

# Brainwriting Protocol

## Premortem Format

Version 1- January 1, 2018

The brainwriting premortem method will aid in engaging stakeholders to identify barriers that a group, program, or organization could come across while implementing a program, intervention, or behavior change.

The brainwriting premortem protocol includes a step-by-step guide to hosting a session and analyzing the data. This protocol is still in development. **If you are interested in using the protocol, we are available for consultation to help you be successful.** Please contact Heather Gilmartin at [heather.gilmartin@va.gov](mailto:heather.gilmartin@va.gov)

**To better understand how the method works in diverse settings we request you share with us how the protocol was used, adaptations made, how the tool performed (number of ideas, experience of facilitators) and participant satisfaction results. This will help us refine the protocol and track outcomes.**

A study in which this method was used successfully to identify barriers to program implementation while engaging front-line clinicians at ten Veterans Health Administration hospitals and primary care clinics will be published in 2018. Until this paper is available, please use the following citation for this work:

*Gilmartin, H., Leonard, C., Lawrence, E., Burke, B. Brainwriting Premortem Protocol. January 1, 2018  
Denver/Seattle Center of Innovation, Department of Veterans Affairs*



# BRAINWRITING PREMORTEM GUIDE



We have a new program we are going to roll-out. We would like your input.



To set the stage, I want you to imagine that the program has been running for about a year, and it's been a huge failure.

I want you to write out specific reasons why the program failed.

Begin with writing out as many ideas that pop into your head.



When you run out of ideas, put your paper in the center of the table.  
Grab a page that someone else has been working on. Read through it.  
If it prompts more ideas – keep writing!



10 min later



Thank you. We will use this information to help us adapt and strengthen our program.

Citation: Gilmartin, H., Leonard, C., Lawrence, E., Burke, B. Brainwriting Premortem Protocol. January 1, 2018. Denver Center of Innovation, Department of Veterans Affairs. [heather.gilmartin@va.gov](mailto:heather.gilmartin@va.gov)

## What is Brainwriting?

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Brainwriting is when a group of people get together and write out ideas on a specific topic. The process involves people writing ideas onto a sheet of paper, then passing the paper to other members of the group. Participants are given time to read, reflect and expand on each other's ideas. The goal of passing papers is to share ideas, trigger new ideas, and prompt innovative and out-of-the box thinking.

## Why use the Brainwriting Approach?

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The brainwriting process is similar to brainstorming in that ideas are being generated and shared in a group. However, the brainwriting process allows for all voices to be heard for no one has to wait their turn or worry that their idea might not be good enough to share. It also minimizes the risk of certain people dominating the conversation or taking the group off topic. Logistically, a brainwriting session can be hosted by one person with just this protocol for guidance. Data collection is easy. The participants do all the documentation, so there is no need for recording devices or someone to take notes. Lastly, the information is immediately available and can be used for real-time decision making.<sup>1-4</sup>

## What is a Premortem?

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A premortem is the hypothetical opposite of a postmortem. In healthcare, a postmortem allows the healthcare team to learn what caused a patient's death. Everyone benefits, except the patient. The same idea can be translated to project implementation. A premortem in a project planning setting comes at the beginning of a project rather than the end, so that the project can be improved rather than autopsied.<sup>5</sup> Unlike a typical problem identification session in which stakeholders are asked what *might* go wrong, the premortem pretends/assumes that the project has been implemented and failed and so asks what *did* go wrong. The stakeholder's task is to generate plausible reasons for the projects failure.

## When should you use the Brainwriting Premortem Approach?

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A brainwriting premortem approach is perfect when you want to engage stakeholders to learn what real or potential barriers exist with a project. Many people are reluctant to speak up about concerns during the planning stages because they think it's already a done deal and don't want to rock the boat. By making it safe for dissenters who are knowledgeable about processes and practices to share their concerns, you can improve a projects chances of success. The goal of this exercise is to identify the risks to the success of the program before it is implemented. After these barriers are shared, project team members can review the written information and look for ways to strengthen or adapt the program. This may lead to another brainwriting session that targets specific issues, or seeks solutions to barriers identified in the premortem.

## Who should Participate?

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Anyone who will be involved with a program or will be impacted by the program can participate in this activity. In healthcare, this may include clinical team members such as nurses, physicians, social workers, psychologists, or therapists. In the community setting, this may include community partners, citizens, patients, or family members.

