

Chapter 27. Exercises for Generating and Organizing

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We can think about “exercises” two ways, as skill-building and as simple movement. We know that reflective writers need deliberate practice to improve: after all, writing doesn’t happen with just one big swoop of words landing on a page, but with deliberate moves and approaches assembled over time. Practicing writing shares many characteristics with other kinds of practice: like shooting free throws, drawing faces, piping frosting, calculating cosines, or identifying cells, writing practice requires guidance, focus, repetition, and connection to a larger goal. Writers gain confidence and insight when we practice particular skills, either skills we most need for our work at the moment or skills we struggle with most.

Solve writing problems reflectively

As reflective writers, we also know that when we’re stuck, we don’t have “writer’s block”—instead, we just have a problem



we need to figure out. The exercises in this section are designed to support that problem-solving process. They can help writers DEAL with being stuck, by

- Defining a problem,
- Exploring some options for addressing it,
- Acting by trying out a new approach for 20 minutes or so, and
- Learning how to apply that new idea where it's helpful.

When we take deliberate, reflective, writing-focused action (rather than checking our messages or staring at the cursor blinking on the screen), we can lower our stress, gain a fresh perspective or increased energy, and move forward to new and productive insights.

Avoid high expectations

Practice may “make perfect,” but practice work should never strive to *be* perfect. When you exercise as a writer, try to ignore small errors in word choice or punctuation, and try not to worry about whether you're getting the “right” answers. Just keep writing answers.

Practice persistence

You need to persist in a single exercise long enough to prompt your brain to release or create ideas you weren't aware you had. You might set a timer, and work as hard as you can for 20 or 30 minutes. You also need to persist across time, whether you repeat the same exercise multiple times or engage in different exercises at multiple points during a writing project.

Whether you use these exercises to strengthen your skills or to build more flexible processes, you can improve your current project and gain more fluency as a writer overall.

27.1 3D Mind Map

Define your goal

Generate topic and subtopic ideas, see connections, and identify areas rich in complications.

Background

You may have drawn mind-maps or bubble-diagrams before to help you consider ideas. This exercise is designed to stretch you a little further than most mapping events, in two ways. First, you'll be encouraged in every stage to list more than



just the first three or four ideas that occur to you: this way, you push your brain to send you new ideas rather than only writing the ones you had at the start. Second, you'll be asked to annotate your first-dimension map to help you think about connections and arguments, so that you start to generate higher-order thinking that will help you jump-start your actual writing.

Take action

Draw the first dimension: Core ideas. Draw or insert a circle and write/type your main topic inside it. Around that circle, draw at least 5-7 lines leading to new circles; inside those secondary circles, write ideas, questions, or descriptors that are related ideas or subtopics to the main circle. From most or all of the secondary circles, draw several lines leading out to new circles with new ideas or subtopics (ask yourself, “who, what, where, when, why, how many, what kinds, who cares?”).

Repeat these steps: try to go out to at least *four or five levels of circles*; try to generate as many ideas as you can, even if you think they might not be exactly right for your project. (You don't need to generate lines from every circle, or to have the same number of ideas each time.) If one cluster of circles starts to capture your attention, feel free to spend more time on that part of the map. If you need more paper, get some, or if you need to move to a new page in your document, do it: don't let your tools limit your thinking!

Draw the second dimension: Connections. Look at your first-dimension map and begin to draw new connecting lines: where does a third-level bubble connect to a fifth-level bubble on the other side of the map? (You can use a new color or style of line if you'd like.) You should add at least a dozen new lines, perhaps more, as you build your second layer of your map. If the connection isn't obvious, write a note on or near the line to remind yourself what link you see. Try to look for unexpected connections, and pay attention to any circle that starts to accumulate extra links, because these are the ideas that could lead you to interesting writing.

Draw the third dimension: Complications. Identify at least two places on your map that seem more complicated than others. Sometimes these are second- or third-level circles where a lot of lines from all over the map converge: these ideas are complicated because they are connected to so many parts of the puzzle. Sometimes these are circles that just led you to write out lists of questions around them, or that lead to a clear This vs. That set of ideas. Nearby or on a separate page, write a Complications Note for each of these two nodes: “The topic/idea/question of _____ is complicated because it's hard to decide/choose whether/how_____.”

Reflect to learn and connect

Star or highlight one section of the map that is particularly interesting to you *and* complicated enough that readers need your help figuring it out, and write

yourself some advice: “As a first/next step, I want to take some time to explore ___ because ____.”

Explore related exercises

Authority/Curiosity/Annoyance List, Off on a Rant, Scenarios

27.2 Cause-Effect Map



Define your goal

Use this exercise to explore causal relationships in order to identify complexities and puzzles or unexpected outcomes.

Take action

You should aim to draw two maps: one in the top left corner reaching out to the right, one in the lower right corner reaching over to the left. (These two maps won't connect: they map the future and the past of the same situation.) If you need to use two pages or two online spaces, that's fine. As usual, it's important to go out several levels to discover ideas that aren't obvious but may be important.

Chart the Effects: On the left-hand side of your document, draw or insert a circle or box: inside it, write a short description of the current state of your issue. Draw a few lines out from it and connect those to circles: inside each circle, write an immediate effect of this situation, if left unchanged, on a different stakeholder, community, or component.

From each of those Stage One circles, draw another line or two connected to some Stage Two circles: in a few days, weeks, or months, what could happen as a result of *that* community or component's situation? Repeat the process with a few more circles going out to Stage Three and even Stage Four, going from near or *proximate* effects to more *distant* effects. Distant effects are harder to prove, but they often represent more substantial consequences and more interesting ripples to investigate.

Chart the Causes: Move down or to the next page, and on the right-hand side of your document, draw or insert a circle: inside it, write a short description of the current state of your issue. Draw a few lines out to the left of it, and connect those to circles. Inside each circle, write an immediate cause of this situation: whose decision (or what entity or action) helped lead to this state?

From each of those Stage One circles, draw another line or two to the left, connected to some Stage Two circles: what pressures, circumstances, people, or events influenced the actors in Stage One? Repeat the process with a few more circles going out to Stage Three and even Stage Four, going from near or *proximate* causes to more *distant* causes. Distant causes, as you'll see, are intertwined

and thus harder to isolate, but they are often overlooked and thus present more interesting fields for investigation.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you have finished, highlight or star a few of your outer-stage causes or effects that seem most interesting, most overlooked, or most pertinent to your audience. Write yourself a few sentences about what aspects of these causes or effects might be worthy of further inquiry or discussion.

Explore related exercises

Assumption Inspection, Emperor for a Day, Subtopic Generator

27.3 Dialogue



Define your goal

Use this exercise to identify and track multiple arguments, perspectives, or lines of thinking related to your project.

