

THE
WRITER'S
TAROT

AN OFFBEAT GUIDE TO
BETTER ESSAYS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- | | |
|-----|----------------------|
| 03. | About |
| 05. | Instructions |
| 10. | Card Interpretations |
| 97. | What next? |

ABOUT

These cards are designed for students, educators, or anyone else looking to generate ideas for non-fiction writing. The prompts apply to a range of genres, from literary analysis to application essays to blog posts.

You might be wondering, why Tarot cards? Do these cards channel the supernatural? Not exactly. (Unless believing they do gets your writing mojo on—in which case, you do you.) For the more skeptical, the Tarot format has several benefits.

First, it's fun: who doesn't like to pull their destiny from a deck of cards, even if that destiny is just the next five minutes of brainstorming?

Second, a random card, and the specific parameters suggested by it, jolt the player out of familiar thought patterns and invite further exploration and insight.

Third, the image-heavy, symbolic nature of the cards promotes associative thinking which stimulates originality.

And finally, each card is a memorable shorthand for a specific intellectual technique, lens, or theme. Eventually, you will internalize these approaches and develop a sophisticated inner framework for generating ideas independently. Even then, choosing a card from time to time can be a refreshing way to break through writer's block and stimulate rich and novel ideas.

INSTRUCTIONS

HOW DO I INTERPRET A CARD?

There is no wrong way of using a card as long as it prompts ideas and you are able to tie these ideas back to your writing in a coherent manner. That said, there are two standard ways to interpret each card.

First, you can follow the prompts. Use the number on the card to look up prompts related to each card in this booklet. You'll find two or three prompts for each card. Some are geared to different stages in the brainstorming process or different types of writing. Select the one that looks most relevant and interesting to you.

Alternatively, you can make your own associations. With this approach, select a card and use the imagery, title, and subtitles to stimulate creative thinking. For example, if you pick "The Scale," you would see the giant tortoise, which might make you think about the slow pace of achieving justice or the inevitability of justice. Or it might remind you of Aesop's *Fables*, and you will decide to explore your topic in the context of ancient fable or myth. Let your interest and the requirements of your writing project guide your exploration.

DO I PICK ONE CARD OR SEVERAL?

There are three possible approaches:

Method 1: A Single Card

Maybe you just need a quick insight to

begin your process or to get "unstuck." Pick a single card, and use it to jump-start your thinking.

Method 2: Several Cards

Choose several cards, one after the other, as you develop ideas. Lay out your ideas in lists or paragraphs on regular lined paper, or use a sheet of plain white computer paper or a large sheet of newsprint to cluster ideas in a bubble map or chart.

Method 3: Spreads

For the most structured guidance, select your cards in advance and lay out a spread to guide you through the whole brainstorming process. Although each card can be used at any stage of the process, some are particularly suited to a each stage. The following list is an example spread for persuasive writing. If multiple cards are listed, you can either select your favorite card for

that step or work through all of them.

Persuasive Writing Spread

(Argumentative essays, op-eds, opinion
and editorial pieces, etc.)

1. THE CRUSADER, THE HONEYBEE, THE SCALE
2. THE CHILD, THE MIRROR, THE BOX, THE STOPWATCH, THE FLOOD, THE TIME MACHINE, GIANTS
3. DEVIL'S ADVOCATE, THE ACTOR,
4. THE BOXER
5. THE MEDIATOR
6. COINS, THE DETECTIVE, NUMBERS, THE OUTLIER
7. FOUNDATIONS, THE LAWYER, THE MECHANIC
8. THE WORLD
9. THE PHILOSOPHER
10. THE CROWN
11. THE CRITIC
12. THE HOOK

WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH THE "REVERSED" INTERPRETATIONS?

You can ignore these completely if you'd like, but they offer an additional way to engage with the cards that's useful for critiquing your thinking. Think of the reversed interpretations as a list of "intellectual sins" associated with that card. These are logical fallacies, cognitive distortions, or bad habits that weaken your writing and credibility.

To play in reverse, you can turn all or part of the cards upside down and shuffle them into the deck. When you pick an upside-down card, instead of following the usual prompts, read the list of "reversed" interpretations. Then analyze your thinking, searching for evidence of these particular intellectual sins.

Card Interpretation Guide



1

THE CHILD

Wonder, Playfulness, Innocence

QUESTIONS: Generate twenty questions about your topic. Alternatively, create a question chain: ask a question, answer it, ask another, answer it, and so on. Then choose one question to explore in more depth.

