

## #27) Getting over Writer's Block

There may be many different issues causing your writer's block; the first step to take is to isolate what your specific problem might be.

For example, if your problem is that **you simply don't know where to start**, then try one or more of the following techniques:

- ***Talk to your instructor or a tutor.*** Bring your assignment and discuss it. Sometimes a better understanding of the assignment, along with a refresher-discussion of the topic, will bring ideas up.
- ***Brainstorm.*** Read over your assignment and jot down some of the main ideas that come to your head. What stands out for you? What questions do you have about the topic? What would you like to focus on? What would you like to avoid? What do you remember about the topic? If you are writing about literature, list the main characters, the plot, the conflict, the main message you think the work is trying to convey, etc. Making lists and/or simply jotting down thoughts and questions you have about the topic will get you thinking and writing. After doing this, look over your notes and decide which items will be areas you can further look into, perhaps even research.
- ***Talk about the assignment to anyone.*** Preferably a tutor or a good friend, or even a tape recorder. Have the listener take notes. Talk about the assignment, the topic, ideas and questions you have, things that interest you most about the topic—if you find writing constraining or intimidating, sometimes talking about it, rather than writing, will really get you to loosen up and identify things you know or would like to know about the topic. Get your listener to ask questions to lead you further.
- ***Visualize an audience.*** Sometimes the hard part of writing papers is that it seems unclear whom you're writing for. Makeup a setting—applicable to your course/assignment—and think about how you would communicate your ideas. For example, consider that you are writing an article for the campus newspaper or giving a speech to your class. What type of information do you need to provide for an audience made up of other college students and faculty? What do you want them to learn from your writing? How can you get their attention?
- ***Start anywhere.*** Sometimes writers get stumped because they don't know how to start their introduction. Staring at a blank page and wondering how you can fill it up with your essay can be daunting. Try skipping the introductory section and writing about one of your main points. Writing the body of an essay before the introduction not only helps you get over the initial block but also usually produces a stronger paper because you've allowed your subject matter to lead you rather than an essay formula, and the subsequent introduction better reflects what your paper does rather than promise something that doesn't quite come across in the body.

Or, if your problem is that you are simply **uninterested in the topic or are having trouble mustering up the focus** to get down to working on the assignment, then you might try one of the following:

- ***Choose a different topic.*** If there are different possibilities of focus for your assignment, concentrate on identifying a topic that is meaningful to you. Re-read the assignment and/or the reading material associated with the assignment and note what you feel strongly about or what you have a question about. If your writing assignment is specific and doesn't seem to leave much room for changing your focus, talk with your instructor about something that DOES interest you about the subject matter and get permission to write about that.
- ***Talk about the topic, preferably with the instructor or a tutor.*** Sometimes discussing the topic with someone will open up areas of interest within that topic that you hadn't thought of before. Also, your instructor or tutor can help you find a way to focus on what does interest you in the topic and/or personalize the topic to build a sense of interest and purpose.

If you are **anxious about writing your paper**, try one of the following:

- ***Find a comfort zone.*** Get comfortable on a bed or couch with your assignment and notepaper. Simply read over the assignment, highlighting key words and making notes in the margins. Play some soothing—not distracting—music. Jot down ideas on your note paper. Eventually you might find yourself outlining, writing an early thesis idea, etc.
- ***Exercise.*** Perhaps you can channel nervous energy in a positive way by going for a walk, a jog, doing yoga, stretching, etc. After you've gotten your energy working in a positive way, get comfortable and try one of the strategies listed here for starting writing.
- ***Talk to your instructor or a tutor.*** Bring your assignment and explain your concerns. Your instructor or tutor will be able to ask you questions and give suggestions that will ease you into beginning work on your paper.
- ***Talk to a friend or roommate.*** If your anxiety prevents you from being able to contact your instructor or a tutor, then try talking to someone who seems less intimidating. By expressing your concerns to someone—anyone—you'll be releasing some of the pent-up anxiety. If you start by expressing your frustrations with the course, the topic, the assignment, you'll probably find yourself beginning to discuss aspects of the assignment and subject matter in a way that will generate a focus and ideas.

If you are **self-conscious about your writing or nervous about what your instructor expects of you** . . .

- ***Don't be so hard on yourself!*** Remember that your instructor doesn't expect your writing to be of the same level as the academic scholars and professionals who wrote the material you've been asked to write about.
- ***Talk with your instructor.*** Rather than stressing about what your instructor *might* be expecting of you, find out exactly what he/or she *does* expect. He/she might even provide examples of writing from former students.
- ***Meet with a tutor.*** A tutor will be able to talk about the assignment and your specific concerns with you in a way that may ease your worries. If you're concerned about your writing level, bring a sample from previous work you've done.

The important thing to remember is that you are not alone in feeling overwhelmed by a writing assignment. Even professional writers get writer's block from time to time. Notice that a repeating concept in the above suggestions is to talk with your instructor or a tutor. These people are here to assist you with your progress, so take advantage of their experience. Remember that the Quality Writing Center is available to help you at any point of your writing process, even if you haven't written a word yet!