is to use the brainstorming strategy that works best for you.

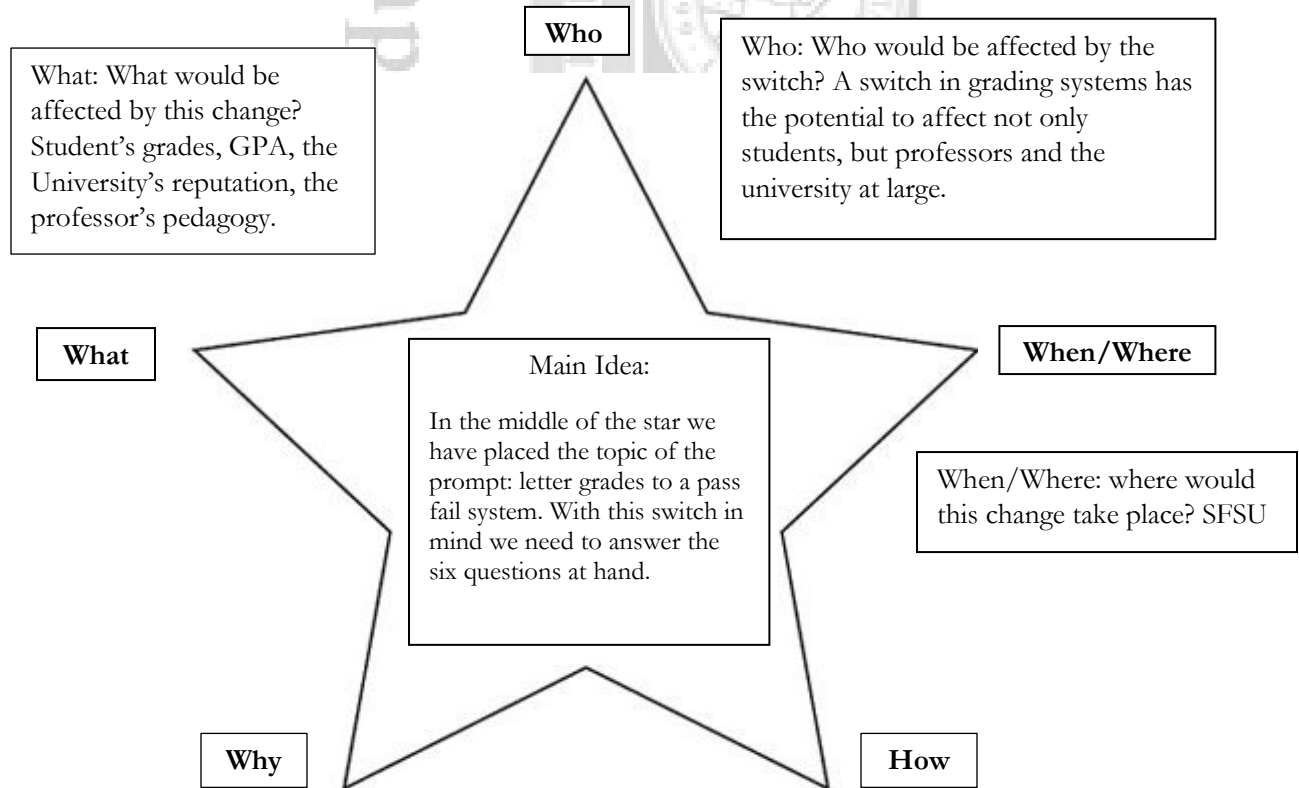
### Graphic/Template Strategies:

- **Visual Word Association:** List your main topic or prompt in the center circle and then begin branching off of the topic. Ask questions of your topic: What are things related to the topic? What is not related to the topic? What does the topic make you think about? What are some things that the topic means or insinuates? Use free association to build upon your ideas.
- **Star-Bursting:** Place your topic or main idea in the center of the star. Then ask yourself these 6 key questions: (*who, what, when, where, why, how*). Try to be as detailed as possible (for space reasons this is less detailed than your star-burst should be). Attempt to either answer or generate more questions regarding your topic.

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Example 1: For this example we will utilize the star-bursting technique to approach the sample prompt: *SFSU is considering a new grading policy that replaces letter or number grades on your transcript with pass or fail. What is your position concerning this issue? Write a letter to the university administration stating your position and supporting it with convincing reasons. Be sure to explain your reasons in detail.*



**Why:** Why is this change important? It holds a variety of positive and negative impacts for faculty, students, and the university.

