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Confronting Writer's Block

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The purpose of this article is to provide guidance on what is sometimes the most challenging aspect of writing a paper: getting started.

Conquering the Blank Page

Regardless of how effortless some might make it seem, writing is no easy feat. Ideas seldom pop into our brains right away, and even when they do, it is often difficult to introduce them properly and organize their structure and format. The blank page can be daunting, especially when you are assigned a topic with which you are unfamiliar. You may hardly know where and how to begin. Sometimes, it might even feel as if the blank page is mocking you with its emptiness, making you doubt your ability to complete a successful paper. Ultimately, though, writer's block is just a temporary inability to begin a writing project, stemming from fear, anxiety, or lack of inspiration. To some extent, every writer deals with these problems when starting a new project. However, like most challenges in life, conquering the blank page need not be as difficult as it first appears.

The Prewriting Process

Prewriting is a process of planning that includes determining your purpose and audience, narrowing your topic, and creating an outline for your documentation. The first step is to answer the most important question of all: *Why am I writing this?* Perhaps it is to convince, to inform, or even to entertain. Write down your purpose and keep it in mind as you begin to outline your paper. Second, consider your audience. *Is this paper written for an audience familiar or unfamiliar with your topic? What are their needs? How can my paper help fulfill those needs?* Jot this information down right below your purpose statement. When this is complete, you can start narrowing your topic to be as specific as possible. Once you understand your purpose, audience, and topic, you can create an outline for your paper.

When outlining your paper, begin with one of several brainstorming strategies, such as freewriting your thoughts and ideas, clustering or mind mapping with a thinking map, writing down questions and answers, or journaling. Then, use your ideas to outline the structure and direction of your paper. It is common to use bullet points to organize the structure and main points, going through every paragraph from the introduction to the conclusion and writing down the main ideas, evidence, and analysis.

Once you have created an outline, you no longer have a blank page. You now have ideas and a direction to take them. There is only one step remaining, which is to overcome those prewriting jitters and start filling the page with words.

Be advised that though the introduction is the first paragraph the author reads, it is often the last thing the author writes. Many students struggle to get started because they think they must write chronologically, but it can be helpful to have the majority of your paper drafted before attempting to introduce the topic. So, to begin, simply make sure you have a clear thesis and outline and start writing

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in whatever section of the paper you feel most comfortable. Then, once you have your body written, circle back to compose the introduction.

Example

Your prompt is to analyze the dynamics that led to the Civil War and take a stance on which side played the largest role. First, you must analyze the purpose and audience. The purpose of this paper is to argue a position. Your professor is already familiar with the topic; he or she is likely not going to learn any new information from your paper, so your purpose is to demonstrate how to present an argument using reason and evidence. Create an outline of your topic from start to finish, keeping in mind that your topic should be specific and concise. Balance the number of details with the appropriate level of analysis. If you feel more confident in one aspect of your discussion than another, start there and let the direction of the paper take shape. Before you know it, you no longer have a blank page and can use the momentum of your early successes to complete the larger project.

Tips

1. Try various prewriting strategies and find the one that works best for you.
2. Write down everything you can, as this will allow you to get your ideas flowing. Sometimes, this may mean writing for five or ten minutes in a stream-of-consciousness mode, writing whatever comes to you – even if it seems to have nothing to do with your topic. As you go back over what you’ve written, see if you can find anything you might use in your paper.
3. Make your outline as simple or as detailed as you need. But the more details you provide from your research and analysis, the more you can use those ideas when you draft your paper.
4. Engage in dialogue. Talking out your ideas with someone (like a writing coach in the Writing Center) if you are finding it difficult to get started can cause our thoughts to rise to the surface.

Works Consulted

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