Take action

Set the context: At the top of your page, write your current best statement of your main focal point or argument, and describe the audience you most want to reach.

Frame the dialogue: Choose one of the dialogue options below that will most help you move forward and identify the voices. Choose “Sides” if you are most interested in tracking different arguments; choose “Stakeholders” if you want to think about alternate perspectives from readers who will be affected; choose “Sources” if you want to understand how other texts you’ve been reading might interact.

- **Sides option:** Remember that there are usually more than “two sides” to any argument, so you need to begin by identifying at least three or four different points of view: you can consider your view, a directly opposing view, and a third or fourth view that might come from someone who is less knowledgeable, less involved, or concerned with a different angle or solution. Remember that you are identifying positions: what goal does each arguer most favor?
- **Stakeholders option:** If you are proposing a change or solution, then many different people might have a “stake” in what you propose: powerful people, people directly affected, people who are nearby but might be overlooked. Identify at least three or four different stakeholders who have something to gain or lose from your recommendations. Here you are identifying (types of) real people: what values and concerns might each of them have?

- **Sources option:** If you are gathering knowledge from two or more different sources—by reading articles, observing sites, and/or interviewing experts—you should start to see that some individual sources or some types of views come out with strong perspectives: maybe some provide local or personal information while others provide factual data, some argue for or against a position, and some may be more credible than others. Here you are identifying the contributions of each text or source: what focus and goal does each of them have?

Identify the speakers. Begin by giving each of your participants a name: the name can be a personal name (Lydia, Me, and Chan) or the name can be a concept name (Supports State Park, Opposes State Park, Doesn't Care)—or you can combine the two approaches (Marissa Bigwig, Ali Campaigner, José Homeowner). You can also give or create biographical data (age, occupation, gender or ethnicity, family status) and/or you can describe the participant's key values or arguments (emphasizes kids' needs, values low cost and efficiency).

Write your dialogue in which each participant “speaks” on your issue at least four times. Just as in a real dialogue—you can imagine them having lunch together using informal conversational language, or debating formally on a stage—the participants should respond to one another's points, not just state their own ideas and sit down: they can agree or disagree, ask questions, raise challenges or concerns, or provide a rebuttal. What would each participant think is most important to address?

- Participants can “speak” in general terms, but you will gain more understanding of their positions if you have them provide two or three sentences per turn so they can give examples, describe viewpoints, or identify key factors that influence their views.
- You may put all participant ideas in your own words, or if you are drawing from other sources, you can use a combination of your paraphrases and some short direct quotations to help you focus on precisely what they know or believe.
- Participants can always speak in the same order, or you can vary the order as two voices go back and forth discussing part of the issue.

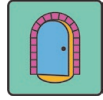
Reflect to learn and connect

When you have finished your dialogue, go back and star or highlight one pair of comments (such as Participant B's question and Participant C's answer) and write yourself a note about why you find it most helpful or interesting: does this highlight the differences, show common ground, or provide a better option for understanding the issue?

Explore related exercises

3D Mind Map, Assumption Inspection, Source Synthesis Grid

27.4 Emperor For a Day



Define your goal

Use this exercise to consider a range of beneficial options without at first being distracted by feasibility or resistance.

Take action

Imagine that you have been made emperor, and you have 24 hours to issue decrees that will be immediately obeyed and will persist across the land even after you return to your everyday life. You are a generous, benevolent emperor, and you want to use your power to improve matters concerning the situation/issue you have been focusing on recently. You can't change how people think (nor would you want to!), but you can change the structures that reward or limit behavior.

As you make your list of decrees—at least 8-10—consider some of the categories below. You should also challenge yourself to create some unexpected or small-scale decrees that nonetheless could have significant effects (what could happen if everyone were required to say a cheerful “Good morning” to at least one neighbor once a day, or if all four-year-olds were issued a computer, a soccer ball, and a guitar?).

- Financial plans: Who must spend how much money on what, with what goals?
- Policies about education, social interaction, legal or illegal behavior
- Government regulation about business, environment, or research
- Policies applying to a particular group of people, locality, or situation
- Laws about governance, elections, or future emperors

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, star or circle one or two decrees that might have real-life parallels you could investigate or recommend a first step toward, even if you're unlikely to see immediate and complete obedience with the snap of your imperial fingers. What lines of inquiry might you undertake to find out what could be possible?

Explore related exercises

Counterargument Generator, Evidence Shopping List, Out on a Limb

27.5 Explode a Moment



Define your goal

Use this exercise to uncover hidden complexities and develop richer details in support of key ideas.

Background

This strategy can work equally well when you choose one angle of a topic you're just getting to know, when you focus on one section of your current draft in which you think you're just scratching the surface but probably have a lot more to say, or when you're working to revise a section that seems thin but in which you believe you've already said all you could the first time around.

Take action

Choose a subtopic area or a sentence or two from a paragraph/section you've written that seems important but underdeveloped. Pick the tiniest-but-intriguing idea that you can. Copy that sentence into a new document. Freewrite (generating ideas as quickly and steadily as you can, without worrying about correctness or coverage) for at least 15-20 minutes (a full if drafty paragraph) *focusing on just that piece* of the issue, trying to notice details you hadn't noticed before. If you wish, you can use one of the following approaches:

- **Scenario:** Describe everything that is happening in a relevant scene, from the people and place to the sounds and smells to the feelings and memories. If you were filming this sentence for a movie, how would you do it?
- **Stases:** Consider one or more of these common argument approaches or *stases*:
 - What *value* judgments would you make about this moment: what is beneficial or effective, and what is harmful or frustrating? Might someone else see it with different values?
 - What short- and long-term *causes* led up to this exact moment, and/or what immediate and distant effects might be the result? Which people were or might be involved?
 - How could this moment be both a *solution* to some problems and a cause of others, and what next steps would you (or others) recommend?
- **Stakeholders:** Imagine two people who are not major players but who are involved in or will be affected by this moment: family members, workers, neighbors, referees, reporters. What would they see, ask, remember, feel, support, doubt, or argue about this moment?

Reflect to learn and connect

Take two minutes at the end to underline or highlight any phrases or sentences you wrote that have ideas you might add into your draft, or to write yourself a note: If you were going to focus your whole project on just this one moment, could you? what areas would you need to cover?

Explore related exercises

Inside Out, Shrunken Draft, Ten Directed Revisions

27.6 Inner Three-Year-Old

*Define your goal*

Use this exercise to extend your thinking past an obvious answer or assumption.

Take action

Set the context: List one of your claims or sub-claims. “I believe/argue that ____.”

Find your child-perspective: Imagine starting a dialogue with a curious child who responds to each of your answers with a truly inquiring question: “But why is *that* true?” or “But how does *that* happen?” (An adult version of this question is “What makes you say that?”) Write out that dialogue—including your answers and your inner child’s questions—for at least five rounds of Q&A (take at least 15 minutes).

