## Unstuck Yourself! A doc to help inspire your next great essay

### First things first

This is not altogether a step-by-step doc, but a collection of prompts, exercises, and get-out-of-your-own-way-isms to help find your next idea. Read through the whole thing before you get started, and over time, try *everything*. You may decide that [keyword brainstorming](#_hnq9s5xwzggf) followed by [freewrites](#_rf9j8b4d541h) works every time, or you may prefer starting with freewrites and using the [list of questions](#_mm34zwb6qi3p) as a prompt instead of a keyword.

If you find something helpful, drop in a comment! Got a question? Ask away! Your comments and questions will help others who use this doc.

Before you take on any of these exercises, get out of “work” mode. Writing by hand is often the best way to get out of the judgmental space of our work lives and enter into a more creative “flow” state. If writing by hand is not available to you, use whatever tool you’re comfortable with, but try changing up your location. If you normally work in a certain area of your house, try moving to the kitchen, the couch, the bed, or the backyard.

*Bonne chance!*

### Keyword brainstorming

1. Grab a piece of paper and a pen or pencil. If writing by hand is not available to you, use whatever tool you’re comfortable with.
2. Brainstorm ten keywords related to a subject or feeling that has interested you or occupied space in your mind lately or at some time in the past, or perhaps something that’s been in the news and is occupying space in the world or in a field you’re interested in. But caution: these should be very large concepts, like “sustainability,” “productivity,” “soul,” “hero,” “art,” and “honesty.” **Think BIG.**
   1. For each keyword, free associate for five minutes, surrounding the keyword with other words and thoughts that come to mind.
   2. Reviewing your free association work, focus in on one keyword that has the most interesting material around it.
   3. Looking at that keyword and its surrounding material, write down five questions related to what you’ve laid out.
3. Try the **mining** process: Looking at everything you wrote down around your first keyword, choose one of the words or phrases and spend five more minutes writing free-associative concepts and thoughts. Keep going for as long as this feels productive.
4. Do not judge yourself or stop yourself from writing something down no matter how absurd or seemingly unrelated to the initial keyword. This exercise is not about controlling the direction your notes take. Be a boat on the sea of your mind, and let the wind (your whims!) carry you.
5. Whether or not you’re writing by hand, this exercise may be more about lists than word clouds, and that’s ok! Some brains work in lists, some work in space. You may even find yourself doodling instead of writing, and that’s just fine—doodles are feelings. Just record what occurs to you or the feelings that come up as you stare at these big concept words, and don’t judge whatever it is.

### Freewrites

1. Go back to your Big Ten keywords (or something that comes up in the free-association or mining process) and pick one at random (or pick the one you’re drawn to the most—hey, look at that, you’re already narrowing in!). If you’re not into keywords, start with one of the [questions](#_mm34zwb6qi3p) from our list.
2. If it is available to you, write by hand using pen or pencil on paper. A laptop or other digital tool is OK too, but if it’s a work computer, try and do this in a space you don’t normally work in. Your physical space can make a big difference.
3. For five or ten minutes, write about the broad topic you chose, and don’t stop writing! (If you don’t have that much time, 1-2 minutes is better than nothing!)
   1. This is your [Madman stage](http://www.ut-ie.com/b/b_flowers.html)—do not judge what you’re writing, and do not self-edit. Just keep your pen or pencil on the page (or fingers on the keys) and keep going.
   2. Don’t worry about filling in logical gaps or adding facts and figures. Write in sentences or in phrases or in clips or in lyrics, just keep going.
   3. If you really can’t think of anything, write this: “I can’t think of anything to say I can’t think of anything to say I can’t think of anything.” Your brain will be thinking for you while you write that, and soon you’ll have something else to say.
4. Read through what you wrote and see if anything jumps out at you. If nothing interests you, repeat the process with the next keyword, and the next, until you find something. **Believe that you will.**
5. **Invisible freewriting**: If you’re writing on a laptop (or you can repeat this exercise both on paper and on your computer), try “invisible writing”: dim the screen so you can’t see what you’re typing. This can help take the pressure off and put you in a more non-judgmental (aka Madman) flow state. This is particularly helpful if you’re in an office or using a computer that you usually use for work, where you might be primed to self-edit.
6. **Looped freewriting** or **mining**: After your first freewrite, read through and pick one word, phrase, or sentence that jumps out at you, and use that as the prompt for your next five-to-ten-minute freewrite. Then look back at that one, and pick another word, phrase, or sentence, and start a new freewrite. Repeat until you find a focused idea or a topic that you could keep writing about for a long time (or as long as it is productive).
7. Remember that not finding the idea right away doesn’t mean you’ve failed. This is like the scientific process—proving that something *doesn’t* work (or won’t work *right now*) means you can move on. It’s all part of the process.

