Heuristics

DEFINITION
Heuristics are techniques that help you discover and clarify ideas. They help to “set the mind in motion, encourage thinking, stir memory, and coax imagination.”

1. **Brainstorming**: Generate ideas on a particular subject without evaluating or reviewing until after the process. Creativity and volume are the primary goals.  
   *This is a good first step to get ideas flowing especially if you worry about making sense in whole sentences or paragraphs.*

2. **Listing**: Make a list of ideas/things/experiences related to the writing assignment.  
   *This is similar to brainstorming and can also help you to organize or prioritize ideas.*

3. **Freewriting**: Write continuously for 5-10 minutes about a specific topic without worrying about grammar, punctuation, spelling, or how your ideas sound. Remember to keep the pen moving repeating a word or phrase if you are stuck.  
   *This is a good warm up or can help you to develop an essay. (See Freewriting and Looping handout.)*

4. **Looping**: Read over what you’ve written in your freewrite and look for a “hot spot” — an especially interesting or key idea in your writing. Now, write that idea — word or phrase — at the top of a blank sheet of paper, and freewrite again.  
   *This is especially helpful for developing specific examples or explaining ideas more clearly and fully. (See Freewriting and Looping handout.)*

5. **Clustering**: Write a key word related to your assignment, discussion or freewrite in the center of a sheet of paper (or on the chalkboard). Draw a circle around it, add small branches around the circle with more specific related ideas written on each branch.  
   *This is good if you are visually oriented. It is a particularly good technique to use when starting a paper because it can help you decide what to write about a topic, see the relationship among ideas, organize a first draft, and come up with new ideas.*

6. **Cubing**: Look at your topic from six different sides by using freewriting or discussion.  
   - Describe it. Look closely and tell what you see.  
   - Compare it. What is it similar to? Different from?  
   - Associate it. What does it remind you of?  
   - Analyze it. Tell how it’s made. What are its parts? What is it a part of?  
   - Apply it. Argue for or against it.  
   - Place it. In what settings do you find it?  
   *This helps you to develop specific aspects of an essay, enriching the argument and making the essay more interesting to read. (See Cubing handout.)*

7. **Branching Outline**: Choose one main idea and write it down. Write a couple points that support that main idea underneath connecting with a straight line. Elaborate on each point connecting in the same way. The outline will look sort of like a pyramid or family tree.  
   *Like clustering, this helps you to organize ideas and see how they are related to each other.*

Adapted from LAC