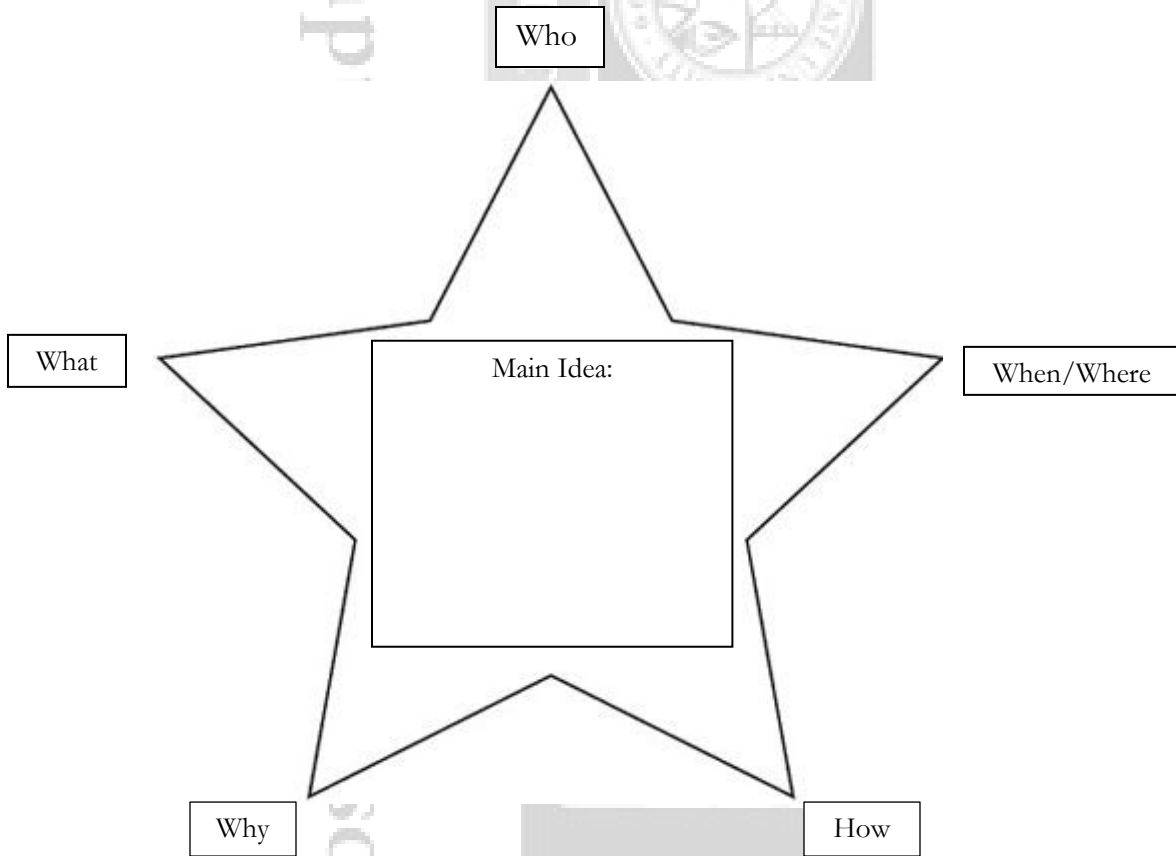
**How:** Does this change impact individuals and institutions?

- A pass/fail system would not reflect variation in student work: depending on what kind of student they are this could be good or bad.
- A pass/fail system could mean that professors only teach students at a level to pass, not at a level to excel
- Future employers tend not to care about GPA so a pass/fail system would not impact getting a job
- Graduate schools do care about GPA and if SFSU switched students would have a harder time getting into competitive graduate programs
- A switch to a pass/fail system could impact the SFSU's education if it negatively impacted student's access to future employment.

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Activity 1: Using the template below to test out the star-bursting technique of brainstorming. With your future essay or project in mind, ask yourself the six questions outlined above (*who, what, when, where, why, how*) and then fill out the star with the ideas or further questions that come to mind. When you are done, circle the ideas that you want to develop further.