### Kinds of essays you can write

There are one million and ten kinds of essays you can write. Here is a selection that might spark some ideas.

#### Assessment

* Trying something that’s trending, or trying something that’s accepted wisdom, to see what its real effects are (“I tried this popular/obscure method to improve my memory/language acquisition and here’s what I learned”).
* Skepticism can be a good starting point for the Assessment, too (“People always say X, but I never really cottoned on. I tried to figure out what others were thinking, and here’s what I learned”).

#### Breakdown

* Taking a complicated idea and translating it for people who don’t know much about the topic—really important to visit your [reader personas](#_j2pztkh7p811) for this one!
* This could mean breaking down a complex subject, like blockchain, because you’re an expert. Or it could mean breaking down the steps to accomplish a certain task.
* Don’t worry about being too “obscure.” If you know everything about shearing sheep, that’s fucking dope. Write about it. Even if you don’t want to publish or share this, writing a lot about something you already know a lot about can help trick you into writing about your next idea.

#### Research

* Exploring the available literature on a topic and summarizing it for others—similar to the Breakdown, but with a goal of helping people understand something new (or newly understand something they think they know), rather than helping them *do* something (these can also be combined!).
* Comparisons can be a good starting point for a Research essay. How is a raven like a writing desk? How are they different?
* Relationships can be a good starting point, too. Is there a connection between these two things I love? Is there a connection between this thing I love and this thing I hate?
* Something you want to understand more.
* Something you think other people should know more about.

#### Critique

* Analyzing and thoughtfully judging something like a popular methodology or attitude (“I’m not so sure ‘10X culture’ is such a good way of looking at the world); a person’s actions (could be your own); a piece of art or law; a movement or belief system; a trend (hint: Critiques can also include predictions).

#### Invention

* Got a system you came up with that works really well? Share it with the world!

#### Profile or Interview

* A profile of an individual that helps your audience understand what they’re all about, how they got where they are, what they work on and what their expertise is, is a great place to go if you like learning about other people, and writing creatively!
  + Interviews and the research that goes into profiling someone can also be great places to start when figuring out what to write about. If you’re feeling stuck, think about a person you’d like to learn something from or learn more about. Investigating them online first might lead you down an interesting path you didn’t expect.
* An interview can provide structure to a Breakdown, Research, Assessment, or Critique; asking someone else a bunch of questions can inspire your next topic; or you can edit the interview and publish that (a Q and A is not an essay, but sometimes you just gotta publish, and this format has great utility too).

#### Personal narrative

* Using the essay to understand or describe a present problem.

#### Memoir

* Focus on an event or story from the past that reveals something about the current moment, collective or shared reality, or reveals a new problem, profound truth, or surprising conclusion. See the questions list (next) for inspiration.

### Questions to ask yourself

Keywords don’t work for everyone. Sometimes we just need to ask the right question. If you think you definitely know what kind of essay you want to write, ask yourselves these questions, too, and consider whether they can be answered in the kind of essay that interests you most. Or, start with these questions before you pick a format, because you care more about the topic than the structure. These questions can help spark that great idea.

