

Blockbuster: Beating Writer's Block

At some point, every writer experiences that unpleasant feeling of being “stuck.” Maybe you’re bored with the topic, maybe you have no idea what to write, maybe you have a mental block around starting or working on an assignment. Although **writer’s block** takes different forms with different writers, it’s a frustrating source of stress and anxiety.



Here are some tips for making writer’s block as much a thing of the past as... well, the Blockbuster chain (RIP video rental stores).*

Brainstorm and Discuss

Not sure how to begin? Try timed freewriting and other prewriting techniques to inspire your ideas (see our “How Do I Get Started?” handout for more ideas). Rather than stress over the blank white page, speak your thoughts out loud to a friend or roommate, or even talk to yourself and record it on your phone.

Bonus tip: Don’t forget office hours! After working on your own first, bring your ideas, outlines, or thesis draft to your instructor’s office hours to explore your ideas or clarify a prompt.

Get Rid Of the “Shoulds”

Nothing makes writers freeze like fixating on what you think you “should” be doing: *I should be able to write the perfect sentence. My first drafts should be perfect.* In reality, every writer is different! Part of beating writer’s block is getting rid of these “should” assumptions.

- **Figure out how YOU write best.** Just like how some people are night owls and some love the early morning, figure out when *your* brain likes to write. Do you feel most inspired at 7 AM, or perhaps after dinner? Assess your writing habits for a couple days, then block out that time for writing.
- **Work in reasonable intervals.** If writing a lot at one time feels overwhelming, set realistic, gradual writing goals each day or each week, even if it’s just “write a title” or “write two sentences.” Conversely, if you’re a “feast or famine” type of writer (writing in concentrated, large bursts with long gaps in between), block out days in the quarter where you’ll be able to do nothing but write for most of the day.
- **Leave the intro for last.** If you find yourself spending a lot of time on the essay’s start, don’t get stuck crafting a beautiful introductory paragraph. If your brain likes to leap around and think non-linearly, let it! Try starting with the subpoint/body paragraph that interests you.

*(fun fact: as of 2021, the last physical Blockbuster store in the world is in Bend, Oregon)

More About Writing Anxiety

The root of writer's block is often writing anxiety, whether it's about a looming deadline, a writer who has negative associations with writing, panic about an unfamiliar topic, or perfectionism. Here are some strategies for identifying and overcoming writing anxiety.

Identify the Culprit

Here's a series of questions you can ask yourself to help narrow down the specific root of your writing anxiety. Then, use the suggestions below to help combat some of these problems!

- Do I think of myself as a "bad writer" who will be revealed as a fraud/not smart?
- Do I struggle to find the precise words I need? Am I self-conscious about my use of language?
- Am I a total perfectionist, and do I over-edit every single line of writing as a result?
- Do I freeze up when I think about deadlines? Do I leave everything until the last minute?
- Am I anxious because I don't understand the concepts / topic involved in the paper?

Bonus Question: Are there **structural issues** preventing me from writing without fear? If you're struggling with toxic systemic issues (discrimination, housing insecurity, etc.), don't internalize or downplay these outside factors. Seek assistance from an advisor or counselor to help find a less anxiety-inducing learning situation.

- **Don't fear "bad" writing.** Rather than panicking that a first draft doesn't live up to impossible standards, realize that a first draft is supposed to be messy, even for professional authors! Can't think of a "perfect" sentence? Put a bracket, like [argument about cats will go here], and keep moving. You can even write a "terrible" first draft (or "zero draft") deliberately, just to get your ideas on the page.
- **Overedit? Write freehand.** Writing with pen and paper makes you less likely to fixate on tiny errors than when you're using a computer, where it's easier to delete and fuss over single words.
- **Dealing with deadlines.** Try to start and plan your assignments early. If you are at the last minute, it is *always* better to ask for an extension than to plagiarize. If you do ask for an extension, send your instructor the work you've already completed and suggest a realistic amount of days you need to finish the assignment.
- **Building your confidence.** Spend a little time reflecting on what you like about your writing and your ideas. Try to connect areas you *do* have a lot of knowledge about to more unfamiliar topics. Ask people for positive feedback to help you pinpoint your strengths. You can even join (or start?) a friendly writing group of your peers!

Bonus Tip: Our Writing Learning Specialist and our peer writing tutors always emphasize your strengths as well as your areas for growth. Come visit us at the [TAEC](#) or in the [Online Writing Lab](#)!

