

LUC WRITING CENTER – “GENERATING IDEAS”

How can I come up with ideas? How can I start writing if I don't know what I want to say?

Start With Questions and Tensions:

Many writers think they have to have all of their ideas in place before they begin writing. For most of us, this is a recipe for disaster—or at least for getting nothing done. Contrary to this assumption, it is often best to start by writing not what you are already certain about, but rather about what you don't know or what you have questions about. Writing expert Peter Elbow calls this stage of the writing process “cooking.”

Forms of “Cooking”

In his book *Writing Without Teachers* (originally published 1973, reprint 1998), Elbow helpfully formulates several kinds of interaction you can use to help generate ideas:

1. Interaction Between People.

Elbow writes, “*The original, commonest, easiest-to-produce kind of interaction is that between people. If you are stuck writing or trying to figure something out, there is nothing better than finding one person, or more to talk to. If they don't agree or have trouble understanding, so much the better—so long as their minds are not closed*” (49).

How to do it: Find a friend, professor, or writing center tutor to talk about your material with you.

2. Interaction Between Ideas

Elbow writes, “*One easy way to produce contrasting and conflicting ideas is just to write along, as in a ten-minute exercise, and let yourself drift in different directions. Even if you are sticking more or less to the same material, what you are writing will shift its organizing principle. Look at all your material in terms of one idea or organizing principle and then in terms of the other. Don't worry about the contradictions*” (50).

How to do it: Write your thoughts out on paper as a kind of free-write and see how well you can explain your ideas to yourself. Remember to thoroughly describe the issue or situation before detailing your solution or conclusion.

3. Interaction Between Immersion and Perspective:

Elbow writes, “*when you sum up a long set of words in to a single thought (even if you do it badly), you always find new things in the words*” (43).

How to do it: If you get stuck writing words, switch to outlining ideas. If you get stuck outlining, switch back.

4. Interaction Between Metaphors

Elbow writes, “*Interaction between metaphors is interact of the most fine-grained, generative sort. Make as many metaphors as you can. And analogies, comparisons, examples. Encourage them. Let them roll off your pencil freely. Too much. They produce interaction and cooking just as in the interaction between people or ideas*” (53).

How to do it: To help your reader understand the importance of your subject, describe an analogous situation. For instance, you could compare failing to vote in a crucial student election at a university to a congressman not showing up to vote for a vital Capitol Hill legislative act.

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Interaction Between You and Symbols on Paper

Elbow writes, “*Language is the principal medium that allows you to interact with yourself...In this way, you can entertain two thoughts or feelings at the same time or think about the relationship between two thoughts or feelings. A principle value of language, therefore, is that it permits you to distance yourself from your own perceptions, thoughts, and feelings*” (55).

How to do it: Rephrasing your own language in more formal terms helps you understand the logic of the situation you are describing and to word your opinions in a way that will convince others.

Things to Keep in Mind

These methods will work for you. But it will be difficult to try them if you don't give yourself enough time to engage in the writing process. Always make sure you leave yourself enough time for this exploratory stage and for revision and rewrites so that you can create a more polished and coherent second draft.

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