1. What’s something I experience regularly or always that might not be shared by others?
2. Is there something I regret from my past that I want to understand, or help others avoid or recover from?
3. Is there something I usually disagree with people about? It could be as (seemingly) small as “bananas are a bad fruit” or as (seemingly) big as “I don’t believe America should have a president.”
4. What are you skeptical of that many people accept as true?
5. What do you accept as true that many people are skeptical of?
6. Something keeping you up at night? What do you think about when you can’t fall asleep? This might not be an idea, but a phenomenon (maybe when you can’t sleep, your mind goes to weird places. Where? Why? What can you investigate there?)
7. What would you write about if you could publish something anonymously in a major publication?
8. If you could write an essay that you could guarantee one person would read—someone famous, someone powerful, someone you have unfinished business with from your past, someone long gone—who would it be and what would you write?
9. Think of a strongly held belief and ask yourself how you came to believe it.
10. Think of a strongly held belief or a topic (broad or specific) that is important to you, and ask yourself why other people don’t believe it or don’t care about it.
11. Ask yourself what seems obvious to you, and try and write about that. This is a lot harder than it sounds, and it can lead to a lot of rich essays. What seems like truth to you is not obvious to others, guaranteed.
12. **Look in:** Think of something you really care about (or the topic you’ve already chosen!) and try to think down into the smallest unit of representation of this topic. For example, if you really care about the sea (BIG), what is the smallest unit of reality that represents the sea (PLANKTON, A RAINDROP, MICROPLASTICS), why the sea matters to you, or what the sea means. Try to take a nonjudgmental poetical approach to this investigation. Freewrites, lists, and drawings can all help here.
13. **Look out:** Think of something you do each day and play out its effects, and what had to be true to make it possible, as far as you can go in both directions. For example, what is the significance of having a banana for breakfast? What caused that banana to make it to your table? What happens in your life because of your choice to eat it every day? If others do this too, what happens in aggregate? Consider all the bananas and all the breakfasts and all the days.
14. **Look forward:** Think about something you really care about and ask yourself how it might change—or not change—in the future. What is likely and unlikely to happen?
15. **Particle, wave, field:** One of my favorite prompts! Similar to Look in/Look out but a bit more conceptual, this exercise is in thanks to Young, Becker, and Pike. Pick a topic you’re considering writing about, even if it’s still very broad, and answer the following:
    1. “In what ways can this issue be considered a particle, that is, a discrete thing or a static entity?
    2. How is this issue a wave, that is, a moving process?
    3. How is this issue a field, that is, a system of relationships related to other systems?”

### Audience

If you can’t think of what to write about, think about who you want to write for. (If you already know what you want to write about, still think about who you want to write for.) Creating **reader personas** can be a helpful way to focus in on an essay topic, because the more you understand the needs of the readers you care about, the better you’ll be able to write an essay that will answer their questions, address their pain points, or bring them joy; your reader will affect the kinds of questions you ask, and inform the structure and form of your essay.

There are three types of readers to consider—the **ideal reader** (who you want to reach the most), the **perceived reader** (who you think will read), and the **potential reader** (who might read but who you’re not really writing for). (After the essay is published or shared, then you’ll learn about the fourth type—the **real reader**.) Start with one imagined reader—the one you want to reach most—and then create some more reader personas, thinking about who else might find your essay, and what you’d want them to get out of it. This is a great place to come back to throughout the writing process.

With each and every one of these questions, answer it, and also answer whether this factor is important when it comes to your essay—and who you want to be as a writer.

#### Demographics

1. How old is your reader, or what is their age range? (Is age important?)
2. Where are they located? (Is location important?)
3. What industry or field do they work in, if any? (...)
4. What department do they work in?
5. What is their seniority?
6. What is their income level, if any?
7. What community are they part of, if any?
8. How do they identify racially, ethnically, nationally?
9. What is their gender identity?
10. What is their sexuality?
11. What is their political party or political belief system, if any?
12. What kind of schooling do they have, if any?
13. Do they worship? How? Where?
14. Bonus: What systems are in place that affect the way this reader moves through the world?

#### Communication

1. How does your reader communicate with other people like them?
   1. Reddit? Online forums? Text or phone calls? Social media? Linkedin? Do they use Clubhouse? Are they active on Youtube?

#### Reading and Media

1. What genres and formats is this reader interested in most?
2. What kinds of books do they read?
3. What magazines do they read?
4. What kind of TV do they watch?
5. What kind of movies do they watch?
6. What kind of news do they consume? Where do they get their news?

