

# A Collaborative Activity for Generating Ideas in the Writing Classroom

by ELISE BRITTAIN

“The scariest moment is always just before you start.” This quote from Stephen King (2000) demonstrates the struggle many students experience when they are tasked to write. They feel they lack ideas, or they believe their ideas are not good enough. Prewriting techniques (e.g., brainstorming, clustering, and freewriting) help students develop their ability to think and their confidence in generating ideas. Collaborative prewriting activities expand students’ ideas as they learn from the experiences and knowledge of their classmates. In the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, collaborative activities also provide opportunities for students to practice their English speaking skills and activate vocabulary needed to write about the topic.

## A COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY FOR GENERATING IDEAS

Below is an activity using collaborative techniques for generating ideas in the classroom; the activity has been used in an EFL university writing course. For this example, students are preparing to write an opinion essay on the following topic: “What is the most important room in the house?” (Other topic suggestions are given at the end of the article.)

### ACTIVITY SUMMARY

The objective is that students will be able to collaborate with other students to generate ideas for an essay topic and reflect on how their ideas were similar to and different from those of other students.

The technique is suitable for teenagers and adults; it is recommended for learners at

the intermediate and advanced levels. The technique can be modified for use with learners of other ages and language levels.

The materials required are sheets of paper or cards for each group “label” (in this case, the name of a room) and two sheets of paper for brainstorming/listing for each student group.

The activity should take approximately 15 to 20 minutes.

Following is a summary of the steps in the activity:

1. The full class brainstorms a list of rooms in the house.
2. Groups are assigned different rooms; each group brainstorms reasons for choosing its room as the most important.
3. Groups are reassigned a different room and brainstorm a second time.
4. Groups compare the answers of different groups and discuss similarities and differences in ideas.

### PROCEDURE

Below, the steps of the activity are presented in more detail.

- Tell students they are going to work on generating ideas for an essay topic.
- Present the essay topic: “What is the most important room in the house? Explain the reasons for your response with details.”

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- Ask the full class, “What are the main rooms in a house?” Students will provide main rooms at first (kitchen, living room, etc.). List them on the board. Ask the students, “Are there any other rooms in the house?” Add other rooms to the list (closet, cellar, etc.).
- Divide students into groups of three or four. Assign one room to each group. Have a student in each group write the name of the room on a card or sheet of paper and display it in front of the group as a label for that group. Note that if you have a large class, more than one group might be assigned the same room.
- Instruct groups to brainstorm as many reasons as they can to support the idea that the room they were assigned is the most important room in the house. They should write their reasons on a different sheet of paper—not on the paper or card that gives the name of the room. Set a time limit of two to three minutes—or a bit longer if the groups need more time to brainstorm and write.
- Circulate and make sure all students are getting a chance to offer suggestions. Provide vocabulary as needed.
- At the end of the time limit, collect the cards or pieces of paper with names of rooms and redistribute them to different groups. Have the groups (on a new sheet of paper) brainstorm reasons why the new room is the most important. Again, allow two to three minutes.
- Collect all the lists from the groups. There should now be two lists for each room (in large classes, there may be more than two lists for each room). Keep the two lists for each room together and distribute those two lists to a group that did not discuss reasons for that room. Instruct students to find the ideas from the two lists that are similar and ideas that are different. Tell students to choose three to five of their favorite ideas from those lists.
- Have the groups share with the full class some of the similarities and differences they found on the lists, along with their favorite ideas.

#### **ASSESSMENT AND FOLLOW-UP**

At the end of the activity, ask students to talk about their thought process. You might ask some or all of the following questions: Did the activity lead you to change your ideas? Were any of the ideas from other groups surprising? Do you think you would be able to come up with this many ideas on your own? Did someone have an idea that you wouldn't have thought of? Did you learn any new vocabulary during this activity?

It is important to note that prewriting activities of this type will result in better writing only if there is writing produced in the end; students still need to spend most of their time writing in order to gain proficiency in this skill. Following the collaborative prewriting activity, the next step is for students to select and organize ideas. One way of transitioning to this step is to place the lists of reasons that students generated in different areas of the room. Tell students to walk around to read the lists and choose which room they have decided is the most important in the house—the room that they would

like to write about. Students can choose any room—they do not have to write about one of the rooms they brainstormed about in their groups. After they choose the room they will write about, they should select two or three reasons from the brainstormed lists that they will include in their writing. Let students know that they can add ideas of their own that are not already on the lists.

A template of a basic outline could be used—written on the board or distributed as a handout—for students to fill in their selections and add support, such as examples or additional details. The structure of the outline should be based on the organizational structure of the essay that the teacher will assign. The outline could look something like this:

The most important room in the house is the \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

Reason 1: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Example/Details: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Reason 2: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Example/Details: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

After students fill in their outlines, they can use this organizational structure to write their ideas in paragraphs to form essays and extend their ideas with additional detail. This outline is a template that can help students become familiar with the process of organizing their ideas when they write, but as students develop their writing proficiency, they should be encouraged to try different ways of organizing and presenting their ideas.

## ADDITIONAL WRITING TOPICS

One strength of this activity is that it can be used with a variety of topics. In the example above, the topic is “the most important room in the house.” The following are prompts that could also be used in this collaborative activity:

- What do you believe is the most important problem in the world? Why is it the most important?
- Identify an empty lot or unused public space in your town. What is the best way to use this space?
- Suppose your school has received a donation of money. What is the best way for the school to spend it?
- Many parts of the world are seeing a loss of resources (such as forests and water). Choose one resource that is disappearing and discuss why it must be saved.
- What is one change or development from the twentieth century that should be remembered?
- If you decided to use a few hours each month to help your community, what is one thing you would do? Why do you think that is the best way for you to improve your community?

## REFERENCE

King, S. 2000. *On writing: A memoir of the craft*. New York: Scribner.

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