EXPLORATION: What aspects of your topic or writing spark a sense of genuine wonder or curiosity? List them. Then spend several minutes exploring these elements. Alternatively, explore a different writing style or approach.

INNOCENCE: In the context of your topic, explore any theme related to childhood, innocence, naivety, purity, or beginnings.

Reversed: ignorance, simplistic or self-centered thinking, gullibility



2

THE POND

Place, Setting, Nature, Home

PLACE: How does the pond shape the fish? Explore how your topic is determined by the social milieu and physical environment in which it is enmeshed. What similarities and differences would you find in other places, cultures, or times?

SETTING: For literary or film analysis, examine the setting: location, time, geography, flora-and-fauna, weather, architecture, etc. How does the setting influence the plot, characters, and themes? Alternatively, for narrative writing, brainstorm your own setting, using specific details to create a mood and emphasize your themes.

ENVIRONMENT: In the context of your topic, explore any theme related to place (e.g., home, community, nature, ecology).

*Reversed: insular thinking,
narrow-mindedness, prejudice*



3

THE PATH

Exploration, Quest, Personal Growth

QUEST: Can you formulate your subject as a "quest"—a journey in which someone sets out in pursuit of a goal, overcomes challenges, and discovers self-knowledge?

HERO'S JOURNEY: Does your quest fit in the larger literary arc of Campbell's "Hero's Journey"?

- **DEPARTURE:** The Ordinary World; Call to Adventure; Refusing the Call, Meeting the Mentor; Crossing the Threshold
- **INITIATION:** Test, Allies, and Enemies; Approach to the Inmost Cave; The Ordeal; The Reward;
- **RETURN:** The Road Back; Resurrection; Return With the Elixir

EXPLORATION: In the context of your topic, explore any theme related to a path (e.g., travel, discovery, movement, adventure, obstacles, personal growth).

Reversed: degressions, lack of clarity and focus



4

COINS

Concrete Examples, Objects, Money

CONCRETE EXAMPLES: Choose one to three specific examples to ground your thought. Describe them in detail and analyze what they reveal about your topic.

OBJECTS: Select one to five objects that are significant to the story you are telling. Describe them using sensory details. Why are they meaningful?

WEALTH: In the context of your topic, explore any theme related to money or material possession (e.g., wealth, poverty, frugality, wastefulness, generosity, miserliness, avarice, materialism, asceticism, economics).

Reversed: lack of imagination or conceptualization



5

THE MIRROR

Personal Anecdotes, Self Reflection,
Identity

MEMORIES: Make a list of at least three moments in your own life that are related to your topic. Select one of these moments to explore in more detail through freewriting or brainstorming.

BIAS: What personal biases (both negative and positive assumptions) color your attitude towards your subject? What experiences shaped these biases?

IDENTITY: In the context of your topic, explore any theme related to the self (e.g., identity, self-awareness, vanity, pride, shame, humility, hubris, self-actualization).

Reversed: bias, subjectivity, egoism, vanity



6

THE HONEYBEE

Fascination, Passion, Love

RECLAIM THE PROMPT: What aspects of your topic are fascinating to you? How can you focus on these elements in your writing? Can you change your topic or approach to better align with your personal interests and passions?

GEEK OUT: Whatever your topic, you are now obsessed with it. Read about it. Watch videos about it. Discuss it with friends. Begin by devoting the next twenty minutes to learning more about your topic, just for the sake of learning.

LOVE: In the context of your topic, explore any theme related to love (e.g., romantic love, platonic love, familial love, self-love, infatuation, jealousy, passion, sex, unrequited love, friendship).

Reversed: distractions, digressions, off-topic ideas



7

THE CRUSADER

Values, Purpose, Mission

DRIVE: Brainstorm five reasons you care about your topic. What drives you to write? Now rank your reasons in order of importance to you. How can you use this list to prioritize aspects of your project?

PURPOSE T-CHART: Make a two-columned t-chart analyzing the goals of an individual. This can be any individual related to your topic: the author, a character, a historical figure, or even yourself. What goals is this individual attempting to accomplish? List these goals in the left-hand column. What strategies or techniques does the individual use (successfully or unsuccessfully) to accomplish each goal? List these on the right.

Reversed: motivated reasoning, confirmation bias, violence, madness



8

THE SCALE

Justice, Impartiality, Balance, Equanimity

INJUSTICE: Explore an aspect of your topic that involves injustice. This could be a broader social injustice (e.g., colonialism, class-based struggle, sexism, racism, ableism). or a more personal injustice (e.g., favoritism, false accusations).