As you answer, be as careful, specific, and thorough as you can: give the adult answer, the one suitable for your audience, even though it’s a child’s question. If you don’t know the answer, you can say you don’t know, but be prepared for the child to ask why you don’t know!

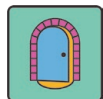
Reflect to learn and connect

When you’re done, write yourself a note: what additional details or explanations might you add into your writing? Do you need to do any more research to help you answer possible readers’ questions?

Explore related exercises

Believing/Doubting, Six Degrees, They Say + I Say

27.7 Off on a Rant

*Define your goal*

Use this exercise to generate energy, emotional connection, and specific details related to a potential topic or subtopic for a writing project.

Background

A *rant* is a stage of thought and communication part way between a simple opinion (“Yes, they are.” “No, they aren’t.”) and a focused, educated argument (“The most significant causes of obesity in children under 10 are . . .”). In everyday life, most of us have subjects we are likely to “go off on a rant” on without much provocation: the way other people drive, politics, an annoying person at work, a frustrating roommate or relative, or the poor customer service from a phone company. When we rant, we usually do two things: we speak *personally with energy*, and we go on *at length with details*: “And then they said . . . which reminds me of another time when . . .”

Take action

“Go off on a rant” about your current topic or issue: Begin by writing about what is most bothersome, harmful, confusing, stressful, difficult, or misunderstood about it, for you, for your field/profession, or for people affected by the situation. If you don’t yet feel a deep, personal attachment to the issue, try to take on the persona of someone who does, just for the sake of the experiment. Give as many vivid, specific examples as you can of what the problems are: you can prompt yourself by beginning some sentences directly with “For example, one time ____.” Keep writing for at least 15-20 minutes.

Use a “freewriting” protocol: Don’t worry about spelling or sentence structure, and keep writing as fast as you can. If your initial rant leads to a slightly different rant on a related topic that makes you even *more* engaged in the problem, follow the new lead, but remember that you’re ranting with details, not just shouting out one opinion after another.

Aim for high energy: Try to rant at least until you hit on the part of the issue that resonates most with you—“But you know what *really* gets to me? The part where . . .”—and then stay there with as many examples as you can.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you finish, take a minute to look back to see if your rant opened up any new avenues or focal points. Since you were tapping an emotional as well as an intellectual response, you might be able to complete a sentence like this to help you (re)start your writing: “Although many people looking at ____ would focus on ____, a more pressing/interesting/relevant problem is ____.”

Explore related exercises

3D Mind Map, Assumption Inspection, Subtopic Generator

27.8 Scenarios



Define your goal

Use this exercise to start, restart, or focus your inquiry or writing by vividly imagining people or situations that could be affected by issues you are inquiring or writing about.

Take action

Choose one of the scenario types listed below, and write a rich paragraph describing as many details as possible about it, as if you were looking at a snapshot or a short movie scene: the setting (including sounds and smells), what has happened just before and/or what is just about to happen, the people present and absent (their ages, occupations, cultural backgrounds, and goals or needs), and any relevant thoughts, emotions, and or dialogue among them.

Try not to create a stereotype, since that will tempt you to generalize rather than dig for interesting details. If you imagine a family having dinner, don't just give them one son and one daughter; if you imagine a workplace, don't just imagine straight middle-class white men in ties.

- **Issue or problem scenario:** Imagine a scene in which the effects of what you are writing about are clearly evident. When you decided to write about this issue, or when you start to think about it as taking place in the real world, what kind of setting and people enter your mind's eye?
- **Solution or field-test scenario:** Imagine a scene in which you or someone has finally been able to implement a possible intervention, field test, change in policy, or solution. When you think about the results of your best-case scenario, what precisely are you envisioning as one reasonable possible outcome in one place and/or for one person or group?
- **Opponents or deciders scenario:** Imagine a scene in which two or more people who oppose or resist your argument or perspective—or two or more people who have the power to make changes to help you—are having an ordinary moment in their day. When they're not directly focused on your issue, what *are* they focused on? What do you see going on around them that is part of their daily world?

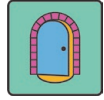
Reflect to learn and connect

When you've finished writing your scenario, write yourself a note: what are two or three details you included that you could write more about, research more about, or use to help you frame your arguments more carefully as you work on your project? How so?

Explore related exercises

Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Counterargument Generator, Seven Generations

27.9 Seven Generations



Define your goal

Use one of the exercises below to begin generating ideas about your project or issue, or to generate additional or refreshed ideas at any point in a writing process, without worrying about evaluating or organizing those ideas.

The exercises are ordered from those providing less structure to those providing slightly more structure:

- Freewrite
- Video/Audio Log
- Loop
- Macro/Micro
- Lists
- Bubble Mapping
- Draw it

Background

Go easy and go long: Generational writing (or spoken journaling) has two key principles: in order to create a lot of ideas at one sitting, or to get unstuck when you feel stuck, you need to go easy and go long.

- To go easy, you need to set aside your internal censors and lower some of your picky standards: don't worry about whether your sentences are complete, your words are precisely the right ones, your structure makes sense, or your commas are in the correct places. It's ok to veer onto a tangent, change your mind, or leave part of an exercise underdeveloped.
- To go long, you need to commit to adding more to any one exercise than you think you need: spend a full 20 or 30 minutes without being distracted by a phone or social media site, and keep generating material into a third or fourth level so that you get past what you already knew you knew about your topic/issue into what you didn't really know you knew or were interested in about it. Keep asking yourself: **what else?**

Take action

Freewrite just to gain ideas: Freewriting (sometimes called “brainstorming”) is the most open-ended type of generational writing, designed primarily to increase

your overall fluency as a writer. In true freewriting, you don't even focus on a particular writing project; you simply take out a pen or open a document and begin writing about whatever you are thinking about that day or hour. Your goal is to bring your brain back into a writing mode of any sort, so that when you go back to work on your project, you'll be warmed up and more prepared to make a contribution. In project-based freewriting, you could instead choose to begin writing with a sentence or question that currently interests you about your topic or issue: "I think ___ is important because ____." Either way, you then need to keep writing as quickly as you can for a full 15-20 minutes or more (set a timer if it helps). Remember that your goal here is *generation* of ideas, not the creation of perfect designs.

- As you write, keep writing. Don't pause and stare into space: If you can't think of anything to write, write the sentence "I can't think of anything else to say" several times until you come up with a more interesting sentence to write—even if the new sentence feels off-topic from where you were previously.
- Don't cross words out or delete them; don't look up a synonym or worry about punctuation. If you need to freewrite in a language other than English so that you have better access to your ideas, you can try that.
- If you run out of things to say about one idea, you can just move on to the next one: "Anyway, another thing I wanted to say is . . ."

