



WRITER'S BLOCK AND HOW TO WORK THROUGH IT¹

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This handout addresses a common problem writers face on a regular basis: writer's block. Writer's block has been mystified and exaggerated to the point that it has become every writer's nightmare. In reality, writer's block is a common phenomenon faced by even the best of writers. This handout attempts to demystify this phenomenon and provide some simple tips to address and work through writer's block.

What is Writer's Block and How Did I Get It?

Writer's block may best be understood as a mental state.² Although writer's block may come in different forms and from different causes, all instances of writer's block involve two factors: a writer failing to write despite being intellectually capable of doing so, and a writer suffering because they are not writing.³ These factors then come together to produce a mental state that feels like inarticulateness, an inability to express the ideas inside you, or a general lack of ideas.⁴

The sources of writer's block vary. Writer's block can occur because of internal pressures: self-criticism,⁵ perfectionism,⁶ or anxiety that other writers have said it before and better than you can.⁷ Writer's block can also occur because of externalized forces such as dislike of your subject matter or the person assigning it, or internalized criticisms such as being told you're not a good writer or getting a lower grade than you had expected.⁸ Whatever the reasons may be, rest assured that it happens to almost all writers and that there are ways to combat and overcome writer's block.

¹ Original work by Melania Garcia (2012); amended by Alexander Crespo (2026).

² See ALICE W. FLAHERTY, *THE MIDNIGHT DISEASE: THE DRIVE TO WRITE, WRITER'S BLOCK, AND THE CREATIVE BRAIN* 79 (2004).

³ See *id.* at 80; JANE ANNE STAW, *UNSTUCK: A SUPPORTIVE AND PRACTICAL GUIDE TO WORKING THROUGH WRITER'S BLOCK* 51 (2003).

⁴ See FLAHERTY, *supra* note 2, at 82. This mental state can alternatively be understood as a creative or psychological barrier that prevents the writer, with metaphorical pen in hand, from putting ink to paper. See *id.* This is in contrast to procrastination, a behavioral pattern in which the writer avoids the task of writing altogether.
⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Perfectionism here means wanting your writing to be perfect from the moment you put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. See ANNE LAMOTT, *BIRD BY BIRD: SOME INSTRUCTIONS ON WRITING AND LIFE* 28 (1995).

⁷ See FLAHERTY, *supra* note 2, at 105.

⁸ See *id.* at 82.

What Do I Do About Writer's Block?

There is no one cure-all for every instance of writer's block, but there are plenty of strategies for circumventing writer's block. Several of these strategies are outlined below. You don't have to use them all—some might work for you and some won't. It might take some trial and error, but find which of these strategies, or combination of them, works best for you and stick with it!

(a) Set the scene:

- Write in a place that you enjoy.⁹ Sometimes stuffy libraries and crowded desks can make us feel just as stuffed and crowded as our environments, but our surroundings can have a positive impact on our writing as well. Making the experience of writing more pleasant can often make the process more enjoyable, and by extension more productive. If you feel free and creative outdoors, try writing in your garden or at a local park. If you're in need of excitement or feel intimidated by silence, try writing in a bustling environment like your favorite café. Environment is all relative: some people thrive in libraries while others work best in bedrooms. Figure out what feels best for you and try to work there.
- Get comfortable.¹⁰ You don't always need a dramatic shift in place to help you write. Sometimes it's as simple as optimizing your existing setup. Treat yourself to the things that make you comfortable and your writing experience enjoyable. Getting comfortable could involve anything from setting out flowers or decorating your desk to grabbing your favorite snack before you sit down.
- Make writing a regular part of your day. Pick a set time that you sit down to write every day and don't let anything else interrupt you during this time.¹¹ Carving out time for writing will help alleviate anxieties that can lead to writer's block.
- Designate a place for writing and focused work. Multipurpose rooms or places can often be more distracting than functional. If other tasks or people tend to pull your focus when trying to write, try setting up a workstation dedicated solely to writing.
- Get potential interruptions out of the way before you begin. If you know that you'll have to get up in twenty minutes to get coffee or tea, get that done first so you don't interrupt your writing.
- Reduce distractions. If you get easily distracted by the internet or put off writing by telling yourself you have to read email, try turning off your internet access. If you find yourself stopping to check notifications on your phone, try turning it off or silencing alerts.