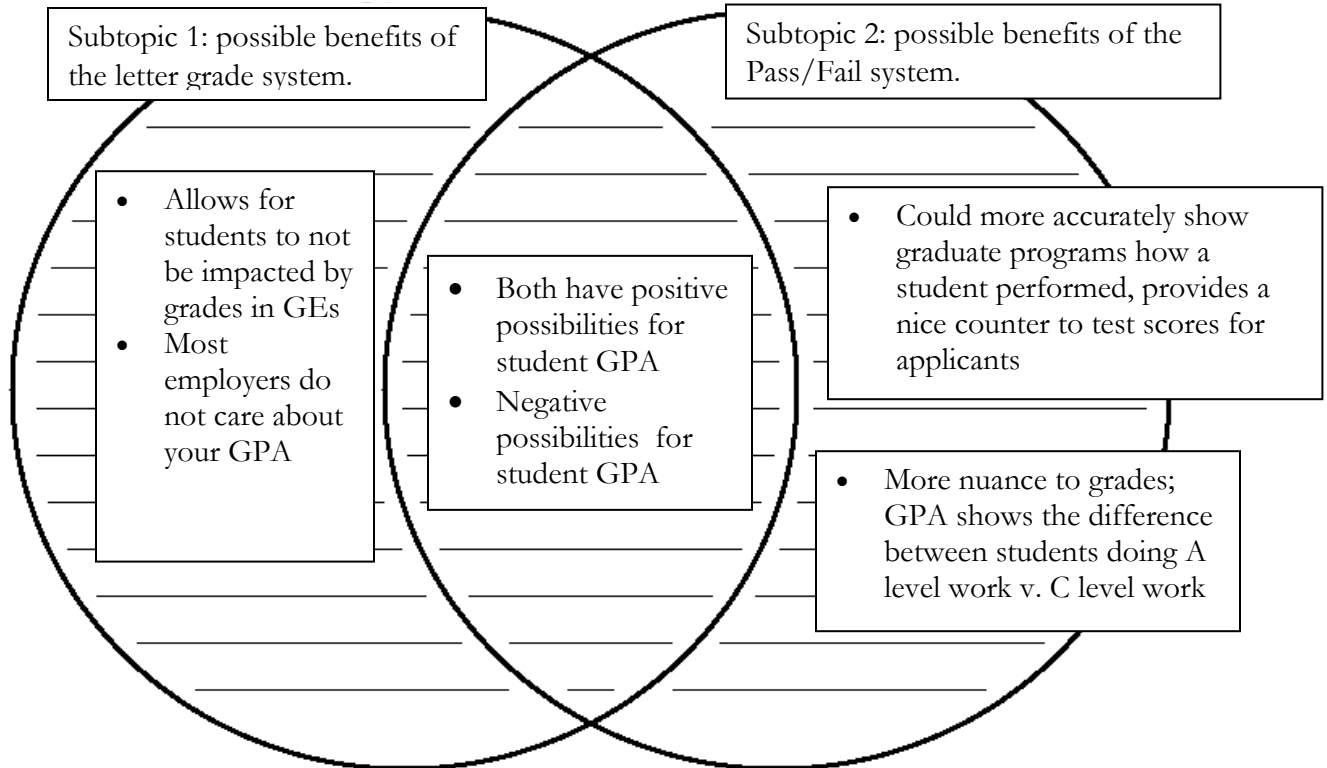


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- **Venn Diagrams:** This method allows you to observe the similarities and differences between two different topics. Each topic receives its own circle. Where the two circles overlap, note all the similarities.

Example 2: Since the venn diagram system is great for comparing and contrasting, we will utilize this template to compare the two contrasting opinions outlined in the sample prompt used in the first Example.



For subtopic 1, we have written down possible benefits of the letter grade system. For subtopic 2, we have written down the possible benefits of the Pass/Fail system. In the middle we have outlined the common places where they both have positive possibilities. By comparing and contrasting the two positions, it is easier to see how one position may be argued over the other in the coming essay.

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Activity 2: Use the template below to compare and contrast two subtopics within the scope of your prompt. Label each circle with one of your subtopics. Next, for each individual circle, fill out the non-overlapping portions of the circle with information on each topic that is unique to that category. Finally, fill out the overlapping portions of the circle with information that the two subtopics have in common. When you are done, make sure to take a moment to summarize your conclusions and consider how you can continue to write on the topic.

