

# brainstorming: invention

*Brainstorming is a crucial step in the writing process. Invention is an ancient technique that can help you discover new ideas to write about. This handout will help you use two tools of invention: the stases and the topoi.*

## What is Invention?

In Classical times, philosophers divided the study of rhetoric—language used to persuade—into five canons or categories: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. **Invention is the art of discovering ideas.** The Latin word *invenire* is usually translated as “to find,” but it literally means “to go into.” Think of the two tools of invention, the **stases** and the **topoi**, as places where you can go to find ideas when brainstorming.

## The Stases: Where You Stand

Few things are as frustrating to watch as two people arguing *past* each other. They both think they are arguing about X, but one is really talking about Y and the other one, Z. They are arguing from two different places; in other words, they haven’t found the stasis of their argument, **that place where both speakers can stand together and discuss the same issue.**

By asking questions of stasis, you will make sure that you are standing in the same place as your audience. The last thing that you want to do is argue past your audience. There are four different stases: fact, definition, quality, and procedure.

The Stases	
Stasis	Questions
Fact	Did X happen? Is X happening? Is X an established fact? Does X exist?
Definition	What should we call X? How should we define X? How should we conceptualize X?
Quality	How important is X? How relevant is X? How justified is X?
Procedure	What should be done about X?



UNIVERSITY of MARYLAND  
THE FOUNDING CAMPUS

## Stasis of Fact

The first question you should ask yourself about any issue is whether or not you and your audience agree on the basic facts. You could ask, “Did X happen? Is X happening? Is X an established fact? Does X exist?” If your audience doesn’t agree on the facts, start your argument here.

**Example:** Let’s say that you are making the case for climate change. In this case, you could ask, “Is the earth getting warmer? Does the evidence indicate that this is a fact?” If your audience does not believe that global temperatures are changing, your first task would be to establish these details.

## Stasis of Definition

Once you have established that something indeed happened or exists, you need to agree on how to define it. You could ask, “Since X exists/happened, what should we call it? How should we define X? How should we conceptualize X?” If your audience does not agree on your definition or conceptualization of the facts, then this is where you should focus your efforts.

**Example:** Once you have established the facts—that the earth is becoming warmer—you will need to decide on how to describe what is taking place. You could ask, “Is this warming natural? Is it man-made?” If your audience doesn’t agree on your definition, you will need to build an argument that demonstrates why it is a logical conclusion based on facts.

## Stasis of Quality

After you have defined the facts, you need to agree on the importance of the issue. Ask, “Is X important? Is it relevant? Is it justified?” If your audience does not agree that the issue matters, then this is where you should focus your efforts.

**Example:** With your facts (the earth is getting warmer) and your definition (the warming is man-made) in place, you can now move on to arguments of quality or importance. Maybe your audience accepts that climate change is real and is caused by human activity but doesn’t see it as a pressing issue. This would be the time to argue about the quality of the issue.

## Stasis of Procedure

Finally, after you agree on facts, definitions, and quality, you can argue about procedure—what should be done about X?

**Example:** If your audience agrees that climate change exists, is man-made, and is important, you can then discuss what needs to be done. You could ask, “Should the government do something? Is this a job for the private sector?”

## A Note on Stasis

While your paper might make use of several stases (establishing the facts, then moving onto a definition), be extra careful to not jump past your audience. If your audience does not agree on facts, it makes little sense to talk about procedure.

# The Topoi: Places to Go for Ideas

You can also generate ideas by using the topoi—a set of questions that encourage thinking about a topic. *Topoi* is a Greek word that means “places” (think *topographical*, like a map), and ancient rhetoricians thought of them as **places where they could go to find arguments**.

Another way of thinking about this concept is to imagine a room full of jars. These jars don’t have any



Writing Center  
SMC Campus Center  
621 W. Lombard St. Room 307  
www.umaryland.edu/writing  
410-706-7725

content on their own, but they can give a particular shape to the substances that are placed in them. As you place your ideas into the topoi, they will allow you to see different shapes or forms for your argument.

Say that you have to write about mental illness but do not have a solid research question: the topoi can help you begin to generate ideas.

## Topoi of Definition

How does my audience define X?

**Example:** How do my professors and peers define mental illness?

How do I define X?

**Example:** How do I define mental illness?

How do experts define X?

**Example:** How do psychiatrists define mental illness?

How has X been defined historically?

**Example:** How has mental illness been defined historically?

What is the etymology of X?

**Example:** What is the etymology of “mental illness”?

Has the definition of X changed? If so, why has it changed?