(b) Make a plan:

- Create a schedule for your writing assignment. Reduce the enormity of your task by segmenting one assignment into several mini-assignments due over a given period. Try spacing your writing out over several days or weeks and giving yourself deadlines for different sections throughout this period.¹²

⁹ See STAW, *supra* note 3, at 60.

¹⁰ See *id.* at 61.

¹¹ See LAMOTT, *supra* note 6, at 6.

¹² See STAW, *supra* note 3, at 74.

- Brainstorm: “write down as many ideas as possible without regard to quality.”¹³ Resist any perfectionist urges and put pen to paper; “only afterward is the editor allowed to throw out the trash.”¹⁴ This approach will help not only with getting your fingers moving but will also let you think about your subject in ways you might not have yet considered.
- Research your subject. Research allows you to both narrow your topic and see what is already out there that supports or contradicts your ideas—sometimes it even leads to new and innovative ideas. Be thorough with your research; don’t just look at Westlaw or Lexis.¹⁵ Approach a librarian for help. Look at the research guides on the library website. Read blog posts on the topic—even if these sources might seem too casual to rely on, they might signal to you what is current and relevant that relates to your subject. However, don’t let your researching take up too much of your time or become a procrastination tool.
- Decide what you’re going to say. Make sure that your topic is conquerable—narrow enough for you to tackle in the space and time you have.¹⁶ For some people this step includes lists of ideas, formal outlines, diagrams, or a collection of sticky notes.
- Talk it out. Find someone who will listen to your ideas and give you feedback on what you plan to write. Consider approaching someone who is an expert in the field you are writing about.¹⁷ For example, talking to your professor may seem intimidating but might provide you with guidance, orientation, and even a list of useful source material.
- Utilize artificial intelligence. Modern tools like large language models can be useful for distilling your ideas, brainstorming, or creating outlines.¹⁸ **Exercise caution here,** however, as policies concerning the permissible uses of AI can differ substantially.

(c) *Take a hint from Nike and Just Do It™:*

- Start with small assignments¹⁹ to get the writing juices flowing. Rather than approaching your assignment by saying “I’m going to write a memo,” tell yourself, “Today, I will write my introduction,” or, “Today I’m going to double-check my citations.” A smaller task is less daunting and lets you focus on the particulars rather than the possibly overwhelming whole.
- Don’t feel married to starting at the beginning; start wherever you feel most comfortable. Consider starting with your strongest argument, or even the conclusion.
- Allow yourself to write a “no good, very bad” first draft.²⁰ Don’t expect to write publishable material in your first attempt. Let yourself write badly as long as you’re writing. This practice lets you get your ideas on the page and even work out some preliminary ideas so that you can get to the ones that matter. Everyone writes terrible

¹³ FLAHERTY, *supra* note 2, at 95.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ See Writing Center Handout “You Have Your Scholarly Paper Topic, Now . . . Get the Research Done.” <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/research2010.pdf>.

¹⁶ See STAW, *supra* note 3, at 67–68.

¹⁷ See LAMOTT, *supra* note 6, at 146.

¹⁸ See Dan Zhao, *The impact of AI-enhanced natural language processing tools on writing proficiency: an analysis of language precision, content summarization, and creative writing facilitation*, 30 EDUC. INFO. TECH. 8056, 8077–79 (2025).

¹⁹ LAMOTT, *supra* note 6, at 4, 16–17; FLAHERTY, *supra* note 2, at 90.

²⁰ See LAMOTT, *supra* note 6, at 21.

first drafts; you just don't see the bad drafts because they get edited into better second and third drafts.

