



Office of Learning Resources

University of Pennsylvania
Suite 300, Stouffer Commons
3702 Spruce Street
57-EXCEL (3-9235)
lrcmail@pobox.upenn.edu
<http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/lrc>

Battling the Block: Writing through and beyond writer's block

We can all relate to the painful experience of counting the number of times the cursor blinks on a blank page. Even the best of writers suffer from writer's block at one time or another. Translating thought into print often feels like a huge leap, and the uncertainty that we'll land on our feet seems to cripple our command of the English language. The following strategies—recommended by seasoned writers—can help to make that leap more manageable.

Let the assignment incubate

Great papers seldom come fully formed. Use waiting time (e.g., walking to class, waiting in line at the bank, doing laundry) to think about what you have to do in this assignment and how you want to respond. You'll be surprised how much this extra thinking time can help!

Represent your ideas visually

Once you've got an idea of what you want to say, try to create a visual representation. Maybe you want to draw a concept map to show how your ideas are related. Or perhaps you want to write your main ideas on big sheets of paper in different colors. These strategies can help you identify weaknesses in your structure or gaps in your logic. And besides, they're fun!

Verbalize your thoughts

We are often more comfortable expressing ourselves verbally than through writing, so use this to your advantage. Talk your ideas out with a friend, learning instructor, or writing advisor and ask them to take notes for you. Or talk into a tape recorder and play your ideas back to yourself. Very often the act of talking will help you generate ideas or make connections you hadn't thought of before.

Change your audience

People very often have difficulty writing because they can't seem to translate the ideas in their head into appropriate academic language. So ignore the language and pretend you're writing to your mother, a friend, or even a family pet. Expressing your ideas more casually allows you to relax and facilitates sincere expression. Once your thoughts are down on paper, you can always revise them to sound more academic.

Freewrite

Sometimes the very act of writing can spur your thinking and facilitate the writing process. Instead of staring at a blank screen, just start typing whatever comes into your head. You may be writing nonsense, but at least you are performing the physical act of writing. This strategy also allows you to clear your mind of any miscellaneous thoughts that may be impeding your progress. Once you've had a chance to purge, begin directing your freewriting to ideas that are relevant to your writing project.

Use a model of good writing

Modeling is a powerful rhetorical strategy. If you're feeling blocked, turn to some of your favorite writers for inspiration. Read a few paragraphs of their work to get a sense of how they're using language. You might even try typing these paragraphs onto your screen so you experience their sentence construction, vocabulary, syntax, and so on.

To discuss your particular concerns with writing, or to develop more effective writing strategies, make an appointment with a learning instructor today!