

Beating Writer's Block

Every writer has so called “writer’s block” at one point or another, but though the condition is real, try uttering it as an excuse to one of your professors and you’ll find it just doesn’t cut it. Many things can cause an inability to write. Disinterest, confusion, anxiety, self-consciousness, perfectionism—all these can lead to a trash can full of balled up papers and an ever rapidly approaching deadline. The Writing Center has put together a brief list of techniques that may help get you started generating ideas and text. Whenever you feel stuck, peer tutors at The Writing Center can help you climb out of your slump by discussing your situation and your assignment. If you visit the Center in person or if you peruse this list, keep in mind that the best way to lose your case of writer’s block is to start writing—ANYTHING—with the realization that there will be time for a million decisions and revisions once you start writing.

1. **Talking the paper out:** Sometimes the best way to begin writing is with conversation. We use this principle at The Writing Center and you can use it yourself. Find an understanding friend or a tape-recorder and simply talk about your paper for a while, fifteen to thirty minutes. Your listener (or you later) can pose questions that may help you find out where you are going. Speaking to someone is often easier than writing. When you begin speaking, you may find that you know more than you thought you did.
2. **Freewriting:** One of the most difficult aspects of writing is fighting that inner censor who won’t let you scribble down a line until it has become a beautifully crafted statement. Freewriting is the kind of technique that helps you get past that censor. The rules for freewriting are simple. Just write nonstop for five to fifteen minutes on a topic. Even if you feel like your mind is completely empty, you must keep writing. Write “My mind is completely empty. I have nothing to say. I hate this.” It doesn’t matter what you write, how sloppy or poorly punctuated it is, as long as you’re writing. At first, this technique may feel awkward and generate little useful material. For many writers though, freewriting allows them to quiet that frustrating censor and discover interesting ideas they didn’t know they had.
3. **Brainstorming:** We remember this one from elementary school. Brainstorming can be done with a group or alone. The writer simply writes down every single idea he or she can think of in connection with the assignment. Don’t worry about the quality of ideas here. Instead concentrate on quantity, so that you may later see various connections and possibilities for writing.
4. **Listing:** Listing is what it sounds like. Come up with lists of ideas or things. Create categories that relate to your topic or possible topics and generate ideas that fall into these lists. These can become like “to do” lists for your paper or may simply be ways to see all the possibilities for what you are writing. Use lists in whatever way seems most beneficial.

5. **Clustering:** Clustering is like both brainstorming and listing. It involves that jotting down of quick ideas, this time into categories where linking lines can be drawn to connect ideas. Think of clustering as mapping out a rough outline for your paper, starting with loose lists of ideas. Clustering can often spring from brainstorming or listing.
6. **Scribbling in a Notebook or Journal:** If your paper is due fairly soon it may be too late to use this technique, but it is a rather helpful one to use later. Often good or even great ideas come to you when you least expect them—right before falling asleep, while working out or even while sitting in class. By keeping a journal handy, you can effortlessly record statements and ideas you may want to retrieve later on, when you usually find yourself blocked.
7. **Role playing:** Sometimes when you feel unable to write, the best way to generate ideas is by stepping into another perspective. This may prove especially useful when writing persuasive or argumentative papers. Adopt a role that is new to you, imagine yourself as the person on the opposite side of your argument, imagine yourself as someone more intimately or personally effected by your topic.
8. **Experiment with thesis statements:** Don't settle on your thesis just yet, but allow yourself to try on different ones for size. See where your interests lie and with which thesis you feel you have the strongest paper. Use the sentence, "In this paper I will show that_____." This sentence will make you move beyond a topic, you will have to analyze it to complete the sentence.
9. **Starting in the middle:** Since starting a paper is often the hardest part, why not forget the beginning and just try writing from some point that seems more accessible and interesting to you. What else is cut and paste for?
10. **Outlining:** Though outlines can seem daunting, they may actually help you. Not everyone benefits by starting their paper with an outline, but many do, especially if you have already gone through some of the other techniques like freewriting and clustering. After generating ideas from these techniques, organizing what you have may motivate you to work on your first draft.
11. **Rereading the assignment:** Always look for clues in the assignment. Make sure you understand what is being asked of you and take cues from the words in the assignment. Let these be what helps you list ideas or brainstorm possible topics. The assignments may even contain a basic structure for your paper which will help you if you want to outline.