

Overcoming Writer's Block in an MA Seminar

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Abstract

MA students find it difficult to overcome their writer's block. Some struggle with it for months becoming more and more anxious about their inability to start writing. Deadlines given by the supervisor are not helpful at all. Inability to find time, energy and strength to sit down and start writing results in lowering students' self-esteem and losing their confidence that this situation could be eventually resolved. The main aim of the paper is to share with the readers four techniques for overcoming writer's block that may be suggested for any students engaged in academic writing. Visualisation, Affirmation, Cubing and Six Thinking Hats will be presented here and offered as classroom activities. The value of these techniques is that they are new in the context of academic writing though they can be found in psychological literature or literature on cognitive processes and creativity.

Introduction

What is writer's block? This fairly common phenomenon can be understood as a mental obstacle occurring during the process of searching and retrieving content to be translated into own text (cf. the concept of writing apprehension, e.g. in Daly and Miller, 1975; Daly and Wilson, 1983; Young, 1999). The source of the obstacle may be either inside the writer, for instance, at the working memory level or the affective level, or outside the writer, for example in the task environment or in the language used (cf. Hayes' 1996 model). Research on writer's block in second language learning context points to various specific factors that may be responsible for the phenomenon, such as teacher's expectations (Daly and Miller, 1975); poor writing strategies applied during the process of writing, e.g. lack of or inadequate planning, too early editing, lack

of or inadequate revising (Rose, 1980; Hayes, 1981; Lee, 2001); poor reading skills correlated with writing performance (Lee, 2002); difficulties in dealing with complex tasks (Lee and Krashen, 2003); or learner's attitude towards writing instruction (Lee, 2005).

In this article it is assumed that every writer (professional, and especially non-professional) experiences a block now and again, which results in non-writing. The process of writing is halted and the writer cannot overcome this block on their own. The purpose of this paper is to suggest four specific techniques which may be successfully used either in class or at home to unblock the writer, to make them write again. The choice of technique may depend on the nature of the block as well as on learners' preferences.

Idea generation – understanding the nature of the block

When a student is faced with a writing task, it immediately creates the need to cope with the task – the need to write what is expected in the task. As Torrance et al. (1996) noticed, «the need to produce language precedes having anything very specific to communicate» (p. 189). Not knowing what to write about, not having any specific ideas to communicate, the student may experience a mental gap which may last for just a moment after which the student proceeds to coping with the task immediately (often engaging certain strategies) or may be prolonged and result in building a block (cf. the concept of procrastination in writing).

The writer may access ideas from two different directions: from the inside – that is from their long term memory, which requires the use of effective retrieval strategies, or from the outside, that is from other sources, which necessitates reading comprehension and critical reading strategies. In the academic writing context, both sources of ideas are valuable – the learners need to learn to control accessing their own memory as well as drawing information from other sources. In Torrance et al.'s words (1996), «how writers find content for their text [is] entirely a matter of search and retrieval. There is no mention of creating or generating in a literal sense» (p. 190).

If we consider writing as a skill, the concept of controlled and automatic processing helps to explain what happens when the writer searches for ideas in their own memory. Information stored in the long term memory can be retrieved easily if a proper memory probe is used to activate related concepts. However, effectiveness of the retrieval depends on «the strength of the association between [the concepts] and the memory probe» (Torrance et al., 1996, p. 192; see also Baddeley, 1997). More experienced writers and adult writers (who have more information encoded in their memory) tend to retrieve activated ideas and present them orally or in writing automatically, that is without conscious control and much effort; however, as the process is automatic, it also lacks flexibility or originality – the generated ideas are prone to be schematic (Torrance et al., 1996). On the other hand, student writers experience writing as a conscious and analytical process, which requires a controlled, step by step procedure. If the probe is too general (cf. a general topic), the writer will experience problems with

accessing anything of value. The processing will be slower and various unrelated ideas will surface in the working memory. Still, if the topic is adequately formed and specific, the students usually start with searching in their long-term memory for any ideas linked with the assignment and only later do they search for more ideas in other sources. Ideas generated directly from the writing assignment go through the process of knowledge telling (cf. Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). Moreover, they are not explicitly evaluated as this would hinder their retrieval. Original ideas can be formed only in the drafting phase, that is when the writer has already collected the first set of ideas and now considers their own knowledge. Thinking the ideas through and choosing the most constructive and original ones leads to knowledge transforming (cf. Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987).

