THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE
JUDITH ANDERSON HERBERT WRITING CENTER

The "Center of Gravity" Brainstorming Technique

Once you've looked over your instructor's assignment and have completed any outside reading that may be required, try the following process, created by scholar Peter Elbow, to jump-start your thoughts.

1. Begin by writing a *possible* idea about your topic at the top of a blank page. Don't worry about being too specific—just something in the general vicinity of where you think you might be headed with your topic or subject.

2. Write for a set amount of time—10 minutes is ideal—**without stopping for anything!** Don't lift your pen from the paper or fingers from the keyboard.

3. If you come to a point when you can't think of anything to say, write "I can't think of anything to write" or the last word that you wrote over and over until something comes to you.

4. Don't worry AT ALL about correctness; that is, don't think about spelling, punctuation, or phrasing. Don't judge your ideas. Just get chunks of text down on the page. (What you write at this point will only be seen by you.)

5. The key is not to stop writing until the end of the 10 minutes. Set a timer if necessary.

6. At the end of 10 minutes, read over what you just wrote.

7. Look for a phrase, a sentence, an image, or an idea that grabs your attention, **something that feels like the most important part of what you were writing**—and hopefully something that's responsive to the topic of your paper! This is the **"center of gravity"** in your text—the "generative source of energy" that you should continue to follow while you're brainstorming.

8. Write this "center of gravity" sentence or idea at the top of another blank page. Begin another 10-minute freewrite.

9. Remember, don't stop writing—just put down whatever comes to mind, no matter what it is.

10. Pick out a new (hopefully related) center of gravity from this second round of writing, and then repeat again--for as many as three freewriting cycles.

If you've now developed a good sense of what you want to say and it's connected in some way to the assignment you've been given, go ahead and start writing your rough draft.

If you feel you need to spend some more time thinking about how your freewriting connects to your assignment, go back to the assignment sheet itself and take another look at it.

Don't forget that you can talk over your ideas with a Judith Anderson Herbert Writing Center tutor too! See https://writingcenter.utk.edu for information about how to get help at any point in your writing process.