

Methods for Brainstorming an Idea

1. **“Bubble” Charting.** In the center of a blank sheet of paper, write your basic idea in as few words as possible. Draw a circle around it (a “bubble”). Think of a related idea, write it down and put it in its own “bubble.” Draw a line from the first “bubble” to the second. As you continue to brainstorm ideas, create more “bubbles” and draw lines between them and other related ideas. Don’t be afraid to draw multiple lines to express more complex relationships between ideas. You may end up seeing how, for example, your fifth idea, though related to your fourth idea, also has a direct connection to your second idea; draw another line to represent that relationship. You may need to label the lines to remind yourself what the relationship is; for example, “love” is related to “fear” through First John 4:18 (“perfect love casts out fear”). Work on the chart until you have created a complex web of connections. My son is using this method to brainstorm a novel he is writing — using sheets of newsprint that are about four feet square!
2. **Index Cards.** Many people like to write out their ideas in more detail, and index cards work very well. This is *NOT* the use of index cards that you may have been taught in school, where you carefully write out the full text and citation of a quote for use in a research paper. It doesn’t have to be neat and tidy; it doesn’t even have to make sense to anyone but you! When you have written out several ideas, label each card with its own letter, number or symbol (some people like to use symbols — ! @ # \$ % ^ & * — because letters or numbers may subconsciously influence them to put the cards in a certain order, so that they tend to ignore interrelationships). Spread out the cards and review your ideas. Write the letter, number or symbol from one card onto another to identify a relationship. You may need to write notes on the cards (maybe on the back) to help you remember the relationships.
3. **“Sticky” Notes.** I once met a technical writer by the name of Dave Young who shared this method with me — a variation on the index card technique. He puts his ideas on “sticky” notes (also called “Post-it”™ Notes), and slaps them on the nearest wall. Then he rearranges them to find the interrelationships. He calls this his “off-the-wall” approach to brainstorming!
4. **“Stream of Consciousness” Writing.** This is my favorite. I just grab a legal pad and start writing my ideas down, “talking it out” on paper. When I come to a new idea, I separate it with a couple blank lines. My notes may consist of single words, sentences, or paragraphs of varying lengths. Sometimes I will write two or three pages on a single idea. It’s not great writing, nor is it always grammatically correct, but it gets the ideas down in concrete form. When review my notes, I simply write down interrelationships in the left margin of the page.
5. **Audio Tape.** More verbal people find it helpful to start a tape recorder a talk their ideas out. Then they review their ideas as they transcribe the tape. Other people are more social, more interactive, and they know someone who is a good listener, who knows how to ask the right questions. They like to sit down over a cup of coffee and discuss their ideas with their friend — as they record the conversation.