

Brainstorming Techniques Cheat Sheet

The five techniques that show up in every major guide, plus two more with hard numbers attached and the solo method most lists skip. Pick by what is actually stuck, not by which list you happen to be reading.

The five techniques every guide agrees on

Brainwriting. Each person writes ideas down instead of saying them aloud, then passes them along for others to add to. The 6-3-5 version: six people each write three ideas in five minutes, repeated for six rounds, up to 108 ideas in about half an hour.

Mind mapping. A central topic sits in the middle of the page, with related ideas branching outward as they occur to you.

Starbursting. Put your idea in the center of a star and label each point with one of six questions: who, what, when, where, why, how. The point is developing strategic questions before you commit to an answer.

Reverse brainstorming. Instead of asking how to solve a problem, ask how to cause it, then work backward from those answers to find real solutions. Works well on a group that has gone quiet or gotten too polite.

Rapid ideation. Set a strict time limit and generate as many ideas as possible before it runs out. Quantity, fast, no filtering yet.

Two more worth knowing for the numbers

Lightning Decision Jam. Runs 40 minutes to an hour and moves a group through positives, negatives, and solutions in that order.

Stepladder brainstorming. For groups of 5 to 15 people: two people start the discussion, then one more joins per round, so each new voice speaks before hearing what the group already thinks.

The dimension most lists skip: brainstorming alone, out loud

Free speaking. Talk the ideas out alone instead of holding them for a turn. Working alone removes production blocking: the wait for a turn to speak, during which an idea is often forgotten or no longer feels worth saying.

SCAMPER, spoken. Rework an existing idea as a spoken checklist: Substitute, Combine, Adapt, Modify, Put to another use, Eliminate, Reverse.

Reverse brainstorm rant. Say everything that could make the idea fail, out loud, with nobody grading you on it.

Which one to reach for

Blank page, nothing to start from. Use a structured prompt: starbursting's six questions, or a spoken Five Whys (ask why at least five times).

Too many ideas already spinning. Capture first, sort second: get everything out in one unsorted pass, then run it through buckets like Do Now, Do Later, Keep, and Drop.

Group politics. Brainwriting or 6-3-5, since ideas are written, not spoken. Or round robin: everyone contributes one idea before anyone gives feedback.

Remote team across time zones. Brain-netting: people brain dump into a shared digital space on their own schedule, then the group reviews the pooled results together.

Brainstorming out loud? InstantOwl turns the recording into an organized list of ideas. instantowl.com