Reflect to learn and connect

When your time is up, you can look back and underline or highlight two or three phrases that you like the best.

Take action

Start a video log, audio journal, or interview to talk it out: If you want to generate material but the thought of another empty page or blinking cursor wears you out, you might try using your phone or computer to record yourself in a spoken "freetalking" exercise, either audio or video. Make sure you're ready to capture at least 10-15 minutes' worth of your think-aloud ideas (set a timer!). For some people, the protocols for freewriting are enough to get them started: begin with a few sentences about what is on your mind (perhaps related to your writing project), and *keep talking*, not worrying about whether the ideas are exactly relevant or the sentences are correct and precise, until your timer runs out.

- Don't pause or censor what you say; if you get stuck, say, "I can't think of anything to say about ___" several times until you start to think of something else you could say that's at least a little more interesting to you.
- If you're feeling awkward, you can imagine you're being interviewed as an "expert in the field" or a first-hand witness, and the interviewer has just

asked you a basic question about how or why you got interested in an area, or what you think is important for others to know about it. If you run out of things to say, imagine the interviewer saying, “That’s fascinating; what else can you tell us about it?” so that you can respond, “Well, another thing is . . .” and keep talking.

Reflect to learn and connect

When your time is up (and 10 minutes talking to yourself can seem like a long time!), stop. You can immediately replay the recording and copy down a few ideas that you liked best—or if it feels odd to listen to yourself right away, you can come back in a while and, with a little more emotional distance, treat your recording like any other source you might find online that may have a few good ideas you can take away.

Take action

Write in loops to gain more focus: Looping is like freewriting with a tour guide added in to point out exciting attractions, so you can give yourself a little more direction. For this approach, you will need at least 20-30 minutes and a timer that you can set to go off (so you’re not distracted by constantly checking the clock). Looping resembles freewriting, though most often writers use it to try to focus on a specific topic rather than to write about whatever is on their mind at the moment.

- **Write:** Set your timer for 5 or 10 minutes and write about your topic or issue, using the freewriting rules described above: no stopping, no worrying, no fixing, no deleting. Produce as much writing as you can.
- **Refocus:** Stop when the timer goes off. Reread what you’ve written, and underline or highlight a short phrase (maybe 4-8 words) that you think best gets to the heart of what you want to share with your audience.
- **Write:** Copy that key phrase on a new line, take a minute to focus on exactly what it suggests and what questions it raises, reset your timer for 5-10 minutes, and write what now comes to mind that is connected exactly to your key phrase.
- **Repeat** at least twice more: Choose a key phrase from the most recent stage of writing you completed, copy it, focus on it, and write about it for 5-10 minutes. At each stage, you should be generating not just a collection of ideas, but an increasingly focused group of ideas and sentences.

Reflect to learn and connect

When your time is up, look back through all your stages and underline or highlight any additional sentences you like the best.

Take action

Move from macro to micro to gain perspective: A more specific version of looping uses a micro-to-macro structure or a macro-to-micro structure. The basic expectations of freewriting and looping apply: you will need at least 20-25 minutes, and you will need to write as much and as quickly as you can, without worrying about perfect sentences or precise relevance from one thought to the next.

- **Micro to macro:** Choose a *very tiny* single element related to your issue, topic, or project: one person/place/object, one day or moment, one small fact or statistic, even a single word.
 - **Write:** Set your timer for 5-10 minutes, and write as much as you can about what you know or what you wonder about that tiny element, just the element in itself.
 - **Refocus:** Widen your perspective just a little bit. Don't go from one frog to the whole biosphere, or one failed product to the overall gross domestic product measurement of the US. Instead, consider adding just one more element (a second kind of frog), or a second kind of perspective (historical, regional, financial) to "ripple outward" just one level from your first vision. Set your timer for 5 minutes; write down what you've added; and then write as much as you can about your slightly larger picture. What new conflicts or opportunities come to mind, and what questions or issues could you pursue?
 - **Repeat** at least twice: Make the scene just a little larger each time, set your timer for 5 minutes, and write quickly and without censoring what you write.
- **Macro to micro:** Choose a *really large aspect* of your issue: a philosophical question, the big disagreement, the most famous scenario, the angle that affects thousands or millions of people, the ultimate problem.
 - **Write:** Set your timer for 5-10 minutes and write about this big issue: How does it have so much impact? What do you know or still wonder about this macro-level scene?
 - **Refocus:** Narrow your perspective just a little bit. You could focus in on a region, group, or historical period; focus just on causes or just on effects; or focus just on one argument, theory, or solution. Set your timer for 5 minutes: what do you see when you look at this aspect more closely?
 - **Repeat** at least twice: Narrow the focus a little bit further each time, aiming to move your attention to local or individual problems, places, moments, or even single objects or words. Set your timer for 5 minutes, and write quickly without censoring what you write.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, look back over what you've written and underline or highlight your best sentences.

Take action

Write a list (or two) to cover as much ground as possible: Generative writing does not need to involve sentences. In the simplest form of idea generation, all you need to write is a list of words or phrases that you associate with the issue or topic you're interested in.

- **Go extremely easy:** Allow yourself to add anything at all to your lists, even if some items initially seem silly, inappropriate, or even impossible.
- **Go extremely long:** Your lists need to have 20, 30, or maybe 50 or more items on them. (If you write a list of 5 or 10 items, you'll only be writing down what you already know that you know, and so you won't generate anything new to help yourself out.) You might want to set a timer and keep listing for 20 or 25 minutes, just as you would with a more sentence-based exercise.
- **Use a targeted list to deepen your focus:** Instead of simply free-associating any words or phrases about your issue, set yourself some targets or goals: make a list of "Possible solutions," "Sensory details," "Character motivations," or "What's missing from the picture." By challenging yourself to create a long list where you originally imagined only a few options, you generate new opportunities for inquiry and development.
- **Use comparative lists to jump-start your analysis:** Line up a few targeted lists to create a comparison: the most common of these is a "Pro" list matched with a "Con" list to present arguments for and against a proposal. However, you might get more mileage out of a three-way or four-way comparison that breaks open any black-and-white thinking a writer could get trapped in: list solutions for Local, Regional, and National organizations to consider; list what happens Before, During, and After a key event; list the possible effects of a decision on four different groups of stakeholders such as Teachers, Students, Parents, and Community Members.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're all out of ideas, or your timer goes off, go back and circle several items that you might want to explore further. (You can also draw some lines or circles to connect similar items, or write yourself some sentences about trends or patterns you see emerging in your list.)

Take action

Draw a bubble map to grow beyond preconceptions: Sometimes a list or even a collection of lists is too linear: you want to spread out on a page in multiple directions to grow your ideas across multiple connections. (See [Six Structures](#) for ways to use a similar approach to focus on organization and relationships, and see [3D Mind Map](#) for ways to use this approach to move toward analysis and insight.)