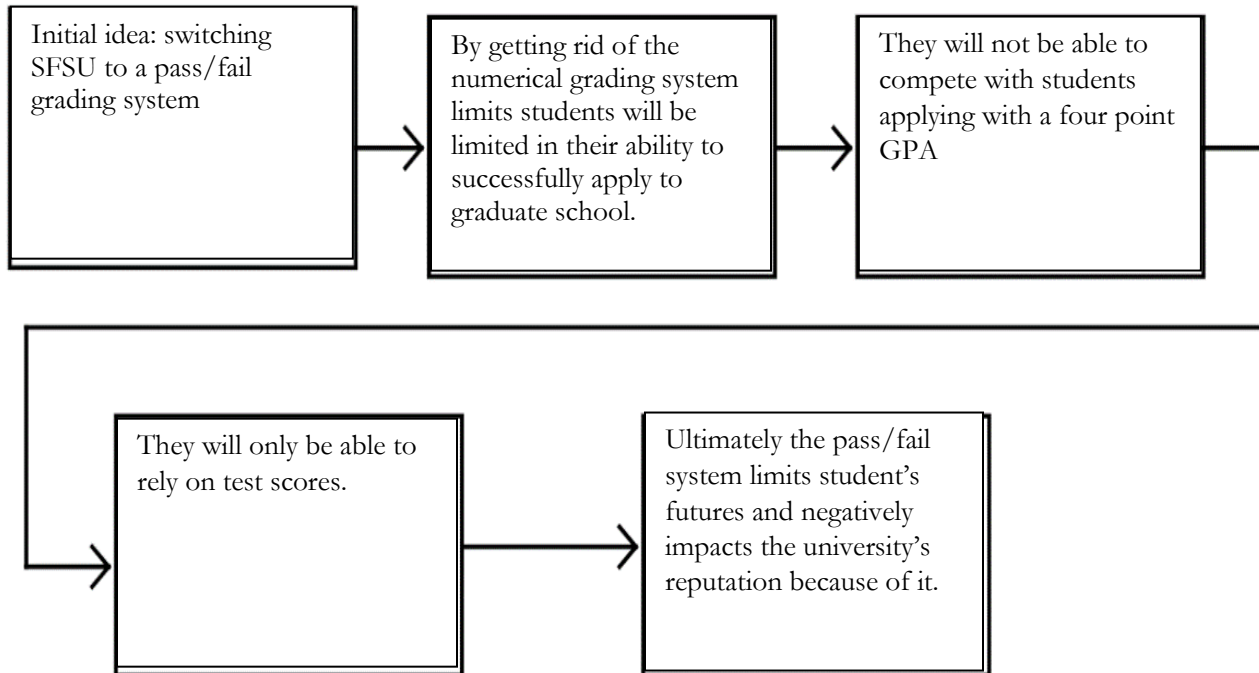
The diagram consists of two overlapping circles. Above the left circle is a rectangular box labeled "Subtopic 1:". Above the right circle is a rectangular box labeled "Subtopic 2:". The interior of each circle is filled with horizontal lines for writing. The overlapping area in the center is also filled with horizontal lines.

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- **Flowchart:** This method helps you draw connections between subjects and ideas. Begin in the first top box with your overarching idea, and then progress further down until the boxes become more specific, streamlined thoughts.

Example 3: For this example, we will use the flowchart method to address the same prompt utilized in the previous exercises. For this method, we start with an initial idea and then work our way down to a more specific argument.