REBALANCING: Has your thinking lost balance or equanimity? Make a list of all the ways your ideas might be lop-sided, incomplete, or defensive. Then, consciously set down your attachment to your previous arguments, and approach your topic again with a fresh perspective and renewed mental serenity.

Reversed: reductive thinking, lack of passion



9

THE ELEPHANT

Uncomfortable Truths

TABOO TOPICS: Is there something about your topic that you or others are avoiding because it is socially unacceptable, inflammatory, or difficult to accept on a personal level? Free write about this issue frankly. Is there any value in addressing it directly or indirectly in your writing?

DISCOMFORT: As you think about your subject, make a list of any aspects of it that trigger a twinge of physical discomfort (a pit in your stomach, a tensing of your shoulders, etc.) What triggers these physiological responses? How could focusing on these uncomfortable elements add interest and complexity to your writing?

Reversed: trolling, tactlessness, sensationalism, loss of balance and measure.



10
THE LIAR

Distortion, Falsehood, Veracity

NEGATIVE SPACE: Lies are shadows of the truth. Write three lies about your subject. What do they reveal about reality? Are there any partial truths in your "lies"?

LIE DETECTOR: Analyze either the text(s) you are writing about or your own brainstorming/writing. Look for exaggerations, distortions, forced connections, obfuscations, or blatant untruths. What do these reveal about the writer, the reader, and the subject at hand?

VERACITY: In the context of your topic, explore any theme related to truth or falsehood (authenticity, deception, fabrications, propaganda, pretext, misinformation, gossip, etc.)

Reversed: intellectual dishonesty, stretching the truth



11

THE JOKER

Random Associations, Absurdity, Humor

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT: Choose three random words or phrases (e.g., "scrambled eggs," "Santa Clause" "underwear"). Write them down. Now, one at a time, brainstorm as many connections as possible between each of these words and your topic.

ANALYZING HUMOR: Analyze the humor in your topic (irony, sarcasm, situational humor, word-play, etc.) How could incorporating this analysis add interest and depth to your writing?

THE COMEDIAN'S DRAFT: Free-write about your subject as a stand-up comedian, a satirist, or other humorist. When you are done, look over your writing to see what ideas emerged from the process.

Reversed: absurdity, far-flung metaphors, triviality



12

STOPWATCH

Time, Pressure, Deadlines

SCATTERSHOT: Set a timer for 3-5 minutes. Then, generate as many individual words as you can about your subject (e.g., "Florida, mud, passion, dog, self-actualization...") The goal here is to rapidly bring the entirety of your subject into consciousness.

TIMED-ESSAY CHALLENGE: Set a timer for 30 minutes. Brainstorm and write a five-paragraph essay on your topic in that time. Alternatively, set a timer for 5-10 minutes and either 1) freewrite about your topic or 2) construct a complete outline of your paper.

TIME: In the context of your topic, explore any theme related to the passage of time (pacing, cycles, boredom, maturity, aging, nostalgia, eternity, etc.)

Reversed: rushed thinking, premature closure



13

GRAIN OF SAND

Narrowing Focus, Key Detail, Pivotal
Moment

FREEZE FRAME: Select a single moment or brief period of time that is important to your topic. Examine this moment—the environment, people, and actions—in depth. What does the moment reveal about the whole?

CLOSE READ: Choose a short scene, passage, paragraph, or even sentence to examine in depth. Can you reveal the big themes or ideas contained in the whole by analyzing this one part?

NARROW YOUR TOPIC: Revisit your topic and/or working thesis. Can you be more specific, narrowing your focus to cover a limited range of material in more depth?

Reversed: loss of context, pettiness



14

THE BOXER

Debate, Duality, Commitment, Conflict

COMMITMENT: Stop standing on the sidelines; enter the ring! Make a list of "I believe..." statements related to your topic.

SHADOW BOXING: Make a table with two columns. On the left, list out possible objections to your argument. On the right, respond to each point with a spirited rebuttal. Experiment with logical and emotional appeals to convince your audience and overcome your opposition.

CONFLICT: In the context of your topic, explore any theme related to conflict (e.g., violence, war, dispute, competition, protest, struggle, survival). Is the conflict in question person vs. person, person vs. society, person vs. self, or person vs. nature?

Reversed: black and white thinking, enmity, cognitive distortions



15

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

Counterclaims, Ambiguity

COUNTERCLAIMS: Who would disagree with your arguments? Free write in the voice of this contrarian. Alternatively, simply generate a list of counterclaims. How do these contradictory ideas prompt you to refine your reasoning or take a different approach?