#### Values

1. What does this reader value? List five things.
2. Are these your values? Is there something you value that the reader might not, or vice versa?
3. Are values something this reader spends time reflecting on, or not?
4. Do their values inform this reader’s choices, or not?
5. Is this reader part of a community that shares central values, or not?
6. Is it likely that this reader spends time volunteering? What kinds of causes do they volunteer for?

#### Expertise

1. If you have a topic in mind to write about, does the reader have to be an expert in the topic, fluent in the topic, aware of the topic, or none of these?
2. If you don’t have a topic in mind, what kind of expertise does this reader have?

#### Interest, goals, and challenges

1. If you have a topic:
   1. How important is this topic to the reader?
   2. What are their goals when it comes to this topic?
   3. Is there interest in this topic urgent—do they need answers now?
   4. How much do they know about this topic?
   5. What questions do they have about this topic? (What are they most likely to google that would lead them to your essay?)
   6. What are their biggest challenges when it comes to this topic? Do they know what their challenges are?
   7. Are they reading other things about this topic right now? What?
   8. Are other areas of interest relevant to this topic?
2. If you don’t have a topic:
   1. What topics are important to this reader?
   2. What are some pain points they have?
   3. What are their goals?
   4. What challenges are they facing?

#### Receptivity

1. Based on what you’ve discovered about your reader, what [kind of essay](#_4sjt2x4zrecw) will they be most receptive to?
   1. Do they need to learn how to do something to solve an immediate pain point?
   2. Or are they curious about a subject that has no immediate use?
   3. Review the kinds of essays with your reader in mind, and narrow in on a form that makes sense.
2. What might surprise them, challenge them, or anger them, related to your topic?
3. Always: **Consider your own positionality** in relation to your ideal, perceived, and potential reader, which will help you determine how receptive they are likely to be to your essay, and whether you are writing for the right folks, or have chosen the right topic.
   1. Are you coming from a place of care and empathy for your reader?
   2. Do you care about their outcomes?
   3. Do you acknowledge where and why your reader might be mistrustful of you as a source of wisdom, expertise, experience, or truth related to this topic? Be honest.
   4. Is your goal to “educate” your reader? Are you relying on your ideal reader knowing less than you about this topic? (That’s not always bad, just acknowledge if true.)
   5. If yes to either or both of the above, try answering the Audience questions as if you were “the reader.”
      1. Consider how your experiences of life might be different from your ideal or potential reader.
      2. Consider whether the systems that structure your days and determine your choices are different from your ideal or perceived reader.
      3. What about your potential reader?
      4. Write down what your potential readers might know more about than you, related to this topic.
      5. (That doesn’t have to be a stopping point—it can be where you begin.)