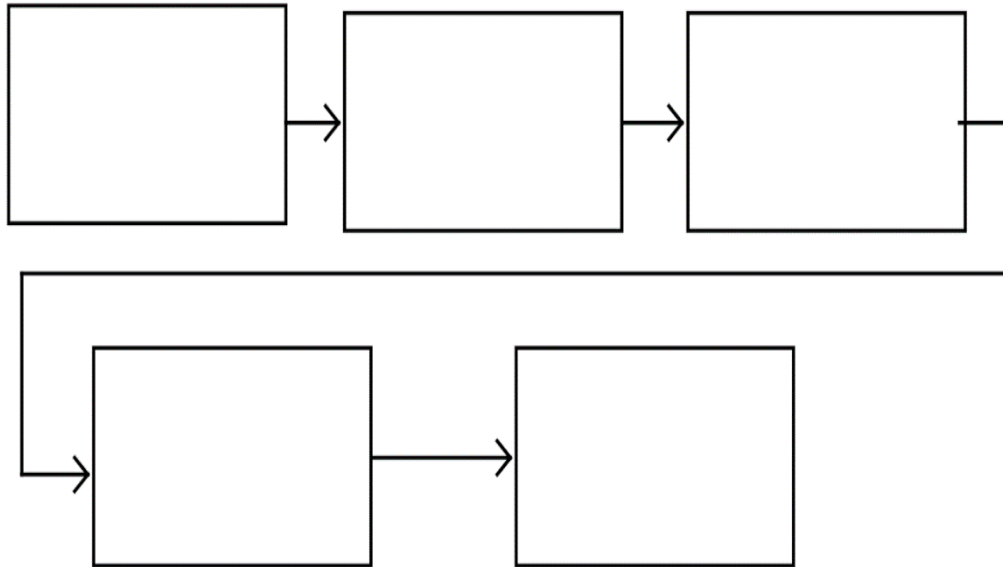


Thus by the final box we are left with a substantial idea from which to build our essay on (for a more thorough definition of “substantial idea,” see page 8 of this handout).

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Activity 3: Use the template below to practice the Flowchart method. First, consider the prompt for your paper and an initial idea for your paper. Next, using this cursory idea, start to fill in the template by writing your overarching idea in the first box, and then progress further down until the boxes become more specific, streamlined thoughts. By the final box you should have an idea that you can build upon for your final paper.



#### Spoken Techniques:

- **Think Aloud:** Speak out loud to yourself (whether they are coherent thoughts or not), read aloud, and/or listen to music. Consider recording yourself so you may listen to your ideas later.
- **Brainstorm in a Group Setting:** Discussing your ideas with another person may create new opinions or make you feel better about your current thoughts. Share your ideas with a friend, a tutor, or a small group.

#### Written Techniques:

- **Guided Free Write:** Put the key topic at the top of the paper and begin writing all your ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc. about the topic. Time yourself for anywhere between 5-15 minutes, and do not stop writing for the full amount of time!
- **Make it a Game:** Go through questions or words that may or may not be related to the topic or subject and ask yourself the question: how does the idea support or not support your topic? For example: If my topic is to write an introductory manual on how to use a computer then I might begin with: Question: How is a mouse important to the function(s) of a computer? How I might respond: The mouse and the keyboard control the way humans communicate and interact with computers.
- **Doodle:** The more you interact with your thoughts or the topic the more potential material you will come up within the brainstorming process. Drawing will activate a different part of the brain and may cause you to notice more intricate details of the subject. Doodling, or

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filling in blank templates may get your mind motivated and activated, ready to write something great. For example: If you are thinking about time, try drawing a clock. Things that may come to mind: minute hands, alarms, numbers, etc.

**After:** Once you have finished your brainstorming activity it is important to take some time to reflect on the ideas that you have generated. Organize your thoughts and ideas and combine related subjects. Decide what ideas excite you the least or are unrelated, so that you may cross those out and narrow your list. Take notice of certain patterns in your brainstorming. Did you:

- Take a particular stance on something?
- Was there any repetition or overlap in your brainstorming process?
- Was there something you felt particularly passionate or excited about?

With the answers to these questions in mind you can begin to develop the ideas you like the most and the ideas that seem the most plausible. After this, you should have anywhere from one to four substantial ideas. Substantial ideas are ideas that provide enough intellectual material to build upon in for your final written project and sufficiently address the writing prompt for your professor. Substantial ideas may take the form of questions or statements but they provide a firm base for you to start working on you final paper, and frame how you will further research or explore the topic at hand.

### Continuing the Writing Process:

Once you have organized your ideas it is time to begin developing your arguments, thesis, and outline! Make sure to check out other helpful CARP handouts including:

- Addressing the Prompt
- Thesis Statements
- How to Make and Use an Outline



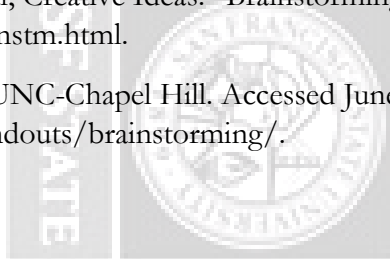
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#### Works Cited

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<http://www.mindtools.com/brainstm.html>.

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