MORAL AMBIGUITY: Analyze your topic for examples of moral ambiguity—something that is both good and bad at the same time. How could this analysis add nuance to your writing?

Reversed: Sophistry, nihilism, paralysis



16

THE MEDIATOR

Synthesis, Ambivalence, Reconciliation

AMBIVALENCE: Choose an aspect of your topic that inspires mixed feelings (e.g., happiness and sadness, pride and shame, fascination and loathing). Explore this ambivalence with freewriting or brainstorming.

BEYOND THE BINARY: Pick an aspect of your topic that inspires debate. Instead of laying out both sides of the issue, explore the in-between. Generate a list of all the positions on the topic that don't fit neatly into the either-or binary.

MEDIATION: Pick an aspect of your topic that is contentious. Begin by assuming that both positions are accurate. When, where, and under what conditions is each true? Now, formulate a nuanced statement about the problem that embraces this complexity.

Reversed: waffling, indecisiveness



17

THE TIME MACHINE

Historical Examples, Flashbacks, Origins

HISTORICAL EXAMPLES: Think of examples from history that relate to your topic (if you're struggling, consult with a friend or do an online search). Select one of these examples and research it in more depth. What does your exploration reveal about your topic?

FLASHBACKS: What pivotal moment in the past shaped your story? Free write a flashback scene about that moment, or generate a list of key details.

BACKSTORY: In literary, film, or art analysis, examine how events in the past have shaped a character's (or the author's/director's/artist's) thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Reversed: presentism, lack of research



18

GIANTS

Famous Quotes, Views of the Wise,
Mentor Texts

VIEWS OF THE WISE: Think about people you respect (family, coaches, public figures, etc.) or thought-leaders in your field. What would they say about your topic?

FAMOUS QUOTES: Research famous quotes that are relevant to your topic. Jot down notes or write short paragraphs analyzing how they relate to your topic.

MENTOR TEXT: Find a strong example of a text written in your genre. Study it carefully. How is it structured? What kind of language does the writer use? How does the writer connect to the reader? Make a list of lessons to take away from the mentor text, and continue to consult this list as you brainstorm and write.

Reversed: parroting, plagiarism, elitism



19

THE ACTOR

Points of View, Empathy, Character
Analysis

SHOES: Imagine a character with a different perspective on your topic and walk in their shoes. Jot down notes about their views and what experiences led to these views. Alternatively, write a brief monologue on your topic from the perspective of your character or a dialogue between several characters.

SHADES: Interpret your topic through an ideological lens of your choice. How would a feminist view it? A Marxist? A conservative? A historian? A psychologist? What is gained and lost from viewing your subject through this particular lens?

CHARACTER ANALYSIS: Choose a character related to your topic. Analyze their physical and psychological traits, fears, desires, influences, relationships, and changes over time.

*Reversed: detachment, moral paralysis,
relativism*



20 **FICTION**

Narrative, Examples from Literature or
Film

TELL A STORY: Pull in the narrative devices of fiction to add a dramatic twist to an otherwise dry essay or other nonfiction piece. Think about the literary elements that make up a good story: *protagonist, villain, setting, conflict, climax, resolution, foreshadowing*, etc. Make a t-chart to brainstorm what the parallel might be for each of these elements in your own writing.

FICTIONAL EXAMPLES: Brainstorm examples from literature, film, videogames, or other media that relate to your topic. Analyze each example to explore what it might teach you about your topic.

Reversed: fantasy, lack of objectivity, melodrama



21

THE POET

Figurative Language, Symbolism, Diction

SYMBOL SCAVENGER HUNT:

Search for symbols in the work you are analyzing or in the story you want to tell. Think about details in the setting (horizons, swamps, storms, sunlight, etc.), plants and creatures (birds, flowers, etc.), objects (tools, clothing, etc.), and colors. How do these symbols convey deeper meanings?

LANGUAGE PLAY:

Transform a dull assignment into a literary jam-session. Freewrite about your topic, paying attention to the language you use. Add a metaphor. Use alliteration. Vary your word choice and sentence structure or experiment with well-placed repetition.

Reversed: false analogies, purple prose, sloppy logic



22

THE ARTIST

Beauty, Visualizing, Sensory Details

SKETCH IT OUT: Draw a picture, diagram, or map of the topic you are exploring. The goal is to 1) make abstract ideas and relationships more apparent in visual form, 2) focus on striking visual details (memorable for your reader), and 3) begin to think symbolically.

IN SEARCH OF BEAUTY: What about your topic is beautiful? Free write or brainstorm, paying particular attention to beauty in unexpected places. How can you highlight this beauty in your own writing? For a twist, focus instead on what is ugly about your topic.

