George Mason University Writing Center

writingcenter.gmu.edu
wcenter@gmu.edu
703.993.1200

Writer's Block

What is writer's block anyway?

- It is an anxiety we feel when we are unable to transfer ideas from our heads to the page.
- It is a feeling of inadequacy—that whatever we write will be unoriginal, unimaginative, or have very little value.
- It is a *temporary* state in which we are so overwhelmed with the expectations of an assignment, instructor, ourselves (inner editor) that we can't get started.

Techniques to Combat Writer's Block

Stream of consciousness writing:
There are variations to this type of writing. In general, the ideas are the same: writing freely without considering grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, etc. The most important aspect of this exercise is to just write!

> Variations include: write what comes to your mind as you focus on your topic; write with your eyes closed; cover your computer screen and type freely; write slowly while focusing on each shaping of the letters; or set a timer/alarm and write non-stop for 10-15 minutes.

Change your location:
If you usually write at a computer, try the kitchen or dining room table. If you usually write at a desk, try a seat by a window. Or how about a coffee shop, a park, or the library?

Relaxation techniques:
Take a break from trying to write. This will help you to rejuvenate (but come back soon)! Take some deep breaths. People who tell you that physical exercise is important for mental activity are telling the truth. If nothing's happening on the computer screen or paper, take a walk around the block. Hit the treadmill or tennis courts or drive to the gym. But take your notebook with you. Fresh blood will be flowing through your brain and jogging might just jog something loose in your head. It happens.

Start in the middle of your writing project:
Avoid the problem of getting started by starting on a part of the project that interests you more and then come back to the introductory matter later. After all, your readers will never know you wrote the introduction last (another joy of word-processing technology!).

Talking Aloud:
Talk over your paper with a friend, or just blab away into a tape recorder (even better). Play the tape back and write down what you hear in clusters of ideas or free write about them.

Accountability & Community:
Set up a time and place to write with someone else or a few other writers. Start by talking about what you are working on, your struggle, and what needs to be done. You can set a specific amount of time for everyone to write silently (an hour or a few). Then come back together in the end to vocalize what you accomplished (and what you still want to accomplish if more needs to be done). This goal setting, accountability, and community are highly valuable for the writing process.
Use the Writing Center:

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Make an appointment with a tutor at our Writing Center! We find that talking out your writing problem and brainstorming with our tutors in a session can be very productive in helping you to move forward.

Some helpful quotes from writers who know

“The secret of getting ahead is getting started. The secret of getting started is breaking your complex overwhelming tasks into small manageable tasks, and then starting on the first one.” — Mark Twain

“If you get stuck, get away from your desk. Take a walk, take a bath, go to sleep, make a pie, draw, listen to - music, meditate, exercise; whatever you do, don’t just stick there scowling at the problem.” — Hilary Mantel

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