

GENERATING MANY IDEAS

BRAINWRITING

A great method for generating many ideas quickly; this one promotes diverse ideas and helps less assertive participants shine.

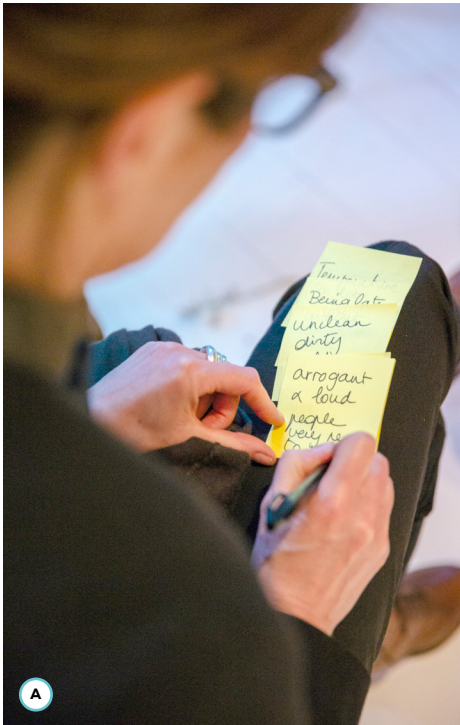
Duration	Preparation: up to 5 minutes Activity: 5–25 minutes plus discussion time
Physical requirements	Paper and pens for all participants, enough space for them to stand or sit comfortably and perhaps move around a little, one long wall where all the output can be shown, and sticky tape
Energy level	Low and thoughtful
Facilitators	1 or more
Participants	A broad range – as few as 3 to as many as hundreds
Expected output	Many diverse ideas

In brainwriting,⁰¹ individual participants work in parallel and in silence, writing their own ideas or observations on pieces of paper which are put to one side or passed on to the next writer. This method produces more ideas and far more diversity than brainstorming, but develops less energy as it is more quiet and thoughtful. Use it when ideas are more complex, when diversity is key, to empower less extroverted participants, or where the group is too large for brainstorming to be practical.

⁰¹ For more on brainwriting, specifically the 6-3-5 method, see Rohrbach, B. (1969). "Kreativ nach Regeln – Methode 635, eine neue Technik zum Lösen von Problemen." *Absatzwirtschaft* 12: 73–53.

Step-by-step guide

- 1** Make sure you are using the right method. Brainwriting is a great option for generating good and diverse ideas. But if you want to test the water first, helping the group quickly understand what the others are thinking and what the mood is around the subject, try brainstorming.
- 2** Look at your starting point for ideation and consider if and how you will bring previous knowledge into the room (for example, as a research wall or as key insights).
- 3** Invite the right people to work beside your core team for the exercise (this might include people who know the background, people with no preconceptions, experts, representatives of the implementation team, people who will deliver the service, users, management, etc.).
- 4** Prepare your group with information and arrange them comfortably. Everyone will need identical thickish pens and several sheets of identical paper or identical sticky notes.
- 5** Show the theme or key question on a poster or projector. (You might do an engaging warm-up after this to distract the participants for a few minutes.)
- 6** Ask the participants to work individually and silently, writing or sketching their ideas on paper or sticky notes. Instruct them on what to do with their sketches: pass them on to others for written comment and expansion, post them on a wall immediately for others to see (if the paper is big enough), or even keep the ideas for themselves until the end of the exercise.
- 7** At the end, display all the ideas on the wall. When all ideas are on display you can group them under whatever criteria the group prefer, discuss them, and/or begin a selection technique.



A

- A** Brainwriting in silence produces more diverse output than brainstorming, and gives less assertive team members a voice.

Method notes

- When you are using any ideation methods which involve quick writing or scribbling, try to give the participants fairly thick (but not very thick) marker pens. These thicker pens will encourage large, legible (and documentable) script, and tend to prevent participants going into too much detail in writing or sketching. Forbid ballpoints and pencils if possible.
- Stop the exercise before it loses too much steam, but not at the first slowdown. The ideas which come when things get difficult can be especially interesting. Remind them instead that wild or unusual ideas are welcome, and that ideas can be combined or reversed.
- If they are hesitant to suggest more radical ideas, remind them that wild ideas are welcome and that all ideas are anonymous.
- You can combine brainstorming and brainwriting easily. One very effective method is to do brainwriting in groups, share the results, then ask each participant to do some solo brainstorming (scribble down a lot of ideas). You then repeat the process a few times. ◀