SHOW, DON'T TELL: Choose a single scene from your writing and freewrite or brainstorm about it, using details from all five senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell.

Reversed: form without substance



23

ECHOES

Motif, Analogy, Repetition, Allusions

REPETITION: Make a list of aspects of your topic that repeat (e.g., imagery, symbolism, events, words). Do these repetitions reveal something interesting about your topic? Alternatively, explore how you could use repetition in your own writing.

ANALOGIES: Compare an important aspect of your topic to something else—an object, event, place, person, experience, etc. If you are struggling, think about one of your passions (e.g., an academic subject, hobby, job). What parallels can you draw between this field and your topic?

ALLUSIONS: How does your writing, or that which you're analyzing, consciously or unconsciously echo writing from the past (myth, religious texts, fairytales, literature, etc.)?



24

LIGHT & DARK

Contrast, Juxtaposition, Good & Evil

OPPOSITES: Examine your topic, looking for contrasts (e.g., old vs. young, structure vs. chaos, strength vs. weakness). How are these contrasts important to the larger ideas or themes you are exploring?

CREATING CONTRAST: How can you juxtapose opposites in your own writing for interest or dramatic effect? Brainstorm a list of possible opposites to highlight.

GOOD & EVIL: Explore any theme related to your topic that involves good, evil, or both. Good could include any virtue or good deed (e.g., kindness, courage, wisdom, honesty, humility) and evil could include any vice or immoral habit or action (e.g., greed, lust, sloth, cruelty, crime).

Reversed: false duality



25

FOUNDATIONS

59 Assumptions, Values, Premises

UNDERPINNING: Choose an argument—your own or one you are analyzing—and explore its assumptions. What must be true in order for your argument to be true? How can you support these assumptions with evidence and reasoning?

BULLDOZE: Attack your own argument or one you are analyzing by revealing its flawed assumptions. Now build a new argument on sounder foundations.

MORAL FRAMEWORKS: What moral beliefs underly your attitude toward your subject? What do you believe is good or bad, just or unjust, pure or corrupt? Alternatively, analyze the moral frameworks in the works or arguments you are analyzing. How do these frameworks align or conflict with your own?

*Reversed: bias, flawed reasoning,
lack of evidence*



26

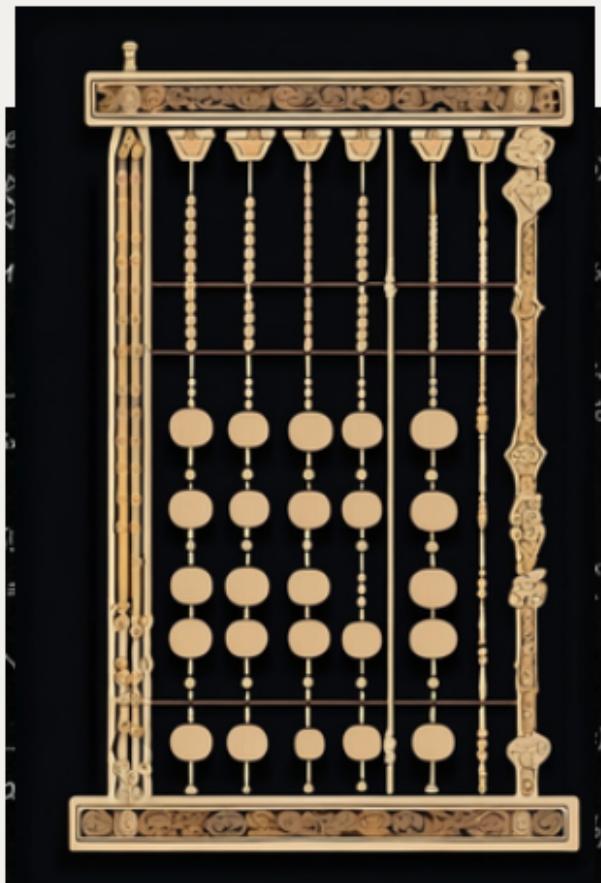
THE DETECTIVE

Evidence, Mystery, Clues, Fact Checking

PROOF: Find more evidence. Dig into research studies, books, journals, etc. Interview someone who was at the event or is an expert in the field. Study old photographs of the scenes you are describing, or similar scenes, for more vivid descriptions.

HIDDEN MEANINGS: Choose an aspect of your topic (passage, conversation, event, etc.) and read between the lines for hidden meanings. Alternatively, make your reader the detective by adding clues to your own writing (e.g., foreshadowing, symbolism).

