

How College Writers Can Beat Writer's Block

Metropolitan State University Writing Center

Index

Freedom	p. 1
A New Point of View	p. 2
Use Your Own Voice	p. 2
You are NOT Alone!	p. 2
Find Your Block and Fix It	pp. 3-11
A Final Word	p. 12
References and Links	pp. 13-14

Freedom.

First off, what are you worried about? Look at it this way - the biggest problem most writers have is trying to get somebody to read their stuff. You have a built-in audience... your professor has to read it! You have absolute freedom from worry about finding an audience.

- Take that freedom and run with it.
- Repeat after me: There is No One Right Way to Do a Paper.
- Look at your assignment again. Say to yourself "How can I fulfill the parameters of the assignment, but do it an interesting way?"
- Make it your own! Something new will be more fun for you to write, and more fun for your professor to read.

A New Point of View

Turn a situation around. Take a different point of view. Here are some examples:

- Write from the point of view of a character in a short story you're studying.
- Take the role of a journalist reporting on the events in the story. Or a police officer. Or an innocent bystander. Or a character's relative.
- Instead of giving a parade of references to prove your point, think of new ways to present your evidence, like writing your essay as a courtroom drama, with your references appearing in court to report your research. You get the idea. Yes, you get the idea!

Use Your Own Voice

Don't be afraid to use your own voice. When your opinion is called for in an assignment – give it!

- Write about your relevant experiences. Give examples.
- Make connections to things you've seen and done. Professors like to see you make connections. It shows you understand the underlying concepts.
- Don't be afraid to express your personality. Academic writing does not always have to fit one mold – it does not have to "sound like an academic paper."

You are NOT Alone!

Everyone has writer's block sometime. The most common cause is thinking that you should be able to sit down and write one perfect draft and you're done. Nobody can do that. There are no "instant" papers. Writing is not one job. It is broken into three phases, pre-writing, writing and post-writing. Pre-writing is when you begin your research, let your ideas flow, write notes to yourself when ideas pop into your head in the shower. Let your mind be free. Take all those notes and write them down. You're writing! Post-writing is just review, editing, and proofing.

Find Your Block and Fix It

There's as many kinds of writer's block as there are writers. And researchers! As a college student, you are learning to identify, analyze and adapt. On the next few pages you'll find 20 different causes of writer's block reported by 20 different researchers. Find one you can relate to:

1. Failure to relax and trust own feelings. (Brandt 1934)

- Use your own unique experiences. Don't hesitate to use your own voice. Connect your own experiences to the concepts you're learning about.
- You have a unique perspective -- it's more interesting for your professor to read, and more fun for you to write, if you write with conviction. Make it your own.
- Professors want to hear what you think about what you've read, not just a report on what you've read. What they want to pick up in your papers is that you are thinking about what you are studying, and making connections... applying what you've learned. Tell them something new! In writing, there's no one right answer. It's all interpretation. So interpret!

2. "Lingerers Thesis" (always too much to do). (Seidenberg 1961)

- Are you a list maker? Do you have to write down everything you need to do for the next three days before you feel free to start on a big project like a paper? At least you're writing! But do you tell yourself "see, I got this list done!" (I have even been known to write "make list" at the top of a list, so I could cross something off right away.)
- It's habit forming. But with a long list like that it's also overwhelming. What do you really have to do? Sorry, it's the "P" word - Prioritize. Don't make a list of everything you have to do tomorrow, next week, next month. Make a list of what you have to do today. And include a little bit of working on your paper.

- A little bit every day gets better results than one frantic night of writing before an assignment is due.

3. Passively await the magical flow of ideas. (Flower & Hayes 1977)

- This is a common affliction in writers that consider themselves good writers. "Oh, I always think of something, it'll come to me. I'll just watch this TV show. I'll just go to bed early. I'll just take a bath and read a good novel to relax and refresh. I deserve a break."
- This is especially prevalent when you have the luxury of a due date comfortably far off in the future and you feel you can just sit and wait for that big idea to arrive.
- Well, you'll find that the best ideas aren't going to flow unless you get out there and get started. Begin your research. Give yourself new directions to think about, new connections to make. So you're a good writer? Be a great writer and give yourself the chance to get started early on a good idea.