As with a list, you need to *go extremely easy* and *go extremely long*. You need to allow yourself to add anything at all to your map, even if some items initially seem silly or inappropriate, and you need to spread out: six or seven idea-circles around every key idea, and four or five rings or layers of circles expanding out from the middle. The first one or two ideas you think of at each point will be what you (and many other people) already know; your more interesting generations will come as you push yourself to add more ideas onto your page or screen.

- **Set the context:** Draw or insert a circle and write/type your main topic inside it. (In a word processing document, you can just insert text-boxes without circles. If you use a prefabricated mapping tool, look for one that isn't just top-down or left-right, because your ideas may need to go in multiple directions.)
- **Identify some connected elements:** Around that circle, draw at least 5-7 lines leading to new circles; inside those secondary circles, write ideas, questions, or descriptors that are related ideas or subtopics—even if they feel only distantly related—to the main circle.
- **Repeat at least two more layers:** Around many of the secondary circles, draw several lines leading to new circles. Focus on *unexpected* ideas that might not have occurred to you before. Ask yourself, “who, what, where, when, why, how many, what kinds, who cares?” and especially, “what *else* might connect?” Try to generate as many ideas as you can, even if you think they might not be exactly right for your project. (You don't need to generate lines from every circle, or to have the same number of ideas each time.)
- **Allow your ideas to grow:** If one cluster of circles starts to capture your attention, feel free to spend more time on that area. If you need more paper, get some, or if you need to move to a new page in your document, do it: don't let your tools limit your thinking!

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, you might circle the clusters that caught your attention most, and/or write a few sentences about trends or patterns you see emerging on your page(s).

Take action

Draw images to use alternate parts of your brain: You can generate ideas for writing by combining words with images, or even by moving away from words altogether. You can bring out your paints and glitter pens, or you can just do simple sketches. As long as you can recognize what you are drawing for yourself, your work will be successful. Your goal is still to notice and note down aspects of your topic or issue that you might not have seen before, or seen in a particular way, and you need to invest enough time and playfulness—to go long and go easy—to allow yourself to generate truly new ideas.

- **Draw literally:** In some cases, you can generate ideas by drawing (part of) something related to your writing. Perhaps you can draw a single scene related to a key event or solution. Or you can draw a common setting, a tool or object, or someone performing an action that is relevant to your writing.
- **Draw imaginatively:** You might also consider drawing a pair or series of pictures: one representing the current state and one representing what you hope or recommend for the future, or scenes representing the views of different stakeholders. Your goal as you draw is to consider the details you need to add and the relationships among the parts of your picture: even if a scene is vivid in your mind, reproducing it on paper can make you more aware of what is present and absent, and how different parts work together.
- **Draw metaphorically:** If you try to imagine your topic or project as if it were a familiar object—a house, a town, a human body, a bicycle, a tree—you can sketch that object and then begin to label its parts as if they were subtopics or parts of your writing project. What might be the “front door” of your proposal, the “head” of your essay, the “side streets” of your memoir? Try to add more details as you go: give the town a supermarket and a school, or give the house several bedrooms and a living room with several couches, and ask yourself what ideas these could represent.
- **Draw abstractly:** You can use circles, squares, stars, and wavy lines to help you create a map or diagram of what the pieces of the problem are, or what the pieces of the solution might be. What ideas are close to one another, and what ideas are farther away? Which are larger or smaller?

Reflect to learn and connect

When you’ve finished your sketch or drawing, add some circles or arrows to note the key features that you want to write about, and/or write yourself a few sentences about details or trends that you noticed while you were drawing.

Explore related exercises

Elevator Speech, Six Structures, Subtopic Generator

27.10 Shrunken Draft



Define your goal

Use this exercise to minimize your current draft so that you can gather a sense of what its core elements are, the better to prioritize, rearrange, and/or refocus the overall document.

Take action

State your purpose: Without looking back at your document, write 2-3 sentences that explain what you most want to convey to your audience or persuade them to believe or act on.

Shrink your document: Use one of the strategies below to condense your current document to a collection of sentences, about one sentence per paragraph or one per every two paragraphs.

- **Extraction version:** Take out a blank page or open a new document. If you'd like, you can have a copy of your current draft, print or on screen, nearby so you can glance at it.
 - Write out, in informal language, a short sketch of your document: if it is under 2000-3000 words, you will probably write one sentence for every paragraph or so in the original.
 - Do not reread and copy the original: just glance over if you need to so you can remind yourself what comes next. Remember that you're not including all the details, just the main arguments or key explanations ("Then it's important to know how the candidate selection process concludes").
 - Do not add sentences to describe paragraphs that do not yet exist in your draft. Do add in the statement of purpose you wrote earlier.
- **Evaporation version:** Open your document on your screen, and save a new copy of it. Delete all but one sentence of every paragraph—the sentence that best conveys what that paragraph is about. Do not add any sentences to sum up paragraphs or convey information that is not already present in your draft. Do add in the statement of purpose you wrote earlier.

Analyze the bones: Read your shrunken draft out loud to yourself, and write yourself several notes about what you notice about it.

- **Check your focus:** Which of the points you most want to convey to your readers seem underrepresented or absent? Which if any points are repeated and might be deleted or condensed? Are there any other points you would like to be more direct about, or to provide more evidence for?

- **Check your structure:** If you were going to rearrange these points, what might be one alternate arrangement? If you were going to split one of these points into two parts, which one might you split, and how?

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude with some suggestions to yourself for revising the full-scale draft: what do you want to try when you go back to it?

Explore related exercises

Explode a Moment, Subtopic Generator, Ten Directed Revisions

27.11 Six Structures



Define your goal

Use this exercise to begin creating structures that can organize your project at the beginning, or to generate additional structural options at any point in a writing process, without worrying about evaluating or following through on all the ideas you identify. The six options here are presented from *strictly structured* to *more loosely structured*:

- Outline
- Tree
- Bubble Map
- Classification
- Timeline
- Comparison Grid

Background

Go easy and go long. Organizational writing has two key principles: in order to create a lot of options at one sitting, or to get unstuck when you feel stuck, you need to go easy and go long.

- **Go easy:** Set aside your internal censors and lower some of your picky standards. Don't worry about whether the ideas in a cluster are exactly parallel, or your responses repeat themselves sometimes.
- **Go long:** Commit to adding more words or levels to any one exercise than you think you need. You should write quickly and spend at least a full 20 or 30 minutes without being distracted by a phone or social media site. Keep representing material into a third or fourth tier at each stage, and always look for cross connections or opportunities for reorganizing, so

that you get past *what you knew you knew* about your topic/issue into *what you didn't really know you knew or were interested in* about it. Keep asking yourself: how else could this work?