SOURCES: Are your sources up-to-date, by authors who are unbiased experts in their field? Do they provide evidence that is accurate, verifiable, and complete? Do they document their sources, and can you find these sources?



27

NUMBERS

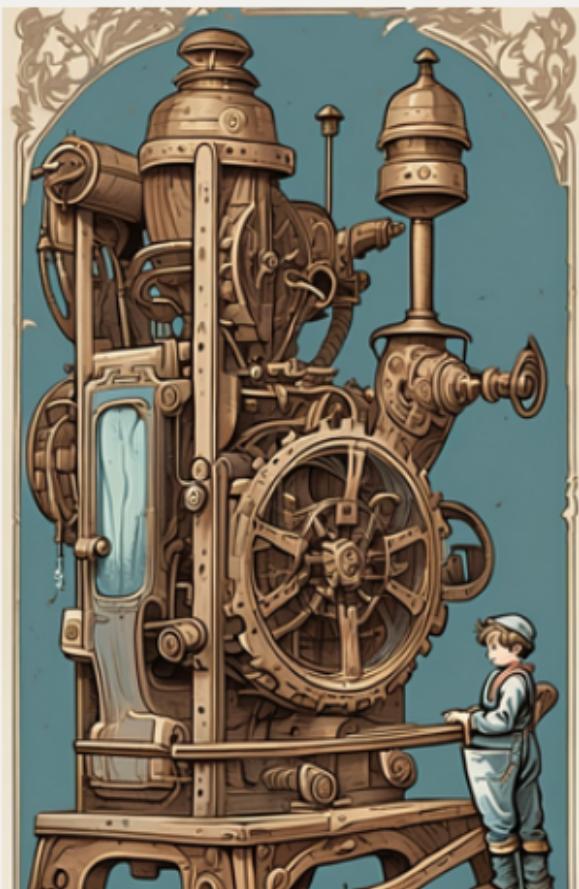
Data, Statistics

STATISTICS: Can your topic be quantified? Research relevant studies and statistics. Or, tell your story with numbers (e.g., "five donuts later," "eighty-two days of silence").

BATTLING STATS: Find a statistic that supports your argument. Now, find another one that supports the opposite position. How can you explain the discrepancy?

STUDY THE STUDY: Select a relevant statistic. Research the original study and learn as much as you can about it. What was the sample size and sample population? Did the study suggest causation or simply correlation between the variables? What other variables could have influenced the findings? Were these variables controlled for by researchers?

*Reversed: cherry-picking, sampling bias,
misinterpretation*



28

THE MECHANIC

Analysis, Systems Thinking, Cause &
Effect, Parts & Wholes

CAUSE & EFFECT FLOWCHART:

Think of your topic as a complex system or machine. Create a flow chart. Identify the important elements in the system and use arrows to illustrate the chain of cause and effect.

STRUCTURE DIAGRAM: Sketch a map of a potential structure of your argument or narrative. Put a box around big ideas and a circle around supporting details and analysis, using lines to connect the supporting details to their big ideas. Number each boxed big idea to plan the sequence of your paragraphs. Alternatively, create a formal outline.

*Reversed: reductive thinking,
narrowmindedness*



29

THE LAWYER

Cross-Examination, Precision, Logical
Fallacies, Definitions

CROSS-EXAMINE THE WITNESS:

Look for ulterior motives, inconsistencies, and forced coherence in your own work or that of another.

LOGICAL FALLACIES: Examine your own work, or that of another, for logical fallacies (e.g., ad hominem attack, appeal to authority, false dilemma, straw man, hasty generalization, slippery slope, equivocation, circular reasoning, etc.).

ABSOLUTE CLARITY: Pick an aspect of your work (the prompt, your thesis, a critical argument), and look for vague or unexamined ideas. Ask, "What does this mean?" Alternatively, select a key term. Look up its definition and etymology, and examine how it is being used in your context.



30
THE CRITIC
Criticism, Judgment, Wit

AN INCISIVE REVIEW: Sharpen your tongue as you prepare to cut through the complexities and absurdities of your subject. Freewrite about your topic, channeling the voice of your favorite critic. Pass judgment and throw shade with a liberal hand.

SELF-CRITIQUE: Write a brief, scathing review of your potential piece's shortcomings (or make a list of flaws). How can these failings be overcome?

WITTY APHORISMS: Try your hand at crafting a pithy maxim. Pick an important idea in your brainstorming and capture it in a single memorable statement. Metaphors are helpful here: use an apt comparison to capture the essence of your topic. Bonus points for humor.