The mental block so often reported by student writers may thus result from their lack of knowledge on the topic (cf. Lee, 2001). Not knowing much about a particular issue is very discouraging. They have nothing to tell as yet. A strategy often offered by supervisors is to go to a library and read. Still, another problem arises – any student would struggle with a) finding proper materials, b) reading them for comprehension (skimming and scanning are still abstract notions in many cases as students are used to reading from cover to cover, which often proves ineffective and time consuming), c) reading materials critically, selecting main ideas and leaving unimportant details out (often students complain that everything seems important in a text). Such predicaments give rise to a mental block when students face piles of books to read.

It is vital that learners become aware of their problem, that they know specifically what bothers them, what blocks them. For different learners there will be different sources of blocks, thus different techniques may be suggested to overcome them.

Overcoming a block – pre-writing activities

In this article, four techniques are presented as helpful pre-writing activities. As a writing teacher I have been exercising these techniques with my students for a few years now and my general observation, which would need to be validated in an experimental study, is that different students experiment with particular activities and when one seems to match their preferences they apply it regularly in dealing with writing tasks, which brings visible results in their writing performance.

However, for the purpose of this paper, I selected only two real-life situations reported by two students of English as a foreign language who were preparing to write their MA dissertations in English, which will serve as a point of reference for explaining how each technique works.

Situation 1

Kasia's (a 4th year student of English Philology) MA thesis was suggested by her supervisor. She found it to be very academic and thus very difficult to address. As the student was unfamiliar with it and did not quite understand it, she did not like the topic at all; it did not seem interesting or motivating enough to research it. Thus the student would postpone going to a library, which only made the whole situation worse. Feeling angry and frustrated, the student asked the supervisor to be given a different topic but the supervisor was disinclined to acquiesce to her request. The student started to panic as the time was passing quickly by and she had not managed to write anything yet. She had collected no materials, and had no idea where to start. Understandably, she felt like abandoning the project. Kasia is not the only case with a mental block arising in an early phase of writing an MA dissertation or any other academic text. Many students faced with academic writing may have such or similar experiences. They feel stuck and helpless, withering under the power of their quickly building writer's block. In such a scenario what they need in order to defeat the block is positive thinking, because «It's all in your head, Melman» (Madagascar – the animated movie). Transforming the negative into the positive is the essence of Affirmation and Visualisation – the first two techniques chosen for presentation.

Affirmation

Affirmation is used to desuggest psychological barriers (cf. Suggestopedia by Lozanov; see Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Richards and Rodgers, 2001). The main aim of the technique is to divert learners' thinking from the negative perception of themselves, the task, or the situation towards a positive one (cf. the technique of self-instruction training in Lazarus, 1989). Graham and Harris (1996, p. 351) as well as Hauswirth (2002, p. 36) report that a negative self-talk may impede performance; affirmation, on the other hand, is a positive self-talk. Such an internal dialogue, taking the form of personalised self-statements, may be developed

to support the writing process in the following areas: defining a problem (goal) (*I set clear and positive goals, I achieve my goals*); planning (*I can plan my composition successfully. I allow flexibility. I am a good planner. I take time to write*); evaluation (*I can notice differences in my performance; I can see the signs of development in my work*); reinforcement (*I know how to write a good composition; I like writing*).

The teacher who plans to offer this technique to the students should start by making them aware of the block itself. Each student then works around their own problem, which makes the task personalised. The next step is to change all the negative words or phrases into positive ones (see Example 1 below).

Example 1

Block = I do not want to research the topic. I have problems with finding suitable materials to cover it. Writing is difficult. I cannot write fluently. I make errors. My style is poor.

Affirmation = I, Kasia, research my academic topic eagerly. I collect suitable materials and write my MA thesis regularly. The text is accurate and fluent. My paper is written in a good academic style.

An important rule to remember is that the self-statement is to be made in the present tense and the writer is to use their own name if possible (Gawain, 1995). Then they are to write the affirmation ten or twenty times on a piece of paper focusing on the meaning of the words to avoid writing by rote. If any negative thoughts appear while writing the affirmation (often the writer has doubts about the effectiveness of the technique, feels it cannot work), they are to turn the paper over and express these doubts and return to writing the affirmation. Such a procedure should be repeated for several days (see Appendix).