Take action

Outline: You can use pen(cil) and notebook paper, but also consider using your word processor's automatic outlining setting for ease of re-ordering, or alternately consider using colored markers or bright sticky notes on large paper to engage your visual brain. Although you may have learned rules or steps for making a traditional outline, such as "start at the beginning and work to the end" or "every 'A' must have a 'B,'" you can ignore these steps and write quickly and easily when you are writing to learn.

Start anywhere! You may start by listing out all the main points you can think of; by naming one major point and listing all the sub-points of that idea you can think of; by writing your main argument at the top and your main conclusions at the bottom; or any other easy starting point. Sometimes you can leave an "A" all by itself; other times, you will write "A" through "M" or even "Q." (If you get to "Q," you might consider refocusing your whole project right on that sub-issue!)

- **Use more words:** In order to pull information out of your brain and onto the page, use long phrases or even sentences whenever you can. For instance, under the header "rebuilding downtown after the hurricane" don't just write "poor" and "middle class" but write "poor people will need subsidies?" and "middle class households will file insurance claims" to remind yourself what you might investigate.
- **Use more categories** at each stage than you think you'll need: more main topics, more sub-topics, more sub-sub-topics (go ahead and add "rich people: will they even come back?" and "what happened to unhoused or food-insecure people?" to the downtown rebuilding list, even if you're not sure you'll investigate those issues). The extra lines may trigger you to think of an angle that's more interesting than you had originally considered—or they may simply help you create a fuller picture for your readers.

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish by jotting down a few sentences identifying the key points or core sub-topics that you know you want to develop for your project and explaining what the best order for those points seems to be for now.

Take action

Tree: If you like the orderly concept of an outline, but keeping track of 1's and 2's and A's and B's isn't for you, you might prefer to work with a tree—or to use

one of your word processor's line-and-box charts (Microsoft Word calls this "SmartArt").

- **Start simply:** On paper, you might want start in the middle (perhaps arranging a sheet in wide or "landscape" orientation) with the tree on its side growing from left to right. Add your first line or box, the trunk, naming your main issue, question, or argument. (Your tree can also grow from the top or from the bottom.)
- **Branch out** from that start point with several lines to connect to your major issues, and branch out from each of those to sub-topics, and so on. Write quickly, without worrying about correctness.
 - Use any order, and remember that you do not have to spend equal amounts of time on all of the parts of the tree. Indeed, you might discover that one branch has enough ideas to support your project all by itself.
 - Use more words: if you're writing about Hegel's philosophy or patent-office applications, you may need to leave enough space on your branches or in your boxes for full intelligent phrases that capture your whole thought, such as "phenomenology of spirit" or "affirmative act by inventor."
- **Go to the smaller branches:** Challenge yourself to create more sub-topics and more sub-sub-topics than you think you'll really need. Before you leave a branch, ask yourself: can I think of any other issue? Do any of these issues have questions or sub-issues I can think of that interest me? What about sub-sub-sub-issues? Most people agree that the great beauty of trees lies in their leaves and blossoms, far out away from the trunk: push your thinking all the way to the tips.

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish by jotting down a few sentences identifying the key points or core sub-topics that you know you want to develop for your project and explaining what the best order for those points seems to be for now.

Take action

Bubble map: If you want the structure of a tree but you want more freedom to connect in multiple directions, you can create a bubble-map, mind-map, or cluster chart. You can draw with pencil on paper (or use colored pencils or markers, or use colored sticky notes), or use the mapping function of your word processor, or search online for a free mind-mapping program. (See [Seven Generations](#) for ideas about how to use this mapping approach in a more generative way, or [3D Mind Map](#) for ideas about using bubble-mapping to

generate deeper analysis or insight.)

- **Set the context:** Draw or insert a circle and write/type your main topic inside it. (In a word processing document, you can just insert text-boxes without circles. If you use a prefabricated mapping tool, look for one that isn't just top-down or left-right, because your ideas may need to go in multiple directions.)
- **Identify the main subtopics:** Around that circle, draw at least 5-7 lines leading to new circles; inside those secondary circles, write ideas or questions that can serve as subtopics to the main circle. Try to imagine how your issue is made up of many smaller pieces: what steps, causes, effects, people, problems, or solutions catch your attention? You might ask yourself, "who, what, where, when, why, how many, what kinds, who cares?" or especially, "What else has an impact?"
- **Use more words:** You may be writing about complex issues such as the problems of genetically modified agriculture or the challenges of water conservation, and so you'll need to leave space to use sentences or long phrases such as "resistance from organic farmers" or "strategies for conservation in high-tech electronic manufacturing" to describe your exact ideas.
- **Narrow your focus:** Around many of the secondary circles, draw several lines leading to new circles with subtopics: again, try to focus on the *smaller parts* that contribute to each secondary issue.
- **Repeat at least two more layers:** Try to generate as many sub-issues, and sub-sub-issues as you can, even if you think they might not be exactly right for your project. If one cluster of circles starts to capture your attention, feel free to spend more time on that part of the map. If you need more paper, get some, or if you need to move to a new page in your online document, do it: don't let your tools limit your thinking.

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish by jotting down a few sentences identifying the key points or core sub-topics that you know you want to develop for your project and explaining what the best order for those points seems to be for now.

Take action

Classification: Your ability to classify what you see serves as a core survival strategy: these plants are edible, those aren't; these animals will try to kill you, those won't. Being able to classify and reclassify elements of the issues you're investigating for your writing task can also be a survival strategy, because the first way you think about organizing your project might not be the best way to present it to your readers.

- **Identify possible subsections:** As you think about classifications—which we often consider as “kinds of ___” or “types of ___” or “parts of ___”—you might want to consider the following possible ways to break out your issue: Time periods, locations, important people or groups of people affected, possible causes, possible effects, recommendations or goals, questions to pose, the 5 best/worst ___, the 4 most/least important (or surprising) ___, overlooked points, connections or patterns, personal favorites. You might set each list out in parallel columns:

Category A	Category B	Category C	Category D
item/idea	item/idea	item/idea	item/idea
item/idea	item/idea	item/idea	item/idea
item/idea	item/idea	item/idea	item/idea

- **Extend your lists:** Write as many items under each category as you can, even if some of them seem a bit obvious or a bit silly at first, so that you are stretching your brain and writing to learn.
- **Try adding one extra subsection:** If you created three, add a fourth, and list some ideas under it. You can either split one category into two (going from “Past/Present/Future” to “Past/Present/Near Future/Distant Future”) or find a separate subtopic (going from “Pro/Con/Don’t care” to “Pro/Con/Don’t know/Don’t care”)
- **Try at least one alternate structure.** Just as there are lots of ways to organize your heap of laundry into separate piles (by color, by how dirty items are, by which items you need for tomorrow and which can wait, by how long they will take to dry), there are lots of ways to classify elements of your issue. Instead of arranging ideas according to the “Past/Present/Future” of a problem, could you classify “Easy solutions/Medium-hard solutions/Challenging solutions” to the problem?

