

# Symptoms and Cures for Writer's Block

(from the Owl at Perdue: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/567/01/>)

Because writers have various ways of writing, a variety of things can cause a writer to experience anxiety, and sometimes this anxiety leads to writer's block. There are some common causes of writer's block, however, and when you are blocked, consider these causes and try the strategies that sound most promising:

Symptom	Possible Cures
1. You have attempted to begin a paper without doing any preliminary work such as brainstorming or outlining...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use different pre-writing strategies.</li> <li>• Write down all the primary ideas you'd like to express and then fill in each with the smaller ideas that make up each primary idea. This can easily be converted into an outline.</li> </ul>
2. You have chosen or been assigned a topic which bores you....	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose a particular aspect of the topic you are interested in (if the goal of your writing can be adjusted and is not given to you specifically, or if the advisor will allow it).</li> <li>• Think about how you can personalize a topic to make it more interesting.</li> </ul>
3. You don't want to spend time writing or don't understand the assignment...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resign yourself to the fact that you have to write.</li> <li>• Find out what is expected of you (consult your advisor or your committee members).</li> </ul>
4. You are anxious about writing the paper...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus your energy by rehearsing the task in your head.</li> <li>• Consciously stop the non-productive comments running through your head by replacing them with productive ones.</li> <li>• If you have some "rituals" for writing success listening to classical music, etc.), use them.</li> </ul>
5. You are so stressed out you can't seem to put a word on the page...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stretch! Stretch as many muscle groups as possible.</li> <li>• Breathe deeply. Close your eyes; then, fill your chest cavity slowly by taking four of five short deep breaths. Hold each breath until it hurts, and then let it out slowly.</li> <li>• Use a calming word or mental image to focus on while relaxing. If you choose a word, be careful not to use an imperative. Don't command yourself to "Calm down!" or "Relax!"</li> </ul>
6. You're self-conscious about your writing, you may have trouble getting started. So, if you're preoccupied with the idea that you have to write about a subject and feel you probably won't express yourself well...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk over the subject with a friend or your advisor.</li> <li>• Assure yourself that the first draft doesn't have to be a work of genius, it is something to work with.</li> <li>• Force yourself to write down something, however poorly worded, that approximates your thought and go on with the next idea.</li> <li>• Break the task up into steps. Meet the general purpose first, and then flesh out the more specific aspects later.</li> </ul>

# Other Strategies for Getting Over Writer's Block

These strategies will prove more helpful when you're drafting your writing.

## **Begin in the Middle**

Start writing at whatever point you like. If you want to begin in the middle, fine. Leave the introduction or first section until later. The reader will never know that you wrote the paper "backwards." Besides, some writers routinely save the introduction until later when they have a clearer idea of what the main idea and purpose of the piece will be.

## **Talk Out the Paper**

Talking feels less artificial than writing to some people. Talk about what you want to write to someone — a friend, a roommate, or a member of your family. Just pick someone who's willing to give you fifteen to thirty minutes to talk about the topic and whose main aim is to help you start writing. Have the person take notes while you talk or tape your conversation. Talking will be helpful because you'll probably be more natural and spontaneous in speech than in writing. Your listener can ask questions and guide you as you speak, and you'll be more likely to relax and say something unpredictable than if that you were sitting and forcing yourself to write.

## **Tape the Paper**

Talk into a tape recorder, imagining your audience sitting in front of you. Then, transcribe the tape-recorded material. You'll at least have some ideas written down to work with and move around.

## **Change the Audience**

Pretend that you're writing to a child, to a close friend, to a parent, to a person who sharply disagrees with you, or to someone who's new to the subject and needs to have you explain your paper's topic slowly and clearly. Changing the audience can clarify your purpose and can also make you feel more comfortable and help you write more easily.

## **Play a Role**

Pretend you are someone else writing the paper. For instance, if you have been asked to write about sexist advertising, assume you are the president of the National Organization of Women. Or, pretend you are the president of a major oil company asked to defend the high price of oil. Consider being someone in another time period, or someone with a wildly different perspective from your own. Pulling yourself out of your usual perspective can help you see things that are otherwise invisible or difficult to articulate, and your writing will be stronger for it.