

Keep on Writing: Getting Past So-Called Writer's Block

No. 32 in the Writing Center Handout Series

Writer's block is "a usually temporary psychological inability to begin or continue work on a piece of writing" (The American Heritage Dictionary). It can be a source of great frustration when trying to complete any type of writing but numerous strategies exist to move that "block" out of the way and keep on writing. Different writers use different tactics. Whether you're stuck at the very beginning or on your last sentence, these strategies can help get those wheels turning.

Read

Sometimes you get so involved in a particular assignment that you lose track of your direction or of how your paper relates to the class or text. After going over the assumed material again, you will often feel confident and clear enough about your topic to begin writing again.

- *Review your thesis.* You'll either return to your focus with a good sense of direction or decide to rewrite it. Don't be afraid to alter your thesis; you might be "blocking" yourself by refusing to do so.
- *Look over previous drafts* (if you have them). Remind yourself of your original plan and pursue it or change it.
- *Review class notes or reading notes.* These sources can give you ideas for your assignment and support for your topic.
- *Reread the text* (or part of it). Reviewing the original source can remind you of why you chose your topic in the first place, and might motivate you to continue writing.

Rethink

Try thinking about your paper in different ways, instead of as a long series of connecting phrases and paragraphs.

- *Make an outline* of what you have so far or of what you want to say. Looking at the most important points of your paper can help you see how to tie it all together, and you may think of points to add or change.
- *Make a chart or draw a picture* related to your assignment. If you're a visual learner, viewing your paper as an image can seem less daunting than looking over hundreds of words on a page.
- *Start somewhere else.* Work on the part of the paper that comes easiest to you. This might be the conclusion or a paragraph in the middle. Starting with the easy part will help you focus on your topic and should spark ideas for other sections.
- *Try free-writing.* Just write whatever comes to mind about your topic, even if it's grammatically incorrect or you don't think it sounds good. Fresh perspectives may come to you during this exercise.

Move

Your case of writer's block might be the result of staring into a computer screen for hours on end. Leaving your workspace for a while can be a good thing. Don't worry about missing the deadline; these tips can help you make that due date, rather than watch it pass from a slumped position in the computer lab:

- *Take a break.* This might sound counterproductive, but pausing to take a walk, make a phone call, or play frisbee gives your mind a chance to relax, and you will return to your writing refreshed. If taking a complete break isn't feasible, try working on an assignment for a different class. Then go back to the paper.
- *Do more research.* You might be stumped because you don't have adequate support for your thesis—find some.
- *Describe your topic to someone else.* Go to the Writing Center or talk to a friend, and have that person take notes on what you say. Talking out your ideas can shed new light on what you think and what you can include.
- *Talk to your instructor.* He or she can give you advice on a focus for your paper and can sometimes help you determine what's really "blocking" your writing.
- *Move to a different place* to work on your assignment. Maybe your brain is slouching because your body is. A new location might be the refresher you need.

Back to the paper

Some debate exists about whether writer's block exists at all; perhaps it's just the way we describe difficult moments in the writing process. In any case, whatever "it" is, it's curable. As with many other problems, admitting you're stuck is the first step to overcoming that block. Then you can get back to work!

For more information on writer's block, see

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

<http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/block.html>

<http://www.purefiction.com/pages/writing/block.htm>

