

Writer's Block

Writing is never a smooth process, and most successful writing proceeds in fits and starts. Writer's block refers to those greater-than-ordinary blockages. It occurs when a writer feels truly stuck and unable to write. There are many possible causes, including anxiety, stress, or a simple lack of understanding of the material. Below are some common causes of writer's block, with some potential solutions. Do not forget that if you have access to a writing centre, probably the best way to work through writer's block is to meet with a writing centre instructor.

Are you having trouble understanding the assignment? You can gain a better understanding of the assignment through a combination of outside help and self-help:

1. When the instructor gives out an assignment, ask questions about anything that you find new or confusing. If you have questions, chances are that other students do too.
2. Most assignments use keywords that will help you figure out what you are expected to do. Look for keywords and phrases such as *analyse*, *discuss*, *argue*, *compare*, and *provide evidence*.

Have you done enough research? If you don't know what to write about, you may need to do more research or review the research you have already done:

1. Go to the library and speak with a librarian about finding materials on your topic and specific to the discipline.
2. Go back and reread key passages from your research materials. After reading, make notes on key ideas or potential pieces of evidence. Write in your own words so that you engage more fully with the material. Be sure to jot down any of your own ideas as well.

Have you done too much research? Sometimes if you've done a lot of reading on a particular subject, beginning to write can be overwhelming. See if either of the following two strategies helps focus your thinking:

1. Come up with a narrow research question that you can reasonably answer within the assigned word count. This question should help you discard materials that are beyond the scope of the paper.
2. Put the notes aside and ask yourself, what are the essential points to make about the topic? When you gather a lot of notes, you can easily become lost in all of the detail.

Do you have a topic? In many of your courses, you must narrow down a topic or even create your own. This challenging task can make getting started tricky. Try these suggestions:

1. Be sure that you have a specific topic. If you try to write on a topic that is too general or too vague, you will probably struggle.
2. Use course materials to help you generate or refine your topic. Reread lecture notes or readings in areas that you find interesting or that relate to the assigned topic. Look at the bibliographies of course readings to help you discover possible research directions.
3. Talk about your ideas. Have a conversation with a friend or another student in your class. Speak with your instructor about how to proceed with any thoughts you might already have for the assignment. Make an appointment at your writing centre. Sometimes discussing your ideas with another person can help you to clarify them.
4. Try a mind-mapping exercise. Take a piece of paper and write down your topic, or idea for a topic, in the centre of the page. In the surrounding space, write down any related ideas from class materials and research. Now, look at this mind map and take note of any interesting connections. Cross out any unrelated areas. Use the mind map to help create an essay outline or a research plan.

Have you written a paper in this genre before? It can be hard to get started on a piece of writing when it's in an unfamiliar genre or discipline. For example, if you're used to writing lab reports, you might not know how to get started on a thesis-driven essay. To solve this problem, find out the conventions for this type of writing in this particular discipline:

5. Check the course and department websites for examples or explanations.
6. Seek guidance from your professor or TA.
7. Look for handbooks and guides on how to write in specific disciplines.

Are you worried about sounding smart enough? It's normal to have trouble expressing your ideas in the early drafts of a paper. Here are tips to avoid paralyzing yourself unnecessarily:

8. Don't try to use unfamiliar words to sound smart, and don't convince yourself that your readers want you to do so. Focus on getting your ideas down simply and clearly.
9. Just get something down on the page! Try a free-writing exercise. Open up a new Word document and turn off your computer screen. Set a timer for five minutes. Start writing about whatever comes into your mind on the topic. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, or punctuation, and don't stop writing. After five minutes, look at what you've written. Ignore grammar or spelling problems. Instead, look for any important or recurring ideas.
10. Leave plenty of time for revising and editing. Once you have your ideas formulated in a draft, you can work on combining some of your simple sentences into more complex ones. You can also improve your word choice and, if necessary, make the overall tone more formal or academic by eliminating inappropriate colloquialisms and relying on key terms in your discipline.

Do you find introductions difficult to write? Even very experienced writers often find the introduction to be the hardest part of a paper. The best remedies relieve the pressure of having to come up with the ideal introduction before moving on to the body:

11. Write the introduction last. This approach may sound radical, but once you've written your paper, you will have a better sense of exactly what you need to introduce. Most of us were taught to write a paper from beginning to end, but research shows that many people don't think most effectively this way. Don't be afraid to start writing with what you know, even if it is something that you plan to deal with in a body paragraph. A writing plan, outline, or focus statement is still a good idea, but you don't need to write the introduction first.
12. Write the introduction quickly. If you find it impossible to write the paper unless the earliest draft begins with an introduction, then write one just to get going. But don't waste time on it or expect it to be perfect. Come back to it after you have completed the body, and then rewrite it.

Is outside stress distracting you from your academic work? Everybody has a life outside school, and sometimes outside responsibilities and stress can prevent you from focusing on writing. Learning new study habits can make a big difference:

13. Try time-management strategies that allow you to set aside separate time for school work and for other obligations. When you are writing, work somewhere quiet where you cannot be interrupted, turn off your cell phone, and stay off email and the Internet.
14. Take a break. If you are exhausted, you're unlikely to be productive. Take a nap, go for a walk, or have a snack. Often time away from an essay allows you to gain perspective or generate fresh ideas.