The success of affirmation lies in the belief that the words on the piece of paper are actually powerful and that they can change one's attitude. Moreover, from the study habits' perspective, if learners write affirmations regularly, they learn to find time for writing as well as the motivation to sit down and write several lines everyday. When they are done with their affirmation they feel better about themselves and have a higher self-esteem, on the one hand, and, on the other, they

have a free time slot to fill in with other writing tasks, for instance, their essays or chapters of MA.

Visualisation

Visualisation is a powerful technique used in psychology (cf. Necka, 2005). The main aim of the technique, similarly to affirmation, is to redirect one's negative thinking into thinking about one's own goals and picturing how they are to be reached. Imagining the perfect scenario (Gawain, 1995), imagining there are no limitations (Thomas, 2005) helps to see beyond the familiar current situation that restricts one's own actions; it helps to get unstuck (cf. the technique of positive imagery in Lazarus, 1989). As in visualisation, anything maybe a goal, students who collide with their mental «Wall» may use this supporting technique at the beginning of the writing process or at any point in the process (getting stuck may be experienced just as well during drafting or revision) (cf. Klauser, 1986).

A usual procedure for visualisation is starting with writing one's own goal in the present tense as if it were already true. The self-statement from affirmation may be used here successfully or learners may imagine what they would prefer instead of the current situation (see Example 2 below).

Example 2

Goal: I find time for writing my MA thesis. I write for two hours a day everyday. My supervisor is satisfied with my work.

The next step is to create a clear, vivid image of the new situation. Learners are advised to write down the perfect scenario in a form of a description of the situation in the present tense as if the goal has already been reached. It is essential that the description is very detailed, that it engages various senses (what I see; what I hear; what I touch; what I smell; what I taste in this new situation), and that learners become an integral part of it. When the text is ready, they sign it. They are to keep this description in their notebook or hang it above their desk and read it or see it with their mind's eyes regularly, for several days. It is important they get engaged with the image and believe in what they see.

In the classroom context a guided visualisation may be offered (see Appendix). This is an effective way of training learners in visualisation so that they can form their own personalised images to work on. Background

relaxation music may be played to help learners relax and focus on their images.

Overcoming the writer's block – Kasia's case

Kasia tried both techniques to overcome her block. First she decided to apply affirmation, which she perceived as new and attractive. She specified her problem and transformed it into a positive self-statement (cf. Example 1). However, having worked on this for several days (writing her affirmation in her notebook), she eventually realized that the technique had not been proving effective. «I focused only on the act of writing, not on the affirmation itself.» She decided to change this technique into visualisation (see Example 2). As she later reported, «I found it easy to calm down and imagine the day of writing itself. ... Each evening before going sleep [sic] I turned on soft music, closed my eyes, and visualised myself writing. ... I imagined that I found the topic really interesting and easy to handle.» In her visualisation she focused on the writing itself (developing the topic, using academic vocabulary, writing accurately, etc.), but also on the surroundings – the weather outside, the room; she also saw in her visualisation her smiling supervisor congratulating her on her work. Kasia was very satisfied with this technique. It gave her more confidence in dealing with writing. «I felt that I did it so many times [in the visualisation] that I should not worry. . . . Having applied this technique I found I was able to finish my writing on time. . . . I started using visualisation not only to overcome writer's block, but also to address other problems connected with learning (for instance, oral presentation). It really worked.»

Kasia is a good example of a student who was open to trying something new. At a point when she started worrying about her mental blockage in writing, she decided to make an effort and deal with the situation. Her first choice was based on her perception of attractiveness of the chosen technique and yet affirmation did not suit her or maybe she could not overcome the scepticism that would block her from believing in what she was writing¹. However, she did not surrender; she moved on to the second technique. From the pedagogical point of view, by giving learners choice in picking their own ways to solve their problems

¹ Personally, I use affirmation on a regular basis when dealing with difficult situations such as academic writing itself. In my view, the verbal form of the technique may be more appealing for aural learners than visual ones, though this hypothesis would need to be researched.

and leaving them space to practice on their own, the teacher creates optimal conditions for aiding learner's autonomy.