## How do I stage a Brainwriting Premortem Session?

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A brainwriting premortem session should be scheduled during the planning stages of a program, or as part of pre-implementation site visits. A typical premortem begins after the group has been extensively briefed on the program plan and has been offered an opportunity to learn how the program is expected to fit or add to current processes (e.g. through mapping out each step of the process). The group is asked to sit around a single table. Participants are given paper and pens. The leader starts the exercise by informing everyone that the program has failed spectacularly. Over the next 10 minutes, those in the room write down every reason they can think of for the failure – especially the kind of things they ordinarily wouldn't mention as potential problems, such as system issues or political hotspots. Participants will review others' ideas for inspiration or to expand further on proposed ideas by writing on the same piece of paper. Once the time is up, the leader should collect the pages and let participants debrief amongst themselves, if there is interest.

## Materials and Set-up

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### Materials:

1. Multiple pens of the same color
2. Multiple sheets of blank paper (write on top of each page, “Why did the program fail?”)
3. Sign-in sheet (name, role in the organization or community)

### Set-up:

1. Schedule approximately 1 hour for the session:
  - a. Program briefing (30 minutes)
  - b. Brainwriting premortem exercise (10 minutes)
  - c. Debriefing (20 minutes)
2. Place multiple chairs around a single table
3. Put plain white paper in the center, equivalent amount to two times the number of participants
4. Place a pack of pens in the center

## Brainwriting Premortem Steps

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### Step 1:

Introduce or review the program being implemented. Allow time for questions about the program before beginning the activity.

### Step 2:

Introduce brainwriting premortem activity using the script guide below:

“This process is going to look a bit different than a traditional group brainstorming activity where everyone shouts out ideas and I write them on a board. We are using an approach called brainwriting, a silent, written brainstorming activity. You will be writing out your ideas and then pass the papers to others so people can agree or expand on them. To be clear, we don’t have any answers for you. This is about getting your insights so we can strengthen or adapt this program.

To set the stage, I want you to imagine that the program has been running in your organization for about a year, and it’s been a huge failure. It’s not been producing the promised results. People are not happy about any part of it.

I want you to write out specific reasons why the program failed. What aspects of your organization/community made it fail? What aspects of the population made it impossible to be successful? Who dropped the ball? Where were the issues in the system that made this program crash and burn?

To give you space to be fully honest and open, we will only be reporting the data from the group, not from individuals. We hope you will dig deep into your daily experiences of working in this organization/community. Be creative, there is no such thing as a bad idea. Though you may be the first to think of something, it may be real to everyone else in the room.

Each of you will start off with a blank piece of paper. You will have a total of 10 minutes to work on this. Begin with writing out as many reasons why the program failed that pop into your head. When you run out of ideas, put your paper in the center of the table and select a page that someone else has been working on. Read everything on the paper and either add to someone else’s idea, or start a new one. This is a group effort, so you can and should build off each other’s ideas.

As you are reading other ideas, if you see an idea that you agree is important, but you can’t expand on it, put a check next to it. You can then start a new idea, or you can continue writing about the failure point -- go deeper.

After the 10 minutes is up, I’ll collect the papers. Our goal is to use this information to strengthen or adapt the program. I may be reaching out to you again to identify solutions to some of these issues. However, if you have anything particular to share, please contact me directly.”

### Step 3:

Start brainwriting premortem activity. Your role is to keep people writing!

#### **Step 4:**

Collect forms and allow group to debrief with each other as needed.  
Distribute the Post-Brainwriting Survey to Participants (**Appendix**)

## **Problem Solving**

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### **No one is writing:**

- Say to the group:
  - Can you think of similar programs that have been implemented and failed, why do you think they failed?
  - If you get stuck, read an idea and ask yourself, “Who owns this?”, “Where can this happen?”, “What causes this?”
  - Write down any idea that comes to mind, no matter how wild
  - Focus on quantity – the more ideas the better
  - Focus on processes, people, organizational barriers, money, resources

### **Everyone is talking and not writing**

- Say to the group:
  - Since I am not recording this session, I ask that you write down your ideas so they can be captured

### **The group wants to jump to solutions instead of working on the problem**

- Say to the group:
  - Feel free to write down solutions to an idea if you have them, but know that we will be discussing solutions once we see what barriers exist. We want to focus on the biggest issues first

### **The debrief session has turned into brainstorming with lots of conversation**

- You can ask the group if it is okay for you to take notes, or request a note taker to capture the information
- You can ask if you can record this part of the session on your phone, then transcribe later

## **Data Entry and Analytic Guide**

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Once you have collected the brainwriting sheets, we recommend you scan all documents to a secure folder on your computer so they are stored somewhere safe. The next step is to review the information and start to look for useful ideas. You can do this by yourself or with your team. We suggest that you type each idea into a spreadsheet so that you can categorize the ideas into similar groups using cut and paste.