*Reversed: Self-adulation, Self-sabotage,
Nastiness, Nihilism*



31

THE HOOK

Audience, Rhetoric, Engagement

YOUR INTEREST: What are the most captivating aspects of your topic? What draws you in? How can you emphasize this in your writing to hook your reader?

AUDIENCE: Who are your readers (age, gender, education, etc.)? What interests them? What bores them? What do they admire? How do they want to see themselves? What rhetoric would be most persuasive to them—appeals to logic, emotions, or authority/moral credibility?

OPENING LINES: Craft your "hook," the opening line or paragraph that will draw your reader in. Brainstorm several possible options, looking for striking anecdotes, facts, statistics, quotes, descriptions, patterns, contrasts, misconception, etc.

Reversed: Empty rhetoric, manipulation



32

THE MIST

Mood, Tone, Confusion

ATTITUDES: List the range of feelings people have about your topic and analyze their origins. Alternatively, freewrite about your topic while assuming a mismatched attitude (e.g., a flippant tone for a serious issue or a fiery polemic for a trivial matter of taste).

TONE/MOOD: What tone or mood would help you achieve your purpose? Tone is the attitude a writer has towards the subject (e.g., reverent, sarcastic). Mood is the feelings the writing creates for the reader (e.g., tense, joyful). Alternatively, study how the author of a text uses words and details to express tone or mood.

CONFUSION: Make a list of all the aspects of your topic that you or others find confusing or obscure, and elucidate these topics with analysis/research.

Reversed: inconsistent tone, modifiers, maudlin or exaggerated mood



33

THE BOX

Common Sense, Convention, Tradition

COMMON SENSE: Before thinking outside the box, try thinking in it. What do most people believe about your subject? Why might these attitudes have arisen in the first place? Do they contain wisdom?

TRADITION: Explore your topic in the context of your cultural traditions or those of another culture, doing research if necessary. How did views evolve over time? What value did these beliefs have for the people who held them?

OUTSIDE THE BOX: How can you subvert the reader's expectations? Examine popular beliefs people hold about your topic. What "obvious" or widely-held belief is wrong? Why?

Reversed: unexamined opinions, prejudice, narrow-mindedness, cliches



34

THE WILDERNESS

Liberty, Authenticity, Freedom of Thought

MAVERICK: Make a list of obvious topics or approaches associated with your topic. Now, make a list of alternatives. Circle everything on the list worth further experimentation.

AUTHENTICITY: How are external or internalized expectations making your thinking or writing inauthentic? Freewrite about your topic, writing as if you are speaking to a trusted friend. Can you incorporate more of this authenticity into your project while still satisfying necessary requirements?

FREEDOM: In the context of your subject, explore any theme related to freedom or its opposite (freedom of thought, autonomy, liberty, sovereignty, emancipation, free will, captivity, social control, dependence, subjugation, etc.)

Reversed: contrarianism, outlandishness, self-indulgence



35

THE OUTLIER

Exceptions, Anomalies, Outsiders

EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE: Select a claim about your topic. Think of an exception to this rule. How does the exceptions help you refine your argument and understand the mechanisms behind it?

ANOMALIES: What is odd or surprising about your subject? Choose one of these anomalies and jot down notes or freewrite about it.

OUTSIDERS: In the context of your topic, explore any theme related to outsiders (loneliness, alienation, displacement, strangers, foreigners, etc.)

Reversed: distraction, inconsistency, incoherence, exhibitionism



36

THE WORLD

Current Events, Context, Pop-Culture

THE HERE AND NOW: How is your topic relevant today? What events in your community or in the news bring up the same problems or themes? Don't be afraid to explore your topic in unconventional places (pop songs, video games, social media, etc.).

CONTEXT: For analytical writing, how does the context of the work you are analyzing shape its content? What social and political factors influenced the author? Alternatively, what larger social and political factors are influencing you as a writer?

PHONE A FRIEND: Discuss your topic with a friend, family member, acquaintance or stranger. How does their perspective broaden your thinking?

*Reversed: Abstraction, distraction,
overgeneralization*



37

THE FLOOD

Stream of Consciousness, Dream
Imagery, the Subconscious

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS: Set a timer for 5-10 minutes and free write whatever thoughts come to mind. Don't stop and don't judge what you are writing. The goal is not to write anything particular, or anything particularly well, but simply to prime your subconscious mind to produce creative associations.

THE DARK STAGE: Close your eyes and imagine a dark stage. Now, ask yourself a question related to your topic. Count to three. In your imagination, something will appear on the stage. Allow the image to appear in as much detail as possible. How might the image be an answer to your question?