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish by jotting down a few sentences identifying the key points or core sub-topics that you know you want to develop for your project and explaining what the best order for those points seems to be for now.

Take action

Timeline: If you’re working with a narrative, analyzing a text in which the order of events is important, discussing a complicated process or instructions, or creating arguments that depend on knowing and explaining how actions will cause or have caused results, you may want to draft a careful timeline to help visualize the sequence of events. Your timeline may not necessarily structure your whole

project—not all documents are 100% chronological in their final presentation—but knowing the sequence clearly in your head can help you with other kinds of structures as well.

- **Start any time!** You can start your timeline at any point, and you can work forward and/or backward. Because of that option, and because you will want to push yourself toward digging for more details, you should leave yourself extra space on any page—physical or on-screen—around every incident you add, so you can write down new information later. If you need to get extra paper or add pages or sticky-notes, do so!
- **Extend beyond immediate events.** In order for a timeline to help you learn, you should push your brain in at least one of three ways beyond writing down events as they ordinarily occur to you (“this happened, then that, then the next thing”).
- **Go far:** Extend both past and future as far as possible, even if you have to begin to use your imagination because you do not have specific data.
- **Get detailed:** You should fill in the intermediary steps whenever possible: what comes between lunch and dinner, between the wind-up and the pitch, between inhaling and exhaling? Again, you may not know for sure, but trying to imagine what else could occur will help you help your reader consider additional possibilities.
- **Find alternatives:** Consider branching into alternate timelines, such as tracing different (hypothetical) causes, or considering what would happen if other choices (had) led to different consequences?
- **Use phrases and sentences** to explain moments or events: if you are describing how to grow a cell culture or analyzing the effects of divorce proceedings on adolescents, you may need room for longer phrases such as “perform filter sterilization” or “assess contributions of personality dispositions.

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish by jotting down a few sentences identifying the key points or core sub-topics that you know you want to develop for your project and explaining what the best order for those points seems to be for now.

Take action

Comparison: When you know that your project relies in some way on a basic two-part classification—you have arguments for and against a policy; you are comparing two products, performances, or services; you have to assess “before” and “after” scenarios—you can create a comparison grid to help you map out your ideas. You may already have worked with a technique like this before: now

your goal is to use advanced writing strategies to gain the most write-to-learn benefits from your work while staying organized.

- **Set your columns:** You will find it simple to set up a comparison grid on paper or screen, whether you simply divide your writing space into two columns or create a full table like this one:

Product A / Before / Pro	Product B / After / Con
Idea 1A	Idea 1B
Idea 2A	
	Idea 3B
Idea 4B	Idea 4A

- **Use the structure to spark thinking:** Both columns are important individually and as they reflect one another, so you should try to have ideas be similar from side to side. You should leave space between items if you are writing on paper, and be ready to add space or relocate lines if you are writing on screen. After all, Product A and Product B may not lead you to think the same way. You may come up with features of Product B that you didn't notice originally about A, but that apply, so you should spend separate time on your second list, not just write it as a mirror of the first. (You might also have features of A that aren't present in B, or vice versa.)
- **Build more subtopics:** Your goal in a comparison grid, as with any other structure exercise, is to consider as many sub-areas and sub-sub-areas as possible, so that you stretch your brain beyond the first five elements that you already know you know. Remember to represent each idea in fully complicated phrases or sentences: if the supporting arguments for a new community garden include "teaching children the value of patience" and counterarguments include concerns about "reduced funding for summer teen basketball league," don't just say "kids" and "sports."

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish by jotting down a few sentences identifying the key points or core sub-topics that you know you want to develop for your project and explaining what the best order for those points seems to be for now.

Explore related exercises

Lowest Common Denominator, Problem Solver Parallels, Source Synthesis Grid

27.12 Subtopic Generator



Define your goal

Use this exercise to turn up the microscope magnification on your question, issue, concern, or topic so that you can see the parts or sub-issues that comprise it, in order to focus your attention for research, paragraph development, or project-narrowing.

Take action

Divide: Choose one of the division strategies below and generate a list of 5-7 possible subtopics that fit that category. Try to make at least one or two subtopics surprising or “out on a limb”: groups or issues that are so small or overlooked or unusual that not many people might even consider them.

Sub-divide: Circle 3-4 of the new subtopics that you just created that you’re interested in. Pick **one** of them and use a category below to subdivide it even further, at least 3-5 ways.

Re-divide: Repeat Round 1 and Round 2 with a different division strategy.

Evaluate: Choose any of your new subtopics or sub-subtopics, and write a short paragraph: What images come to mind when you think about this sub-issue? What do you already know is the most interesting problem or question for this sub issue? How does it connect to what your readers know or need to know? What might you have to find out if you were going to write more about this?

- **Subdivide by time.** What happens or should happen first, second, third, and forth? Alternately, what happened a long time ago, several years ago, a few days ago, yesterday? What might happen tomorrow, in a week, in ten years? (What’s the smallest subdivision of time that will make a difference in your topic/issue?)
- **Subdivide by place.** What different locations are affected, and how are they affected differently? These may be different geographical regions (Virginia, California); different of environments (rural, suburban, urban); different nations, climates, or schools; different corners of a meadow or different quadrants of a painting. (How small can you go before two places are affected exactly the same way?)
- **Subdivide by causes or effects.** What are the various forces, events, people, laws, or actions that have led to this situation? What are the most immediate causes, the causes of those causes, and the distant causes? What will be the most immediate effects, locally and nearby, on different groups or organizations; what will be later effects, and much later effects? (Are you sure you’ve got all the interesting causes, that no other factors—time,

money, temperature, politics, personality, chance, or skill were involved? Have you considered all the effects of interest to all your readers, especially your critical or resistant ones?)

- **Subdivide by people.** Which groups of people have power to make changes, and which groups of people are affected? Consider dividing people by age, gender, occupation, or other identity. Consider formal organizations or officials; consider small groups that are often overlooked. Consider groups that were involved in the past and others that will soon be involved; consider groups that are local and ones that are distant but still affected. Might you even imagine a specific (real or hypothetical) individual, on a Tuesday afternoon?
- **Subdivide by types of ____.** You invent “types of ____” every day to organize your world: types of freeway drivers, types of cellphone users, types of dogs at a dog park, types of obstacle walls in a video game. What “types of ____” are there in your topic area: types of cell formations, types of client behavior, types of college student stress, types of sales strategies, types of coding errors?

Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, identify at least one subtopic that surprised or intrigued you, and write a note about how you could follow up to read or write more about it.