4. Writing feels like chaos and disorientation. (Elbow 1973)

- The process of writing is capturing a stream of thoughts. But like water, ideas can pour out in all different directions. A raging river of inspiration.
- But organizing a writing task is a process - a series of stages - like locks in a river. Stop, fill up with ideas, and continue downstream. The writing process has three stages: pre-writing, writing and post-writing. Pre-writing can feel like chaos. That's OK. Lots of ideas are colliding in there. Give yourself time to think about them, and the good ones will surface.
- Take notes as you research your subject. Keep notes as you think about your project over a period of time. Then start the writing stage. Type all your notes into your computer. Type them into one big file, get all your thoughts down. Just typing them into the computer will help align ideas. Then work with and organize your thoughts. Don't worry about little things like grammar and

punctuation. Just get the writing done. Then take a break! You can go back and check grammar, punctuation and spelling in the post-writing stage.

5. Avoidance due to expectancy of failure. (Daly & Miller 1975)

- This is no time to be a pessimist. Give yourself a break. Every new paper is a fresh start. Break the vicious cycle. Smash it. Bash it. Pummel it into dust. Let your mind go. Let yourself be free.
- If you've been given constructive criticism, take it. Get some help. There's so much written about writer's block and writer's apprehension. All the academic studies talk about high-apprehensives and low-apprehensives... but none of them talk about non-apprehensives. Everybody's had writer's block.
- You are not alone. Forgive yourself for any perceived failures, and try again. If you have trouble getting started, make an appointment at the Writing Center. Helping people brainstorm is our favorite part. We can talk to you about your assignment, interview you about your experiences, and help discover new angles to write about.

6. Difficulty concentrating. (Mellgren 1976)

- Your mind knows when it is wasting time. If you haven't got a valid idea for a project that's worth chasing down, your mind won't get excited about it. And if you try to tackle a huge project all at once, your mind will hit that slippery slope and give up.
- Turn that slippery slope into a series of small steps upward with a little bit of work every day. Just give yourself time to climb those stairs. Once you've got a good idea, it'll be easy to keep going.

7. Reject too soon, discriminate too severely (Freud 1913)

- Of course we have to have a theory from Freud, don't we? And what was his take on writer's block? You're being too harsh on yourself. Punishing yourself too fiercely. Let it go! Step back and look at your writing. It's not so bad!

- Go easy on yourself. Forgive yourself, as Freud would say. You're trying to reject your writing before anybody else can reject it. But don't judge your work by your first draft. It's just a draft. Just get all the ideas down. Think about them. Let them sort themselves out. Give yourself time to do several drafts. Don't reject your whole idea by throwing it out too soon.. Keep what you have and build on it. Build a better paper. All it probably needs is some reorganizing. Your first instinct is usually correct. Your primal instinct, as Freud would say!

8. Failure to arrange writing tasks into manageable subunits. (Passman 1976)

- Having a hard time organizing a project is one of the most common causes of writer's block. But like anything else, you have to break it into pieces and get started on a little corner of it. Before you know it, the project is taking shape.
- The writing process is broken into pre-writing, writing, and post-writing stages. So forget about having to actually write something right off the bat. Stop and think about it first. Pre-writing does not have to be formal. Just relax and think about your project while you are doing the dishes or laundry or taking a shower. The best ideas come to you when you are occupied with something else and not just sitting there thinking "I must come up with something right NOW." During your pre-writing stage, you start your research. You need new ideas, new input from your research. Just pick a general area and start reading. Take notes of your thoughts while you are reading, and think about your reading while you're doing the dishes or whatever. You'll find your project taking shape.
- Then type all your notes into your computer. There! Something has been written! Then you just have to sort out your ideas and soon you will have a paper.
- Post-writing is for review and editing and proofing. You're done!