### There are two approaches to the data analysis:

*The first is an open-ended, inductive thematic approach* where the team reviews the ideas and asks the following questions:

1. Do any of the ideas seem similar?
2. If so, how do they seem similar?
3. Can you think of a label (couple of words or short sentence) that describes how these ideas are similar?

The labels the teams come up with are also called themes. For example, staffing issues, hiring issues, and holding staff accountable to the program may all fall under the “human resources” theme. Once you have started to identify themes, place the labels into the top column of a spreadsheet and copy and paste each individual idea into the appropriate category. It is okay if some ideas do not fit into a theme. It is also okay if there is disagreement among team members on what to label themes and/or which ideas fit under which themes. You should continue the discussion until the majority of the team comes to agreement on where an idea fits best. This may require slightly changing the theme names to make it more inclusive or exclusive of additional ideas.

*The second is a deductive thematic approach using an established conceptual framework.* This approach uses pre-identified themes or categories of interest for you to categorize the ideas generated during brainwriting. The selection of a conceptual framework is usually part of the pre-project planning phase and is meant to guide the collection, interpretation, and reporting of data. However, a framework can be selected at any time to guide the categorization and interpretation of data. Multiple resources are available to help select frameworks (see resources section).

Once you have identified a framework that fits your project, place the categories into the top column of a spreadsheet to guide categorization of ideas. Using the unique ideas from the brainwriting exercise, copy and paste each idea into the appropriate category. Just as in the inductive approach, categorization can be done through group discussion, or by two team members who cross-check results. The group should discuss any differences until all agree on the placement of ideas in categories. Some ideas may not fit into any category, and it is okay to create an “other” category.

Once you have your themes identified, determine which ones are your greatest priority and begin to discuss how to adapt or strengthen the intervention to address these issues.

## Data Reporting

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The thematic results can be presented in a one-page summary or through an infographic to allow for a discussion of perceived barriers and opportunities to adapt the intervention or address the contextual realities prior to implementation.

The data should be reviewed periodically with key stakeholders during implementation and sustainment phases to determine if adaptations to the intervention to address contextual barriers have been effective.

## References

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1. Paulus PB, Yang H-C. Idea generation in groups: A basis for creativity in organizations. *Organizational Behavior and Human decision processes* 2000;82(1):76-87.
2. Thompson L. Improving the creativity of organizational work groups. *The Academy of Management Executive* 2003;17(1):96-109.
3. Heslin PA. Better than brainstorming? Potential contextual boundary conditions to brainwriting for idea generation in organizations. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 2009;82(1):129-45.
4. Paulus PB, Korde RM, Dickson JJ, et al. Asynchronous brainstorming in an industrial setting: Exploratory studies. *Human factors* 2015;57(6):1076-94.
5. Klein G. Performing a project premortem. *Harvard Business Review* 2007;85(9):18-19.

## Resources

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For implementation frameworks

- <http://www.dissemination-implementation.org/>
- <http://www.cfirguide.org/>
- <http://www.nccmt.ca/resources/search/85>;

For evaluation frameworks

- <http://re-aim.org/>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/eval/framework/index.htm>

## Post-Brainwriting Premortem Survey

Thank you for participating in a brainwriting premortem activity to identify potential opportunities for failure in the roll-out of the \_\_\_\_\_ intervention at your facility. The \_\_\_\_\_ team will use the information to (a) adapt the program to the unique contextual realities of your organization, (b) bring the contextual data to key stakeholders and leadership at your site to hear different perspectives, and (c) act as baseline data to assess the effectiveness of interventions to address potential failure points.

The purpose of this brief survey is to assess your satisfaction with the activity. Your input is crucial to understanding how to alter the activity for future use. Participation is voluntary, anonymous, and should take less than two minutes.

For each item below, please select the single best response:

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am satisfied with my groups productivity	1	2	3	4	5
I am satisfied with the work processes of my group	1	2	3	4	5
I was afraid to give my ideas to the group	1	2	3	4	5
I was worried that my ideas would be criticized by the group	1	2	3	4	5

Do you have any suggestions for improving the brainwriting activity?

**Thank you for your participation**  
*Results will be reported in aggregate to assure anonymity.*