

FROM BRAINSTORMING TO OUTLINING

You have some idea of the subject you'll write about; you've done some initial research. What's next? How do you figure out what to write? How do you figure out your thesis or what additional research you need? There are many prewriting techniques that can help you, but here are three steps to get you going: brainstorming, clustering, and outlining.

BRAINSTORM – Brainstorming is a process of thinking freely, creatively, without worrying about form or appearances or even good sense. As a prewriting technique, brainstorming usually means writing down associated thoughts just as they come up, without much regard for how they relate to each other or even whether they're appropriate to include in your paper.

WHY? You can brainstorm to help you consider and choose a subject for your paper, or—after you've done some thinking and research into your subject—you can brainstorm to record and begin sorting through your information and ideas.

HOW? In the example that follows, you have chosen a general topic and done some initial research but don't have a thesis statement yet. Your brainstorming notes would probably be hand-written and not in any particular order, and would record your questions, keywords, and subtopics from your thinking and reading so far.

EXAMPLE: FIREARM VIOLENCE: What contributes to it? What would reduce it?

Firearm (f/a) possession, how many people
and what types of f/a out there?

Suicide, homicide, unintentional shooting

Ethnic differences in f/a violence rates?

Socio-economic differences?

Influence of media, esp. violent video games

Public policy: prevention/intervention strategies?

Gun safety technology

National gun registry

Role of National Rifle Association (NRA)

Security of storage

F/a training

Access laws: carry laws; background checks;
ban on assault weapons, large magazines

High-risk locations?

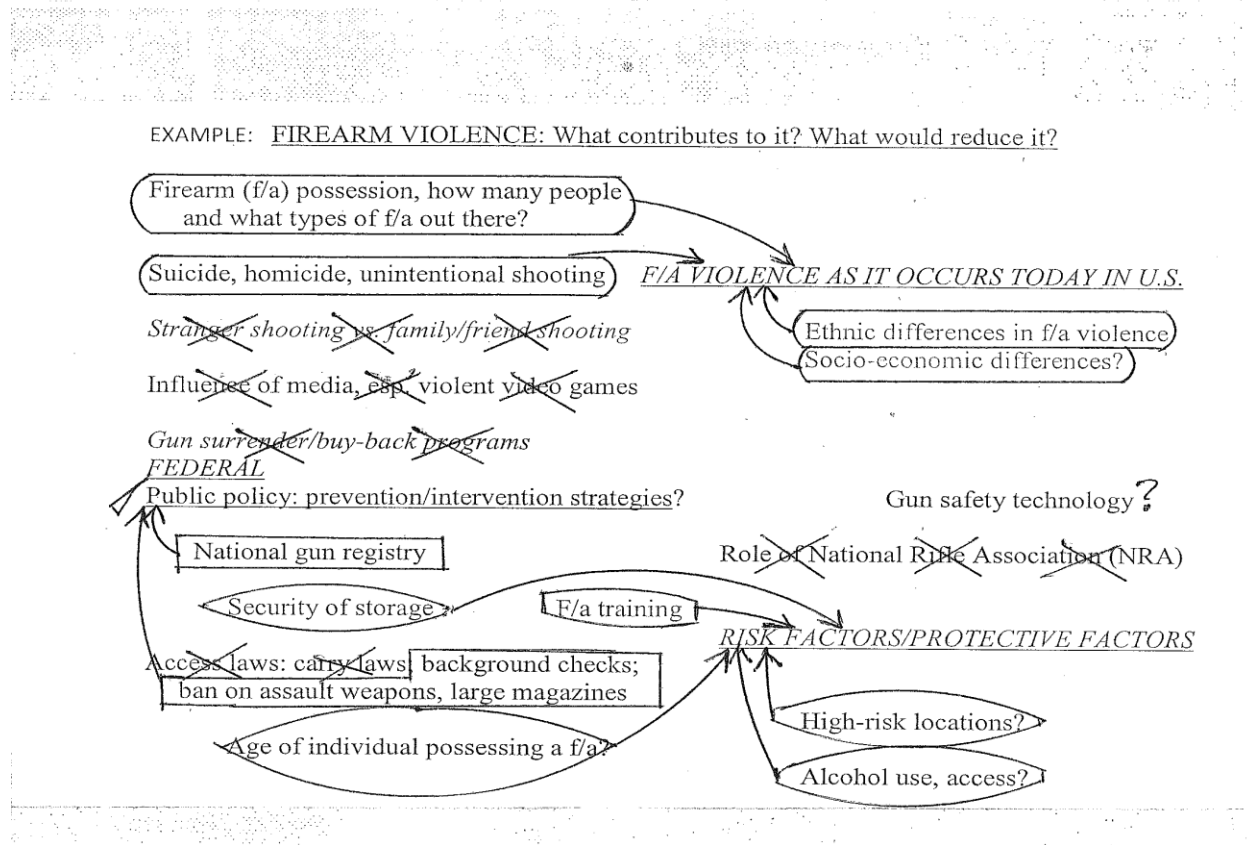
Age of individual possessing a f/a?