9. Lack of strategy for composing. (Lamberg 1977)

- The most important thing is know your audience. In the case of a college paper, your audience is primarily your professor, and secondarily, the intended audience of your assignment. If you've paid attention in class, you're going to know your professor's interests, likes and dislikes.
- When the fact that you paid attention to that is evident in your work, it doesn't mean you are fawning on the professor. It means you listened, paid attention to your primary audience, and wrote something that was interesting for them to read.

10. Fatigue. (Chase-Marshall 1977)

- Fatigue happens when you try do do too much. And it happens when you put off doing too much. Guilt is heavy. I've spent more time worrying about not doing a project than doing it.
- If you let your project go for too long, you're going to have too much to do in too little time. Everyone has busy lives and sure, it is hard to fit in homework. If you can do a little each day it is so much better than sitting down at 8:00am on a Sunday morning and saying: OK - I've got 24 hours till this is due.
- If you're still stuck - get an extension if you can. And break the vicious cycle. Start right away!

11. Early experience with intimidating teachers. (Minninger 1977)

- Third grade teachers who tore up papers and threw them in the trash. Teachers that laughed at papers. Teachers who left papers awash in sea of red ink. And even worse, teachers who make indistinct marks in the margin and tell you to find the mistake and fix it.
- These teachers are not helping. And it seems that many writers harbor bad feelings from those third grade humiliations. Leave all that behind. Start fresh. They can't intimidate you. Those teachers and their red pens are long gone. Retire them!

12. Writing as a trap, for making one look foolish. (Shaughnessy 1977)

- Every student has a right to expect a positive learning experience when taking a course. But face it, we've all had teachers who give vague assignments, and imply that the choice is up to us. Then when the assignment is turned in, they say "This isn't what I wanted." It's like they set you up to fail. And it can be very, very discouraging.
- You have good and bad teachers, like everything else. If there are 30 people in a class, there are 30 different ways people can interpret the assignment. If you're not sure what the teacher is asking for, speak up in class. There are plenty of other people who are wondering, too. If you still don't get it, talk to the teacher after class or email them. If you're going to build your paper on it, it's better to start with a strong foundation.

13. Anger and resentment about having to work and compete. (Valian 1977)

- So everyone else is having a good time and you're stuck doing a paper? Remember why you're in school. You're doing this for yourself.
- Some people find that the school environment is too competitive. They don't want to be measured against other students. They'd rather just do their own thing. But that's what college is all about. If you don't do the work, you won't learn anything. And life is all about competition.
- Don't feel bad if someone else gets an A. Ask them how they did their paper. (If they got an A unfairly, that's another story.) So many students stay in their own bubbles. You don't want to be stuck with just one perspective. Collect a bunch of them.

14. Rather judge than generate own writing. (Adams 1978)

- Sure, it's easier to judge someone else than put your own work out there to be judged. Writing is hard work.
- The hardest part of it is tackling that blank sheet of paper and setting up and framing the project. An editor just comes along and tinkers with wallpaper

and paint. But you're a better judge, and a better editor, if you've put in the work yourself. Over, and over, and over. Just like anything else.

15. Difficulty of getting started each new day. (Cowley 1978)

- What we can put off till tomorrow... we can easily put off another day. Until the deadline is staring you in the face.
- One reason we have difficulty getting started is we know we have an impossibly huge task in front of us that will never get done, so why start? At least today.
- But if you work on it a little bit every day... the mountain will be whittled away. Make a realistic goal every day. You will gain momentum instead of losing it.

16. Writing is hard work that invites criticism. (Mack & Skjei 1979)

- Who wants to put themselves out there, do a lot of hard work, and then get punished for it? Writing is easy to criticize. Besides all the grammatical and punctuation traps, everyone is going to either agree or disagree with your ideas.
- Everyone's an editor. Some people think they have to change something just to show they were paying attention. But you can't worry about that. Just do your best and have no regrets. Like William Hung!

