

Writing Center

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HOW TO TREAT WRITER'S BLOCK

Every writer, sooner or later, suffers from some form of Writer's Block, the inability to think or organize ideas. Symptoms may include sweaty palms, pencil chewing, and a pronounced tendency to sit in corners and weep. Although not every "cure" works for everyone, the following are a few suggestions to help minimize the misery.

Give yourself time to write

Give yourself time to write your essay, don't try to write the entire paper in one sitting. By doing so, you may place yourself under too much pressure. Writer's Block often accompanies the "up against the wall" feeling that strikes you at 2:00 am on the morning your essay is due at 9:00 am. Rome wasn't built in a day and neither are most good essays.

Verbalize your ideas

Since most students have had more experience talking than writing, try to verbalize your ideas. Sometimes it helps to discuss your ideas with a friend or classmate. Their questions and comments (not to mention their sympathy for your temporary block) will often trigger the thoughts you need to begin writing again. Or you might want to talk into a tape recorder so you can hear what you want to say.

Conquer the task

When an irresistible force meets an immovable object, something has to give. Conquer the task by separating your paper into manageable parts. Instead of drooping with despair over the thought of a ten page research paper, think of it as a series of small parts (explain the problem, review current research, possible solutions or whatever). Then tackle one part at a time and reward yourself when that section is completed.

Write the easiest part first

Get the juices flowing and the pen moving by writing the easiest or shortest part of your essay first. A feeling of accomplishment may give you the boost of confidence you need to undertake the other, more difficult sections. If no part appears easy or inviting, try more prewriting exercises until you feel prepared to begin the essay itself.

Play "Let's Make a Deal"

Sometimes you can't face the failure that you think will occur. If that happens, make a bargain with yourself, promising that you will work on the paper for only fifteen minutes, not a second longer. If in that fifteen-minute time span you are making good headway, ignore the promise you made to yourself and continue writing. If, on the other hand, your block continues,

put the essay aside for a while and come back for a fifteen-minute session later. (If you began writing your essay early enough, you can do this without increasing your anxiety.)

Give yourself permission to write

Give yourself permission to write garbage, that is, something you think might not be usable. Take the pressure off of yourself by agreeing in advance to tear up the first one or two pages of whatever you write if it doesn't meet your standards. You can always change your mind if those bad pages turn out to be treasures; if not, you said you were going to toss them anyway.

Consider your brain a water faucet

If you are like most people, you have probably lived in a house or apartment that contained a faucet that needed to run a few minutes before the hot water began to come out. Think of your brain in the same way and work on some other, easier writing task to warm up. Write a letter, make a grocery list, copy notes, do whatever, to get your brain working. When you return to your paper, your thoughts may be much better than you thought they'd be.

Remove anxiety, address a friendly face

Sometimes you can't write because you are too concerned thinking about what someone else will think of you because of what you wrote. Also, maybe you can't write because you can't decide who would want to read your work anyway. Instead of writing into a void or to an audience that seems threatening, try writing to a friend. Imagine what that friend's responses might be and try to elaborate or clarify whatever is necessary. If it helps, write the first draft as a letter (Dear Clyde, I want to tell you what happened to me last week....), and then redraft your ideas as an essay when you have found your purpose and focus, making whatever changes in tone or development necessary to fit your real audience.

Writer's Block is temporary

Writer's Block is a temporary condition, not a permanent one. Many writers, including many professional writers, have had it and survived to write again. To help overcome it, leave your papers and take a walk outside, walk around the block or, at least, into another room. Think about your readers, what should they know or feel at this point in your essay? As you walk, try to complete the sentence, "What I am trying to say is....). Keep repeating this phrase and your responses aloud until you find the answer you want.

Knit one, pearl two

Sometimes when you are blocked at one point, a bright idea for another part of your essay will occur to you. If possible, skip the section in which you are stuck and begin working on the new part. (At least jot down the new ideas so they won't be lost when you need them later.)

Change partners and dance

If you are thoroughly overcome by the vast white wasteland before you on your desk, get up and do something else for a while. Exercise, balance your checkbook, or put on music and dance. (Mystery writer Agatha Christie claims that she did her best planning while washing the dishes.) Give your mind a break and refresh your spirit by putting the essay away for a while, a day or two if you began it early enough and have the time. Do something else and return to it

much later. When you come back to it, you may be surprised to discover that your subconscious writer was working while the rest of you played.

Relax!

The single, most important advice that can be given you is to relax! No one, not even the best professional writer, produces perfect prose every time he/she sits down and writes. If you are blocked, you may be trying too hard; if your expectations of your first draft are too high, you may not be able to write at all for fear of failure. You might be holding yourself back by being a perfectionist. You can always revise and polish your prose in another draft—the first important step is jotting down your idea. Remember that once the first word or phrase appears on your blank paper, a major battle has been won.

Adapted from Jean Wyrick's *Steps to Writing Well*.