

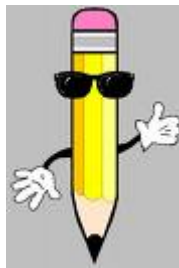


Getting Words on the Page:

Strategies for Writing and Overcoming Writing Blocks

GENERATING TOPICS/THESIS & GETTING STARTED:

- ❖ **Mark possible paper topics in your notes as you listen in class or read.**
- ❖ Clarify assignments with prof right away, before writing. Show professor brainstorming or outline or discuss ideas with him/her.
- ❖ Make mini-deadlines & put them in your calendar. Make appointments with friends, writing tutor, prof to keep you accountable.
- ❖ **Get help** from writing tutor and/or prof at point(s) that is/are hardest for you (ie, brainstorming, choosing topic, organizing material, forming thesis, drafting, revising, or editing) **BEFORE you get bogged down.**
- ❖ Try brainstorming techniques such as trees; maps; “reporter’s questions” (who, what, when, where, how, why); freewriting; free-doodling; looping freewrite (freewrite fast for 2-5 minutes, read over, highlight/circle most interesting sentence or phrase, write it down & start another freewrite from that sentence/phrase for 2-5 minutes. Repeat several times until you have something focused and interesting to work from.) **Looping freewrites are especially good for narrowing topics & discovering a thesis.**
- ❖ Re-read class/reading/research notes or texts from class that particularly interested you, looking for possible paper topics, or re-read them with the paper topic(s) in mind, taking notes about relevant info.
- ❖ Talk to a classmate, friend, writing tutor, or the professor about your ideas or topics related to class that interest you most, that you understand best or least. You could ask a classmate, tutor, or friend to take notes on what you say so you’re not worried about writing it down.
- ❖ Talk your ideas into a dictaphone or tape recorder, then transcribe them.
- ❖ Think about what you would cover if you were to teach someone else about this subject. What’s most important/most interesting?
- ❖ Try phrasing potential thesis as a question you’d like to explore or answer or argue about in your research/writing.
- ❖ Try phrasing a potential thesis as a “provable” or arguable statement about the topic you’re writing about—something like: “I believe _____ about _____ because _____.” (You can always word this more elegantly later, after you come up with something!)



WRITING THE DRAFT:

- ❖ Listen to music while writing if it’s not too distracting.
- ❖ Write fast when you are drafting. Turn off your “internal editor”; promise it that it can be turned on again when you are revising and editing!

- ❖ If you have a laptop, write someplace you like to be or have good associations with, as long as it isn't too distracting.
- ❖ For help with organization, try using notecards with main ideas written on them, and physically move them around into different patterns until you find an order you like.
- ❖ Try voice recognition software like Naturally Speaking or software that will read your paper back to you, like Kurzweil (check with Disability Services). Some versions of Word have a built-in function that allows you to dictate. On a Windows platform, open MSWord and look under "Tools," then click on "speech." On a Mac, look under "System Preferences" and click on "speech." You will need a microphone and need to use your own computer for this, since the program adapts to your way of speaking.



BREAKING THROUGH BLOCKS:

- ❖ Think of a time when writing has been easier--ANY writing, not just academic. What was different? What did you do? What was the situation/context? Try to replicate that as much as possible.
- ❖ Take a break, especially by doing something physical like walking, running, dancing, swimming, etc. I get a lot of ideas when I'm moving! Or go to sleep and set your alarm to get up a little earlier and work on it tomorrow. Don't worry that you're "wasting" time; your brain will be working on your paper in the background, and you probably will come back to it refreshed and more effective.
- ❖ Try one or more of the suggestions above, especially those under "**Generating topics/thesis.**"
- ❖ Break the writing project down into ½ hr or 1 hr chunks, and assign each a time in your calendar. For example: 1. Find 3 possible sources. 2. Read through index of book and look up pages on relevant topics. 3. Freewrite and talk to prof about my ideas.
- ❖ Write questions. What do you want to know about the subject? What interests you?
- ❖ If you have a bad block, try telling yourself you'll just work on it for 15 or 20 or 30 minutes, then take a 5 minute break. Stretch; get coffee; walk around. Sometimes the anticipation is the worst, and once you get going it's not as bad as you feared.
- ❖ "Fake it"—imagine you're writing a letter to a friend, a journal entry, or just telling someone about the topic. Remind yourself it's just a draft, not "the real thing."
- ❖ Write fast—think "this is just a draft!" Pick over exact wording later; just get the main ideas down first, even if they're not in complete sentences or the best order yet. Turn off your inner critic!
- ❖ Try making a writing "date" with a friend for moral support, even if you're working on different things.



REVISING:

Possibly making major changes in organization, content, and/or language

- ❖ Read over any comments your professor, classmates, or tutors made. Ask for clarification if you don't understand.
- ❖ Bring the draft (with comments, if any) to a writing tutor and/or to your professor to discuss revising strategies.
- ❖ If you need to expand parts of your essay, try targeted brainstorming. Focus on the idea(s) or section(s) that needs more development and try looping freewrites (see "**Generating Topics**" above), a map or tree, listing, re-reading relevant texts, doing more research, and/or talking through your ideas with a tutor, friend, or professor.

- ❖ If you need to work on organization, try printing out your paper so you can see the whole thing and physically cutting and taping sections.
- ❖ Making a “skeleton” of your essay by writing the main idea beside each paragraph can also help you reorganize and/or see where you need to cut or add material.
- ❖ Again, think of how you would explain or teach about the topic to someone else. Look for places where there may be too much or too little information, or information that is off-topic.
- ❖ Qualify generalizations and/or back them up with specific facts, opinions, ideas.
- ❖ Make sure assertions are supported by examples, facts, quotes, etc.



EDITING:

Minor changes to improve flow & proofreading for grammar/mechanics

- ❖ **PRINT IT OUT.** It can be hard to see mistakes on the screen. Don't look at the paper for at least a few hours—preferably overnight. Proofread it the next morning when your eyes are fresh.
- ❖ Try reading your paper aloud to yourself or someone else. Sometimes you can hear errors more easily than you can see them.
- ❖ Trade papers with someone else and proofread each other's writing. You will be seeing each other's work with fresh eyes, so it will be easier to spot mistakes.
- ❖ Try reading your paper backwards, starting with the last word or last sentence and moving back to the first. This helps you see what is *actually* on the page (including any errors) instead of just seeing what you know you *meant* to write.