17. Doubting thoughts lead to tension, fearfulness. (Menks 1979)

- Here's a typical writing pattern... Think about writing. Eat something. Think about writing. Eat something. Run out of time. Write something. Anxiously await feedback.
- Break that vicious cycle. Start with confidence. Think about the three stages of writing: pre-writing, writing, post-writing. It's nothing to worry about, it's all mechanical, just break it down in stages and get started. Every paper is a clean slate.

- Sure, you can call an introductory period of doubts and procrastination your "pre-writing" period... but why not just start your research instead?

18. Unproductive worries about details. (Sears 1979)

- Perfectionism is a finely crafted form of procrastination. Need I say more?
- Dispense with all worries about grammar, structure, punctuation, and MLA style, just get those ideas down. Get the writing done. Then come back when it's done and tweak the little stuff.
- If you skip worrying in the beginning, and instead save time for your worrying at the end ... you'll always be done early!

19. Written thought pales compared to imagined ideas. (Galbraith 1980)

- Oh, the bonds of pen and paper, or the computer key pad! As Mr. Bingley said in Austen's "Pride and Prejudice"... "My ideas flow so rapidly that I have not the time to express them, by which means my letters sometimes convey no ideas at all to my correspondents."
- As Darcy noted at the time, Bingley said this with a certain amount of pride in his impetuous thoughts. Well, that's no excuse! If you want to share your thoughts, and turn in your assignments, you're going to have to write them down. Clearly! So slow down and capture those ideas!

20. Procrastination when immediate pressures disrupt. (Dillon, Kent & Malott 1980)

- There's always going to be something else going on. Especially when conflicts arise because you don't have enough time for your project in the first place. Well, they're just not going to put more hours in the day. (It took me a while to realize that!)
- We all "have to" do more in one day than we can possibly do. But who is making these "to do" lists? Us! Make a shorter list! Give yourself a break.

There's always going to be dishes to wash (the darn things accumulate every day!) and laundry to do.

- Agatha Christie said that the best time to plan a book is when you are doing the dishes. Use that time for prewriting. Think up some ideas that get you excited and ready to go to work on your paper!

A Final Word

Give yourself the gift of time. Time to think. Time to research. Time to follow new ideas. Time to pull your notes together. Time to go through the three phases of writing... pre-writing, writing, and post-writing. You'll be proud of the result.

And give yourself time to make an appointment at the Writing Center here at Metropolitan State University. It's free. With an appointment, you get a whole hour with a tutor to go over your paper or help you brainstorm. And we don't just mark up your paper. We like to talk about your assignments, brainstorm together, show you new ways to express your ideas. A different perspective can be a positive thing. Come see us. Think about it! Call 651-793-1460.

References ad Links

References

The causes of writer's block came from this article: Boice, Robert. "Cognitive Components of Blocking." *Written Communication* 2, 1985, p. 91-104. There are 20 more causes included in the article!

Recommended Reading

Fuller, Linda K. and Shilling, Lilless M. *Communicating Comfortably: Your Guide to Overcoming Speaking and Writing Anxiety*. Amherst, MA: Human Resource Development Press, Inc.. 1990.

Klauser, Henriette. *Writing on Both Sides of the Brain: Breakthrough Techniques for People Who Write*. San Francisco, CA: Harper. 1987.

Helpful Links

DePauw University Writing Center Web Site.

http://www.depauw.edu/admin/arc/writing_center/handoutlist.asp

"Strategies for Helping Students Overcome Writing Anxiety/Writer's Block/Getting Started Anxiety"

Metropolitan State University Writing Center.

<http://www.metrostate.edu/writingcenter/clues/index.html>

"Clues for College Writers"

Princeton University Writing Center Web Site. "Writing Anxiety"

Purdue University OWL Online Writing Lab. "Coping with Writing Anxiety" and "Overcoming Writer's Block"

Princeton University Writing Center Web Site.

http://web.princeton.edu/sites/writing/Writing_Center/WCWritingResources.htm

"Writing Anxiety"

Purdue University OWL Online Writing Lab.

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/index.html>

"Coping with Writing Anxiety" and "Overcoming Writer's Block"