DREAMS: In the context of your topic, explore any theme related to dreams or the subconscious.

Reversed: irrationality, superstition



38

CONSTELLATIONS

Connections, Integration, Relationships

RADIATING OUT: Select one idea, symbol, or image from the subject you are analyzing. Now relate it to as many other parts of your topic as possible.

SPIDER WEB: In your brainstorming, generate as many connections as possible between ideas. If you are using a bubble map, draw lines to show how information relates and jot down notes next to each line to describe the connection.

RELATIONSHIPS: Examine a key relationship that's relevant to your topic. This could be a friendship, family bond, political alliance, relationship with an animal, etc. What key interactions define the relationship? How is the relationship shaped by—and, in turn, how does it shape—those who participate in it?

Reversed: forced connections



39

THE UNIVERSE

Broader Significance, Abstraction, Faith

SO WHAT?: Zoom out from the specific conditions of your topic and look at it from a universal perspective. Why does it matter? What is at stake (for the characters, for society, for you)?

ABSTRACTION: Generate a list of abstract concepts that relate to your topic (e.g., "regret," "exploitation," "freedom," etc.)

FAITH: In the context of your topic explore any theme related to faith or lack thereof (belief, religion, prayer, the supernatural, the gods, God, the Devil, the Void, disillusionment, loss of faith, atheism, etc.)



40

DEATH

Focus, Concision, Loss

PRUNING: Clear away the dead growth. Select your three most interesting ideas. Transfer these to a fresh piece of paper. Cut everything else out. Now, continue to develop these ideas until you have a cohesive piece.

LACONIC MODE: Choose an important part or passage of your writing. Write at least a paragraph, using as few words as possible to convey your ideas. Try a second version, reducing your word count still more. What did you gain and lose through this experiment in concision?

DYING: In the context of your topic, explore any theme related to literal or figurative death (e.g., loss, grief, impermanence, immortality, new beginnings, etc.)

Reversed: narrow-mindedness, premature criticism, limited examples and exploration



41

METAMORPHOSIS

Change, Transformation, Transitions

TURNING POINT: Reflect on the topic or text you are analyzing, and look for a turning point. What changed? Why? Why is it significant? Alternatively, analyze a hypothetical future turning point that you either fear or would like to see become a reality.

TRANSFORMATION: How could you take a radically different approach to your writing? Evaluate the merits of this approach, and if it appears better than your current tack, transform your vision.

CHANGE: In the context of your topic, explore any theme related to change or its opposite (growth, adaption, circle of life, loss of innocence, fading beauty, progress, fear of change, stasis, permanence, stagnation, etc.)

Reversed: chaos, lack of commitment, weak transitions



42

THE PHILOSOPHER

Inquiry, Thought Experiments, Wisdom

ENDURING QUESTIONS: Write three big-picture questions related to your topic. These should be about ideas that are relevant to anyone in any culture at any time (e.g., human nature, existence, ethics, truth, beauty, the good, freewill, etc.) Choose one question to guide your brainstorming.

THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS: Create a hypothetical scenario to think through your issue and isolate the variables you are examining. Consider pushing things to the extreme to imagine what would happen if something were always true or never true.

WISDOM: In the context of your topic, explore any theme related to wisdom (e.g., good judgment, insight, intuition, humility, openness, learning, experience, etc.)

Reversed: Overly broad topic, ivory-tower speculation



43

THE CROWN

Thesis, Theme, Requirements, Power

GUIDELINES: What external requirements govern your writing, either explicitly (a prompt, a rubric) or implicitly (social norms)? How can you satisfy these requirements while aligning your work with your own interests and values?

THESIS OR THEME: Identify a governing idea for your writing. For analytical writing, generate a thesis: one sentence that summarizes your argument and is specific, debatable, and interesting. For narrative writing, determine your main theme: the larger message you will convey.

POWER: In the context of your topic, explore any theme related to power (e.g., coercion, manipulation, government, corruption, law, strength, weakness, capability, ineptitude, etc.)

WHAT NEXT?

There are three critical dimensions to pre-writing:

- Generate original ideas that will interest you and your reader
- Analyze and research to develop depth, clarity, and accuracy
- Prune and organize to create focus, coherence, and relevance

If you've played through enough cards, you'll likely have worked on all three of these dimensions.

However, if one still feels underdeveloped, take time now to strengthen it with more brainstorming, analysis, and outlining.

And then, it's time to write! Gather your ideas and march fearlessly and brightly into that first draft. Happy writing!