### Still having trouble figuring out what to write about next?

1. **Take a walk.**
2. Seriously, take a walk if walking is available to you. Walking has been proven to increase creative ideation both during and directly after the walk.
3. Take a **drive** and talk to yourself in the car. Record it.
4. If walking and driving are not available to you, try and just spend **some quiet time** outside or otherwise away from your workspace.
5. If you’re not already **writing in a journal** for a short time every day, start. You never know what might make its way onto the page when you’re not paying attention.
6. If you already have a journal, take a look back at it and see if anything jumps out at you. A question that comes up repeatedly, an observation that you’d like to expand and explore, or something else.
7. If you’re not already doing it, keep a **small journal or notes app** open on your phone during the day (and by your sleep space at night!), where you can write scraps of thoughts, daydreams or nightdreams, and things you overhear, as well as ideas or questions you can’t pursue in the moment. This form of note-taking can be very productive when you’re looking for inspiration for your next great idea.
8. Stop thinking about it. Go **do something fun**. Do something that’s rewarding and focused and doesn’t take a lot of extraneous brain power, like knitting or puzzling, and let your mind wander. Keep a notebook nearby.
9. **Trick yourself** into writing about something you care about by just writing *period*. Moving your writing muscle, no matter what the topic, will remind you that **it isn’t actually impossible**. And who knows? What you pick could be a great topic after all. A few prompts:
   1. Do something of service to others. Write about it.
   2. Try picking up a language, trying a new tool, take the first step in learning a new instrument. Take notes on what you’re feeling as you try something you don’t know how to do or how to use. Write down what you learn.
   3. Pick a random topic you know nothing about—the history of dog breeding, what it takes to become a professional curler, the inner lives of standup comedians, [oranges](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1966/05/07/oranges-2)—and start learning about it. Write down what you learn.
   4. Think of a memory you have very strong attachment to. Write about it.
      1. Try writing down all the senses associated with that memory. Write into each sense.
      2. If someone else was present for this memory, write down what you think they thought at the time.
      3. Write about what you might be getting wrong about that person.
      4. Write about what you might be getting wrong about the memory.
10. Bring your vaguest idea to someone you trust, and talk it out with them.
    1. This can be your workshop group, your editor (hi!), your partner, or a friend or colleague you respect. It can even be someone who doesn’t talk back, like a dog or pet rock. Ask people what they think is interesting about the vague topic or idea, and ask what they would want to know about the topic or idea, what questions they would like answered. Or don’t ask them anything, just listen and wait and keep listening. If this conversation sparks anything in you (and it probably will), follow the spark.
11. Chill. **Writing is not an emergency.**
12. Be patient. Do something boring.
13. Read. Read. **Read.**
    1. Read in your genre.
    2. Read outside your genre.
    3. Re-read work that inspires you.
    4. Read work that you hate and try to articulate why.
    5. Read in the morning, and read something different in the evening.
    6. Read a cereal box.
    7. Read a magazine.
    8. Read on paper if that is available to you. Just read.
    9. When you really can’t write, you still have a page to go back to. One that’s, miraculously, already filled in.
14. Call me.

### Rachel’s Rule for Writers

Writing doesn’t have to be smart. Writing can be dumb. People are allowed to be dumb. Being dumb is how you start. Ask the most basic questions you can think of. Let being uninformed be your inspiration. Being dumb allows for discovery. Being smart allows only judgment. Don’t write to prove something. Write to learn something. **Let yourself be dumb.**

### Jack Kerouac’s Rules for Writers

When in doubt: embrace nonsense because nonsense is closest to reality. Read Jack’s 30 rules to let it sink in:

1. Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for yr own joy
2. Submissive to everything, open, listening
3. Try never get drunk outside yr own house
4. Be in love with yr life
5. Something that you feel will find its own form
6. Be crazy dumbsaint of the mind
7. Blow as deep as you want to blow
8. Write what you want bottomless from bottom of the mind
9. The unspeakable visions of the individual
10. No time for poetry but exactly what is
11. Visionary tics shivering in the chest
12. In tranced fixation dreaming upon object before you
13. Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition
14. Like Proust be an old teahead of time
15. Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog
16. The jewel centre of interest is the eye within the eye
17. Write in recollection and amazement for yourself
18. Work from pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea
19. **Accept loss forever**
20. Believe in the holy contour of life
21. Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind
22. Don’t think of words when you stop but to see picture better
23. Keep track of every day the date emblazoned in yr morning
24. No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language & knowledge
25. Write for the world to read and see yr exact pictures of it
26. Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form
27. In praise of Character in the Bleak inhuman Loneliness
28. Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better
29. You’re a Genius all the time
30. Writer-Director of Earthly movies Sponsored & Angeled in Heaven

### Finally

Once you’ve narrowed in on a topic and determined the idea you want to write about, some of these same exercises will help you flesh out the concept, the questions you want to answer, and get you started on an outline (which is just a tool to help you get started—hopefully you discover enough in the writing process that you have to update the outline you started with!). Remember, keep being dumb the whole time you write, because being dumb is the only genuine way to be.

If you’re on the verge of your next essay subject, you might be worried: *Who cares? Who wants to hear what I have to say? Just because I’m interested in this, well, I’m probably the only one.*

**Do not let your humbleness or humility become a withholding.** It’s selfish. If you care, someone else does, too. And they’re waiting for you.