Situation 2

Now, let us focus on a different situation. Agnieszka, a student of English Philology, also received a topic for her MA thesis from her supervisor, which she perceived, however, as challenging but very interesting. Being keen to start her work, she would eagerly collect all the necessary materials from the library and place them on her desk in two large piles. However, every time she would look at the pile she would feel more and more anxious. She knew she was supposed to start reading the materials and making notes but she could not. She would feel butterflies in her stomach every time she thought about going through those books. Although she felt uneasy, she persisted in finding other things to do to delay reading and writing. Eventually the situation became serious and her enthusiasm left her completely. Not sure anymore whether she was able to start writing, she felt ever more frustrated and angry at herself. Finally Agnieszka realized that suffering from the writer's block was «one of the most unpleasant experiences in [her] life.»

For the second time, Agnieszka's case is not exceptional. Students dealing with tasks from academic writing often undergo stress and complain about the difficulty the writing process brings. They struggle with their low motivation, with the cognitive load of the task, and with themselves as the time slips through their fingers. Though writing seems fine at first, once they are faced with the amount of materials they need to go through, those young writers start to doubt their ability to deal with the task. In their mind, they create a mental block, which, like a brick wall, effectively stops them from beginning to write. In such a case some of the best pre-writing techniques to take into consideration are such that, on the one hand, help generate ideas and direct the thinking process quickly and, on the other, help to deal with certain aspects, one at a time. Among these can be found Six Thinking Hats and Cubing.

Six Thinking Hats

The technique of Six Thinking Hats was invented by Edward de Bono (de Bono, 1999). It is used effectively in business meetings (de Bono, 1999), psychological treatments (Necka, 1994) and also in discussion activities in language classroom. It is claimed here

that it is a useful pre-writing activity. The main point of this technique is to direct the thinking process into six separate areas, one at a time, which facilitates focused thinking (see Appendix). De Bono proposes the following focus themes when considering a topic or a problem: facts/neutral information (white hat), feelings/intuition (red hat), problems/disadvantages (black hat), values/advantages (yellow hat), new ideas/provocative questions (green hat), and control of the thinking process/ organisation of ideas (blue hat). The colours are used on purpose to help associate the abstract notions in focus with concrete denotations of colours.

The concept of donning a hat when thinking is attractive especially when real hats are introduced in the process. Learners may experience fun and play wearing self-made hats; nevertheless, if the playful atmosphere is difficult to handle in a serious academic writing class, the teacher may suggest colourful shawls or just plain colour coded sheets of paper. By wearing one hat at a time (real or imagined), learners direct their thinking to a particular focus area for a few minutes and then take notes. The order of putting particular hats on is random but it is advised to start with the red hat – thus releasing the tension that usually occurs when learners tackle a new topic, a new task, a new challenge and helping them concentrate later. After the session, they may share their ideas and discuss their validity in pairs or small groups. The technique may also take a form of an oral activity during which learners work together and exchange ideas noting them down on a blackboard, or still better, on a flipchart. Six different sheets may be used to display ideas within six different areas. Finally, the class copy those ideas they find useful for their own writing and proceed to drafting.

Cubing

Cubing is a technique similar to the Six Thinking Hats in that it proposes to writers six perspectives for consideration. When exploring a topic, learners focus their attention on description, comparison and contrast, association, analysis, application and argumentation (Ferris and Hedgecock, 1998, p. 108; see also Gould et al., 1989; Wyrick, 1990; Kirszner and Mandell, 1998; Bradley and Bradley, 2001). The writing task may not require such a broad spectrum of ideas; however, the more perspectives the learners consider during the pre-writing phase, the better they may understand the topic itself. With their ideas on paper, young writers are

aware that they have a choice and may then discuss in pairs or groups which ones they find valuable enough to be included in the text. Furthermore, going beyond a mere general description of the topic, learners can see a bigger picture and thus grasp the interrelations between particular ideas, which would give them control over the process of idea generation and aid with the organisation of the discourse.

Furthermore, the cube (or a dice) as a symbol used in this technique may be even more appealing to some learners as it is linked with the concept of a game. Each side of the cube represents one aspect (see Appendix). One dot may stand for a description, two dots may signify comparison and contrast, etc. The teacher may indicate the order in which particular aspects are to be considered by the group or learners may throw their own dice and deal with the aspects that the dice show individually or in pairs. Similarly to the previous technique, cubing introduces an element of fun and play in the academic writing classroom. Moreover, the teacher may suggest that learners prepare their own cubes that may be then personalised with different sizes, colours, and little pictures instead of plain dots on each side. In addition, this technique enables the learner to familiarise oneself with the writing task. Dealing with the task aspect by aspect, the writer has an opportunity to consider their own ideas thoroughly. In one student's words, «in this way, the stress connected with fulfilling the requirements and meeting the deadline is not so intensive.»