- Some techniques for getting the first words on the page:
 - Freewriting: write whatever comes to mind about your topic to develop your ideas.²¹
 - Invisible Writing: cover up your computer screen and start writing; this frees you from the distracting habit of editing as you write.²²
 - Outline: start with an outline that gets more and more elaborate until it becomes your text.²³
 - Take breaks.²⁴ This advice may sound counter-intuitive, but forcing yourself to stare at a computer screen when nothing is happening only serves to further frustrate you.
- Don't break up the flow of your writing by stopping to bluebook every time you need a citation. This does not mean that you should leave citations to the last minute. Rather, it is helpful to make notes to yourself (in footnotes or comment bubbles) of the author's name, source name, and page number or hyperlink. This practice will let you know where to cite to without having to spend time focusing on the details of a correct bluebook citation.

(d) Stop beating yourself up:

- Don't punish yourself for not writing; reward yourself when you do.²⁵ For example, every sentence or paragraph written gets you one bite of chocolate. This incentive structure will reinforce that writing is good, not scary, and that real, tangible rewards can come of it.
- Don't edit too soon.²⁶ Wait until you have a full first draft before you begin critiquing your writing. Editing is an important part of the writing process, but at the beginning it can be more fulfilling to see pages of written material, even if it is bad, than seeing a couple of well written lines. The act of writing is about creating, and is diametrically opposed to the act of editing, which is about deconstructing, critiquing, and taking apart what has already been created. Editing requires you to switch from one state of mind (creative) to another (critiquing) and can break up the flow of your writing process.

Follow some of these steps and you'll be well on your way to getting your writing done!

²¹ See ELIZABETH FAJANS & MARY R. FALK, SCHOLARLY WRITING FOR LAW STUDENTS 31 (2000).

²² See *id.*

²³ See FLAHERTY, *supra* note 2, at 98.

²⁴ See *id.*

²⁵ See STAW, *supra* note 3, at 56-57.

²⁶ See *id.*

What Do I Do Once I Have a First Draft?

If you've finished a "no good, very bad" draft or the first draft of a large section, you may want to take a look at some of these editing techniques.²⁷ Remember, you shouldn't edit in the middle of your initial writing process, but editing is an essential part of creating a final product and can sometimes be the hardest part to make yourself do.

(a) Take a step back:

- Put your draft away for a while. Ideally, you have enough time set aside to take a break between the creating and editing stages of your writing process. Then, when you come back to edit your work you can look at it from a new and fresh perspective. Time away from your writing often allows you to be more objective about what you've written.
- Reverse outline your draft.²⁸ On a separate paper or document, write out the main points or arguments that you made in the order that you made them. Compare this structure to your initial outline or notes.²⁹ Does it work better or worse? Is it logical? Are any arguments repeated? Is the order of the arguments complementary? Did you miss anything?

(b) Ask for help:

- Give your draft to a friend to read. Ask for written or verbal feedback. If you are writing for a non-legal audience, it might help to give your draft to a friend outside of the legal field to make sure that your language is clear to a non-legal reader. If you are writing for a legal audience, try to give your draft to a legal reader that understands some legal conventions about writing. Don't be afraid of what your friend will say, but also don't approach your friend's comments as dictates. Writing is a very personal process and everyone has subjective preferences. Treat these edits as a jumping board for your own editing process. **Exercise caution here** as well: be sure that you are permitted to share your draft with third parties before doing so.
- Sign up for a conference at the [Writing Center](#) and let your reader know what specific concerns you have about your paper. The Writing Center staff can provide feedback on your draft as a whole and help you find the places where you need the most work or where your writing is already where it should be.

²⁷ See Writing Center Handout "Turning the First Draft of Your Seminar Paper into a Final Draft."
https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/first_finaldraft2010.pdf.

²⁸ See Allen Brizee, *Reverse Outlining: An Exercise for Taking Notes and Revising Your Work*, PURDUE OWL ONLINE WRITING LAB, (Apr. 17, 2010) <https://www.scribd.com/doc/156121446/Reverse-Outlining>.

²⁹ If you don't have an initial outline, it might help to jot down what you think your best arguments are and their best order before you begin this process.