Alcohol use, access?

CLUSTER – The next step is clustering, in which you begin to visually relate your ideas to each other and choose to go forward with some and leave others out.

WHY? With the technique of clustering, you organize your thoughts and clarify your focus. This process may highlight additional research you need to do.

HOW? You can draw circles and lines and arrows on your brainstorming notes to group related points together. As you do this, add category headings for the points you group together. Add any additional points that come up (New text is in italics below.). Strike out topics you decide to exclude.



OUTLINE – At this point, you should be settling on the main idea that drives the whole paper and writing this idea down in a thesis statement. Reflection on your material helps you define your thesis, and the thesis helps you figure out how to organize your material. Once you have a thesis, an outline is a great way to clarify how the elements of your paper will fit together.

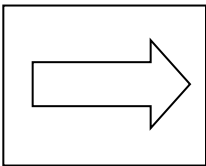
WHY? An outline organizes your ideas and information. It gives you a map for the writing of your paper.

HOW? Arrange— in a meaningful sequence—your main points, the sub-points that flesh out the main points, and the evidence that supports the sub-points. In an outline, we distinguish between the general and the specific:

- Labels and indentations indicate order and relative importance.
- Sections and sub-sections reflect logical relationships.
- Topics of equal generality appear in parallel headings.

EXAMPLE: FIREARM VIOLENCE: What contributes to it? What would reduce it?

- I. Introduction
THESIS STATEMENT: To slow the death and destruction caused by firearm violence in the United States, the federal government should adopt universal background checks and a ban on large magazines.
- II. Firearm (f/a) violence in the U.S. today—Report rates and trends.
 - A. Incidence of f/a possession
 1. Who owns f/as?
 2. What numbers and types of f/as are out there?
 - B. Suicide, homicide, unintentional shooting
 - C. Ethnic and socio-economic differences in f/a violence
- III. Risk factors/protective factors—Assess statistics and research.
 - A. Security of storage of f/a
 - B. F/a training
 - C. High-risk locations
 - D. Alcohol use, access
 - E. Age of individual possessing f/a
- IV. Prevention/intervention strategies—Critique federal policy proposals.
 - A. Universal background checks and sale records
 1. Pros
 - a. Promotes f/a safety...?
 - b. Enables law enforcement tracing of f/as used in crimes
 2. Cons
 - a. Constitutional privacy right for mentally ill
 - b. Cost to government and private business
 - B. Ban on assault weapons
 1. Pros
 2. Cons—Is definition of assault weapons enforceable?
 - C. Ban on large magazines
 1. Pros
 - a. No personal safety or hunting justification
 - b. Definition enforceable
 2. Cons
 - D. National gun registry
 1. Pros
 2. Cons—2nd Amendment?
- V. Conclusion/Recommendation



As always, you can get more help with these issues and techniques from a writing consultant at the Writing Center. We also offer related handouts, including “Why Should Your Essay Include a Thesis Statement?” and “Organizing Ideas & Outlining”; you can download these from the Writing Center website (<http://www.methodist.edu/writingcenter/index.htm>) or pick up a hard copy at the Writing Center.