Overcoming the writer's block – Agnieszka's case

After a talk with her supervisor, who showed her several possible ways to manage the mental block, Agnieszka decided to try Six Thinking Hats. She had prepared colour coded pieces of paper and began to write. She reported being sceptical about the technique at first. «Nice colours, six perspectives, but will it change anything?» She started with the red hat. «But it was not good – all I wrote was just one sentence.» She paused and decided to change colours. She started to write on the yellow piece of paper with the focus on advantages. «And then, all of a sudden, one advantage came after another. The first questions arose and after them, the answers. What is more, I also began to associate and think about disadvantages but I was so afraid that I would forget all the ideas while changing colours that I just kept on writing.» After a 5-minute session Agnieszka

had two full pages of ideas for developing her topic. In her case, it might have been the yellow colour that triggered her writing (cf. the concept of colours having a direct, stimulating or depressing effect on people as discussed in Valentine, 1962; see also Thomson, 1995). She was surprised to experience such a change in her attitude towards writing. From a negative, pessimistic approach «I cannot do it» she went into the positive, confident «I feel that I can do it, can write and most importantly, I know what to write.»

Agnieszka picked a technique that seemed most appealing to her as the idea of colour coded hats appeared attractive and new. In her case, the choice was correct. Still, applying a new technique requires determination from the learner not to quit too soon but to employ it in various contexts and in various tasks to discover its deeper value. To my knowledge, Agnieszka is practicing Six Thinking Hats whenever she «runs on a bump in the rode» during writing.

Conclusion

Expert writers, writing coaches, teachers or educational psychologists often share their own ideas on how to overcome writer's block. They refer to research, their own writing practice, or experiences reported by their learners/clients. Among a variety of techniques they mention are, for instance, perceiving writing as important and then engaging in it fully (Lamott, 1995); setting measurable goals and objectives (Hauswirth, 2002; Sterne, 2005); having regular, preferably daily, sessions of writing (Boice, 1994; Sterne, 2005); using paradox – showing the learners that what they fear the most can be used to their own advantage (Henning, 1981); stimulating both sides of the brain by, for example, music, physical exercises (cf. Kinesiology), images (Reeves, 1998); brainstorming, freewriting or clustering (Leki, 1999); taking a break from writing and clearing one's mind (Abbe, 2005), becoming independent of the mood (Sterne, 2005); breaking the block by talking about it (Banks, 2007) or perceiving writing as problem-solving and writing a way out of it (Staton, 2008) (see also Crosby, 2003, for an interesting account of how academics, being professional writers, resolve the problem of writer's block; and Flaherty, 2004, for an insightful explanation of the neurology of writing). The general message these professionals convey is to treat writer's block as a natural phenomenon that belongs to the process of writing, which is to be experienced and then dealt with

by experimenting with various techniques and finding the one that best serves one's purpose.

In this paper, four additional techniques have been offered for young writers to consider. These are not standard pre-writing techniques, and certainly are not commonly used in academic writing. However, their value cannot be denied. In comparison to other options they are well-structured and thus may become practical classroom activities. Furthermore, they may be used in such a way as to stimulate thinking through fun activities, which in itself might be a challenge for the teacher; nonetheless, my experience tells me that adult learners are eager to have fun while learning.

In the academic writing classroom, depending on the situation, the particular context in which the block occurs, and the type of learner that experiences the block, the teacher may select a certain technique to help unblock certain individuals or a whole group. If a learner is fully blocked in writing, which means they cannot start any writing for some reason – affirmation or visualisation may be suggested to help learners realise what blocks them and then let focus their thinking on the positive side, creating thus the opposite of the block. Frequent imagining that there are no limitations leads to unblocking the mind. When, on the other hand, a learner has problems with gathering ideas or organising them – Cubing or Six Thinking Hats may be offered, as they give learners focus and draw their attention to separate themes and thus make their thinking more constructive. Moreover, a lesson with a difference, which the techniques definitely introduce, aids learners in memorising the techniques and in using them later in their own writing processes outside the classroom environment. Becoming familiar with a variety of techniques, they become more independent in their further study, which is one of the main goals of current teaching programmes.

