

Beating writer's block

The Problem

Everyone occasionally has trouble writing. Sometimes the problem is simply procrastination; sometimes the lack of research means that you can't write because you don't have anything to say. You don't suddenly catch 'writer's block'; it develops when you let minor problems get on top of you. This pamphlet offers some ideas on how to deal with that terrifying blank page (or screen), and how to get to the end when you've become stuck somewhere in the process.

Getting Started

Your very first task as a writer is to make sure that you have something to say – a plan or map of your intended paper, or at least some information about the topic which you want to include in your writing. If you haven't got to this stage yet, don't try to write sentences or paragraphs until you have had a brainstorming session and created at least an outline of what you want to say.

Assuming you do have a plan and a proposition or thesis to communicate, here are some ideas about how to begin the process.

Start anywhere

You don't have to start with the introduction; in fact, you may like to write this last. For instance, for empirical research papers, it's often best to start with the Methods section because it is the most straightforward – you should know what you did.

Start with what you know best

Begin with the one point or paragraph or section that is the most clear to you: this may be a review of the starting reference; the part of this essay which relates to your thesis topic; or the issue which was explained most clearly in lectures or discussed in detail in your tutorial. Starting with something you feel confident about will increase your confidence about the whole task.



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Start with what you think

Your argument is the most important part of any essay. Since this is what you really want to say about the topic you don't have to work up all the supporting material before you commit yourself to paper. Often the best essays are written with this method, because the argument is more convincing when the evidence is added to it rather than vice versa. This may mean more 'thinking' time to make writing more efficient.

Record your responses

As you gather and read information, you can start writing what you think about each; there's no need to wait until all the evidence is in before you consider it, so why not note down your thoughts on each reading?

Try different media

Some people can't write straight onto the computer screen, even though writing in longhand and then typing the draft takes much longer. If you're having trouble drafting on paper or on the screen, see if switching to another writing medium helps to get you going. What about trying a tape recorder? On the computer try using 'outline' mode, bullet point lists or even a table.

Write any old thing

Try the 'stream of consciousness' approach; write everything that comes into your head straight onto your page or screen. Writing out your questions and comments about what you've said is valuable for later structural editing, whatever your writing method. These notes to yourself can be in a different typeface or colour so that they are easier to see later. *How about this? Who else agrees with this?*

Don't try to edit as you write

It doesn't have to be perfect the first time. You should have seen the first draft of this pamphlet! Think about writing as a process — each piece is a series of drafts. It's more important to get the ideas down than to worry about that perfect first sentence (you'll probably delete it later anyway).

When you can't go on

Sometimes you get started okay, but find that somewhere in the middle of the process all that wonderful flow of words dries up. There are many reasons for this, and lots of possible solutions. The most important thing to do is to react immediately. The longer you leave it, the harder it is to get going again. You can in fact write your way out of your problems. Just remember that writing is a process, and keep on drafting.

So — don't leave it too long. You can use some of the starting strategies above to get going again.

More strategies

Evaluate what you've done

Can you isolate particular problem areas? You may be feeling that all you have written so far is worthless, when it's really only one small part that doesn't work. Try and identify why it doesn't flow or what in particular is wrong with it. You might decide to have another attempt at writing that section or you may decide to delete it. The ASU has pamphlets on editing that may be helpful.

Do you need a deadline?

Sometimes procrastination can strike in the middle of your work, or you might lose motivation, especially in a longer piece. Try setting yourself small goals or deadlines so that you can measure achievement and have some sense of progress. For example, 'I will write 200 words and then have lunch'. 'I'll at least write bullet points for this section before I finish for the day'.

Imagine a different point of view

Try to look at your work from the perspective of the marker. Have another look at the assessment criteria or essay question. How well does your piece match what's expected? Are all your points and paragraphs related to the question or have you been sidetracked? Are there sections that need change or elaboration? Pinpoint the places where you need to write more and then write.

Have you lost focus?

Sometimes you can start heading down a different line of argument or get sidetracked on a minor issue. Try re-reading your notes or the main reference to make sure that you are still on track. You might need to delete sections or re-write them to clarify your focus.

Check what you've written against your plan

You can use the 'outline' function on your word processor to do this, or just highlight your topic sentences. Does the structure of your essay match your outline or essay plan? Does it flow logically from one paragraph to the next? If not, why not? What needs to change? Is it a simple matter of rearranging some paragraphs or do you need some more supporting points or further research on an area you planned to cover. Figure out what, if anything, needs to change. Then start writing the changes!

Ask someone you trust

This could be a friend, a tutor, a supervisor or an ASU advisor. The advantage of asking someone else to read your work is that he or she should be able to point out places where your argument is not clear or where you need to change or add more information, or clarify a connection. Ask for written comments and use these as a basis for your redraft.

Have you written your introduction?

Now that you know more about what you are saying, you might find it useful to express your argument concisely in an introductory paragraph. Even if you've already written your introduction take some time to review it to see if it's incomplete in any way or if it needs to be changed in light of the way your essay is developing. The ASU has a pamphlet *Introductions & Conclusions* which may be useful.

Make a plan for the gaps

Write a phrase or key word for the sections that are weak or missing. Even though you may not have all the information you require it's important to identify what you still need to research. Just the action of writing down what you already know, even if it's incomplete, helps generate more thoughts and ideas for investigation. You can use these phrases and key words as focus points for writing.

Do you need to go on?

Perhaps you've actually written all you need to and you're just having a perfectionist procrastination moment about letting the finished product out of your control. Be honest with yourself. Although every piece of writing could undoubtedly be improved, at some point you have to decide that you've done enough and it's good enough. Bite the bullet and hand the thing in before it takes over your life!

Useful references

Marshall, L. & Rowland, F. (1999). *A Guide to learning independently* (3rd ed.) Melbourne: Longman.

Clanchy, J. & Ballard, B. (1982). *Essay writing for students*. Melbourne: Longman.

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_block.html