**Example:** Has that definition of mental illness changed?

Could the definition of X change in the future? How?

**Example:** Could the definition of mental illness change in the future?

Do people misunderstand the meaning of X? If so, who? And why?

**Example:** Who misunderstands the meaning of mental illness?

Are there any other names for X?

**Example:** Are there any other names for mental illness?

Does the meaning of X depend on context?

**Example:** Does the meaning of mental illness depend on context?

What kind of thing is X?

**Example:** What kind of thing is mental illness?

## Topoi of Division

What are the specific components of X?

**Example:** What are the specific components of mental illness?



Writing Center  
SMC Campus Center  
621 W. Lombard St. Room 307  
[www.umaryland.edu/writing](http://www.umaryland.edu/writing)  
410-706-7725

How do the components of X work together?

**Example:** How do the components of mental illness work together?

How are the components of X arranged or ordered?

**Example:** How are the components of mental illness ordered?

What is the structure of X?

**Example:** What is the structure of mental illness?

What are the essential elements of X?

**Example:** What are the essential elements of mental illness?

Are there elements of X that are common but not essential?

**Example:** Are there elements of mental illness that are common but not essential?

## **Topoi of Comparison**

What is similar to X?

**Example:** What is similar to mental illness?

How is X different from ideas similar to X?

**Example:** How is mental illness different than other illnesses?

What is most like X?

**Example:** What is most like mental illness?

What is most unlike X?

**Example:** What is most unlike mental illness?

What is better than X?

**Example:** What is better than mental illness?

What is worse than X?

**Example:** What is worse than mental illness?

What is the opposite of X?

**Example:** What is the opposite of mental illness?

## **Topoi of Relationship**

What are the causes of X?

**Example:** What are the causes of mental illness?

What are the effects of X?

**Example:** What are the effects of mental illness?



Writing Center  
SMC Campus Center  
621 W. Lombard St. Room 307  
[www.umaryland.edu/writing](http://www.umaryland.edu/writing)  
410-706-7725

What is the purpose of X?

**Example:** What is the purpose of mental illness?

Who benefits from X?

**Example:** Who benefits from mental illness?

Who suffers as a result of X?

**Example:** Who suffers as a result of mental illness?

What if X is not X?

**Example:** What if mental illness is not an illness?

## **Topoi of Circumstance**

What happens before X?

**Example:** What happens before mental illness?

What happens after X?

**Example:** What happens after mental illness?

When has X happened previously?

**Example:** When has mental illness happened previously?

When will X happen again?

**Example:** When will mental illness happen again?

Is X impossible? Why?

**Example:** Is mental illness impossible? Or, better yet, is a cure for mental illness impossible?

Is there anything that prevents X?

**Example:** Is there anything that prevents mental illness?

Are there conditions that favor X?

**Example:** Are there conditions that favor mental illness?

Is there anything that can stop X once it has started?

**Example:** Is there anything that can stop mental illness once it has started?

## **Topoi of Testimony**

What do experts or authorities say about X?

**Example:** What do physicians say about mental illness?

Can X be proven?

**Example:** Can mental illness be proven?



Writing Center  
SMC Campus Center  
621 W. Lombard St. Room 307  
[www.umaryland.edu/writing](http://www.umaryland.edu/writing)  
410-706-7725

How is X proven?

**Example:** How is mental illness proven?

What do witnesses of X have to say about it?

**Example:** What do witnesses of mental illness have to say about it?

Are there any maxims or proverbs about X?

**Example:** Are there any proverbs about mental illness?

Are there any laws about X?

**Example:** Are there any laws about mental illness?

How is X depicted in books? In music? In film?

**Example:** How is mental illness depicted in film?

## A Note on Topoi

The topoi are a starting place, not a final destination. Some of the results you will get from plugging your topic into the questions will be nonsensical. The point is to encourage you to examine your topic from as many angles as possible. If you are struggling, try adding an adjective to make a question more specific.

**Example: What are the FINANCIAL effects of X?** What are the financial effects of mental illness?

**What are the SOCIAL causes of X?** What are the social causes of mental illness?

**Who benefits POLITICALLY from X?** Who benefits politically from mental illness?

## References

Burton, G.O. (n.d.) *Silva rhetoricae*. Retrieved from: <http://rhetoric.byu.edu>

Keith, W.M., & Lundberg, C.O. (2008) *The essential guide to rhetoric*. Boston, MA: Bedford.

Larson, R.L. (1968) Discovery through questioning: A plan for teaching rhetorical invention. *College English*, 2(30), 126-134.