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Affirmation

In the case of a writer's block experienced during writing classes the teacher guides learners through the following stages.

- What is your block? – Make it specific.
- Name it. Write one, two, maximum three sentences that express your block.
- How do you feel?
- Write an affirmation that contradicts your block. Write the sentence in the present tense, and include all positive words (avoid: want, try, always).
- Say your affirmation aloud a few times. Believe in what you say. How do you feel? (Option for classroom use: Repeat it, saying it to your colleague as confidently as you can. Look the person straight in the eyes and say it again).
- In a copybook write the affirmation 15 times everyday for 21 days. Focus on the words in the sentences. Believe in these words.
- In case any negative thoughts appear, write them out on the back of the sheet of paper and then return to your affirmation. Later you may analyse your negative thoughts and think what stops you from changing your attitude towards writing. You may use them for creating a new affirmation.

Guided Visualization

In the case of a writer's block experienced during writing classes, the teacher guides learners through the following stages. Pleasant music is played in the background.

Sit comfortably. (Put a piece of paper in front of you just in case you would like to write something down). Close your eyes. In your mind see what blocks you – make it specific. What do you see/feel/hear?

Cross out the negative picture (in your mind) – you will not go back to it.

Breathe deeply in and out. Be conscious of your breath flowing in and out your nostrils. Breathe out tension. Breathe in peace and relaxation.

Visualize the perfect writing environment – see all the details of the place. Involve all the senses (what do you see, smell, hear; how things feel in your hands).

Visualize that the block is not there. Visualize the success scenario.

Visualize yourself writing fluently/ confidently/ accurately ...

Visualize the final draft and people congratulating you on it.

How do you feel? Happy? Satisfied? Confident? Relieved? Smile.

In your visualized reality reach out and touch something – a desk, a chair, a hand to shake. Become a part of that scene and enjoy it for as long as you want. Feel how success feels. This feeling will be with you when you come back to reality.

I will count from 5 to 1 – when I say 1 you will open your eyes:

5, 4, 3, 2, 1

Six Thinking Hats

In the case of a writer's block experienced during writing classes, the teacher guides learners through the following stages of idea generation.

Blue hat – control/ organisation

Let's start with wearing a blue hat of an organizer.

I suggest that you put on your hats one at a time.

Consider your new topic in writing noting down ideas in reference to one hat before considering another one.

Spend 3–5 minutes wearing each hat and freewriting or listing ideas that come to you.

Red hat – feelings

Let us start with the red thinking hat. Note down your feelings about the topic – both positive and negative.

Do you like the topic? What do your feelings tell you about the topic? Do you feel it is difficult/ boring/ challenging?

White hat – neutral facts/ information

How about a white hat thinking for a change? Note down facts/ information that you know or that you need to find out in reference to the topic. Where can you find information on this topic? Consider the journalistic questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

Black hat – disadvantages/ problems

OK, now there is time to consider the black hat's thinking. Note down the disadvantages or problems that need to be considered in this topic.

Yellow hat – positive side

I want you to take off your black hat and put on your yellow hat for a minute. Note down the advantages/ reasons/ logical support for the topic.

Green hat – new ideas

That's fine for a yellow hat thinking. Now let's have the green hat. Note down provocative questions/ ideas that come to your mind when you think about the topic.

Blue hat – control/ organisation

Alright, now with our blue hat on, let's summarise the thinking process. Note down your focus area in the topic. How will you organize the ideas? What will you include in the summary? Feel that you are in control of your thinking process.

Cubing

In the case of a writer's block experienced during writing classes, the teacher guides learners through the following stage of idea generation.

Consider the following questions when facing a new topic in writing. Throw a dice (optional). On a separate sheet of paper note down ideas in reference to a particular aspect on a cube in a form of freewriting or listing. Spend 3–5 minutes considering each side. Finally discuss with a colleague the validity of each idea and decide which ones will be used in your draft.

- . 1. Describe
 - What is it? (define it)
 - What does it look like? (describe the appearance)
- : 2. Compare/Contrast
 - What is it similar to?
 - What is it different from?
 - (what is the point of reference here?)
- ... 3. Associate
 - What do you associate it with?
 - What does it remind you of? (situation? place? person? experience?)
- :: 4. Analyze
 - What are its elements? (typology)

- ::: 5. Apply
 - How can you use it?
 - What can you do with it?

- ::: 6. Argue
 - What are the pros and cons?