Explore related exercises

Explode a Moment, Gray-Area Finder, Three Cubes

27.13 Three Cubes



Define your goal

Use this exercise to help you generate more ideas about your topic by moving into more thorough and analytical thinking. The six-sided cube approach is designed specifically to enable you to see more than “two sides” to the issue you are writing about.

Take action

Choose a cube exercise from the list below, and explore each of the six ways of inquiring that it presents. Remember the key principles of idea-generation.

- **Go easy:** Do not worry about whether you are writing correctly or answering the question precisely the right way or staying exactly on topic, and if you run out of things to say you can write “I can’t think of anything to say.”
- **Go long:** Try to answer each part of the “cube” with at least a full sentence or two or a long list, digging down to think of all the possible ways you

can reply to that prompt. Instead of just listing one person for “who,” for instance, list everyone that occurs to you: remember, it’s not until *after* you’ve written down the obvious answers that you start to benefit from the time you spend freewriting.

Reporter’s Cube for Better Explanations: Write a sentence that explains your issue, argument, question, or goal with your current writing project. Then write at least 2-3 sentences in response to each of the six questions of the cube.

- **Who** is involved in this issue? Who has power, who is affected, who is obviously important, who might be overlooked, who are you knowledgeable/curious about, who will your readers care about, who should be contacted for more information, who else needs to be considered?
- **What** is the main idea/question/problem that you are most curious about or interested in? What will readers be most interested in? What caused it and what will it lead to? What’s controversial or fascinating about it? What’s known or overlooked about it?
- **Where** are the events related to this idea/issue, or the people most connected to it, located or most likely to be found? In what settings—countries, cities, buildings, businesses, rooms—does it become most valuable or relevant? Where is it least valuable or relevant?
- **When** did this idea/issue/question first become important? When did key events happen that readers should know about? When did you first become aware of or interested in it? When do you expect a change? When will it no longer be important/interesting?
- **Why** is this idea/issue/question interesting, important, controversial, valuable, noticeable? Why does it happen or not happen, to/with some people and not others, in some situations and not others? Why do some people support or engage with it and others don’t? Why are you writing about it, and why should readers take note?
- **How** does this idea/issue/question work, function, come into being, survive, affect people, improve or complicate our world? *How much* . . . of it is there . . . money or time will it take . . . effort will be needed? *How many* . . . people will be involved. . . parts does it have . . . steps will be needed? *How long* . . . has it taken to get this far . . . will it take to get to the next stage . . . do we have before real change is needed?

Analyst’s Cube for Wider Thinking: Write a sentence that explains your issue, argument, question, or goal with your current writing project. Then write at least 2-3 sentences in response to each of the six questions of the cube.

- **Describe** your object/idea/issue/question, or a one-person scenario related to it: give as much rich, concrete detail as you can. What exactly do you know about what this looks like, feels like, smells like, sounds like? If

you—or someone you know—had to live an hour right in the middle of it, what would that hour be like? What is the tiniest detail you can imagine, and the most powerful force involved?

- **Compare** your object/idea/issue/question, or contrast it: what is it like or not like? You can compare it to something reasonable and literal (skydiving is a little like jumping off a diving board) or you can compare it to something much more metaphorical (skydiving is like hanging in blue space waiting for the earth to come get you). Stay with the comparison for several points: exactly how are the two ideas alike and how are they different?
- **Associate** your object/idea/issue/question with anything else that you connect it to: what does it remind you of? What other people, places, events, or objects seem linked to it? What larger issues or smaller issues does it connect to? When your readers think of it, what else will they likely think of?
- **Analyze** your object/idea/issue/question: break it down and discuss its parts and how they add up to the whole. Consider what causes it or what its effects are. What are some separate qualities of it that make it better or worse than average? What features stand out, and which ones get overlooked?
- **Apply** your object/idea/issue/question: when it's "in the real world," what is it actually doing, or how might it function? Who benefits from it, now, and who doesn't? (How about in the past or in the future?) What might make it more effective, powerful, ethical, accessible, or renewable?
- **Argue** about your object/idea/issue/question: what do you want to claim about its value, its effects, its past or future, the right or wrong way to view it? What might others claim in return?

Negotiator's Cube for Expanded Problem Solving: Write a sentence that explains your issue, argument, question, or goal with your current writing project. Then write at least 2-3 sentences in response to each of the six questions of the cube.

- **Argue:** State your main argument, your main reasons for it, the main evidence or groups or stakeholders that support that argument. Why are you committed to this argument? Why should readers be committed to it?
- **Counter-argue:** State the most reasonable and most powerful core argument(s) or resistances against your argument. Give the reason(s) for it/them, the main evidence that you can guess at or might need to find, the groups or kinds of people who support this position. Imagine why intelligent people hold this position (through ignorance of facts, emotional or intellectual commitment to another view/backstory, lack of resources to make a change, etc.)

- **See people:** List as many individual people, titles of people, kinds or groups of people, or locations of people, that were/are connected to or were/will be affected by this argument as you can. Who will/would benefit from one outcome vs. another? Try to consider people unlike the ones who first occurred to you, or people who are often less visible or have less voice: people with more or less money, more or less power, older or younger, of different social backgrounds, who will also be affected, and explain how.
- **See power:** List as many people, titles of people, offices, or organizations that have the power to take some action regarding this situation as you can. Perhaps they can take personal action; perhaps they have the resources to create action on a larger scale or to foster group collaboration for problem solving. Identify what each person/group might accomplish.
- **See possibilities:** A “pro-con” argument with “two sides” assumes a limited set of options: “burgers vs. pizza” for dinner assumes there’s no option for tofu stir fry; “environment vs. jobs” assumes that there are no jobs in the environmental energy industry. Look for at least two or three ways to increase the possibilities in your original pro-con, even if you have to invent something that isn’t quite real or take a risk you’re not certain is worthwhile: what if there were (somehow) more time, more funding, more space, more people, more compromise, more choices, better technology, more collaboration, less pressure to change everything at once? What “third side” might one of the people you described above offer?
- **Create a winning vision:** What might a win-win scenario look like? In a “pro-con” argument, the goal is often to subdue your opponent at all costs; in a negotiation, the goal can be to create a long-term solution in which the most possible people get closest to their needs and values. Describe at least one scenario or argument different from your original claim that could allow multiple groups or stakeholders to believe that they had gained something of value from the solution or change that had been achieved.

Reflect to learn and connect

As you finish your cube, take a few minutes to write yourself some notes. Which of your sentences gave you new ways to consider your issue and your writing project? Which suggested lines of inquiry you might need to investigate further? What’s one way you might revise your main argument or thesis to reflect your new awareness?

Explore related exercises

3D Mind Map, Expand and Narrow, Question Ladders