



WRITER'S BLOCK AND HOW TO WORK THROUGH IT

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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. This handout attempts to demystify writer's block 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 is the combination of not being able to write and suffering because of this inability.¹ Writer's block can feel like inarticulateness, an inability to express the ideas inside you, or a general lack of ideas.² It can occur because of internal pressures: self-criticism,³ perfectionism,⁴ or anxiety that other writers have said it before and better than you can.⁵ Writer's block can 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.⁶ 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.

What Do I Do About Writer's Block?

There is no one answer to curing writer's block. Below, several strategies are outlined. 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!

Set the scene:

- Write in a place where you feel comfortable and safe.⁷ This includes a place that has the right noise level; for some this means complete silence, but others find complete silence intimidating and work better in bustling environments like cafes—figure out which is best for you and try to work there.

¹ See ALICE W. FLAHERTY, THE MIDNIGHT DISEASE: THE DRIVE TO WRITE, WRITER'S BLOCK, AND THE CREATIVE BRAIN 82 (2004); JANE ANNE STAW, UNSTUCK: A SUPPORTIVE AND PRACTICAL GUIDE TO WORKING THROUGH WRITER'S BLOCK 60 (2003).

² See FLAHERTY, *supra* note 1, at 82.

³ *Id.*

⁴ 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).

⁵ See FLAHERTY, *supra* note 1, at 105.

⁶ See *id.* at 82.

⁷ See STAW, *supra* note 1, at 60.

- 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.⁸ Carving out time for writing will help alleviate anxieties that can lead to writer's block.
- Treat yourself to the things that make you comfortable and your writing experience enjoyable. This could be anything including a comfy chair, a good view, or a snack.
- If you know that you'll have to get up in twenty minutes to get coffee or tea, get that first so you don't interrupt your writing.
- 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.

Make a plan:

- Create a schedule for your writing assignment; space your writing out over several days or weeks and have deadlines for different sections throughout this period.⁹
- Brainstorm: "write down as many ideas as possible without regard to quality."¹⁰ This 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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³ For example, talking to your professor may seem intimidating but might provide you with guidance, orientation, and even a list of useful source material.

Take a hint from Nike and Just Do It™:

- Start with small assignments¹⁴ 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 two pages." 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.

⁸ See LAMOTT, *supra* note 4, at 6.

⁹ See STAW, *supra* note 1, at 74.

¹⁰ FLAHERTY, *supra* note 1, at 95.

¹¹ See Writing Center Handout "You Have Your Scholarly Paper Topic, Now . . . Get the Research Done."

¹² See STAW, *supra* note 1, at 67-68.

¹³ See LAMOTT, *supra* note 4, at 146.

¹⁴ See *id.* at 69; LAMOTT, *supra* note 4 at 4, 16-17; FLAHERTY, *supra* note 1 at 90.

- Allow yourself to write a “no good, very bad” first draft.¹⁵ Don’t expect to write publishable material in your first attempt. Let yourself write badly as long as you’re writing. This 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 first drafts, you just don’t see them 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.¹⁶
 - Invisible Writing: cover up your computer screen and start writing; this frees you from the distracting habit of editing as you write.¹⁷
 - Outline: start with an outline that gets more and more elaborate until it becomes your text.¹⁸
 - Take breaks.¹⁹ This 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 all bluebooking 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 way you will know where to cite to without having to spend time focusing on the details of a correct bluebook citation.

Stop beating yourself up:

- Don’t punish yourself for not writing; reward yourself when you do.²⁰ For example, every sentence or paragraph written gets you one bite of chocolate. This will reinforce that writing is good, not scary, and that real, tangible rewards can come of it.
- Don’t edit too soon.²¹ 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!

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.²² Remember, you shouldn’t edit in the middle

¹⁵ See LAMOTT, *supra* note 4, at 21 (“shitty first draft”); see also JUDITH VIORST, ALEXANDER AND THE TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, NO GOOD, VERY BAD DAY (1972).

¹⁶ See ELIZABETH FAJANS & MARY R. FALK, SCHOLARLY WRITING FOR LAW STUDENTS 31 (2000).

¹⁷ See *id.*

¹⁸ See FLAHERTY, *supra* note 1, at 98

¹⁹ See *id.*

²⁰ See STAW, *supra* note 1, at 55-57.

²¹ See *id.*

²² See Writing Center Handout “Turning the First Draft of Your Seminar Paper into a Final Draft.”

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.

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. This often allows you to be more objective about what you've written.
- Reverse outline your draft.²³ 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.²⁴ Does it work better or worse? Is it logical? Are any arguments repeated? Is the order of the arguments complementary? Did you miss anything?

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.
- 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.

Where Else Can I Look for Help?

The Writing Center: The Writing Center is a great place to come and talk through your problems. It is not just a tool for people who have papers they want to work through, but can also be a place to develop your ideas for papers, talk through whatever problems you foresee, and establish a plan or schedule for your writing process. You may also want to review the Writing Center Handout "Just Do It: Tips for Avoiding Procrastination."

Helpful Books: The following books are all available through Georgetown's Library System.

- Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life, Anne Lamott
- The Midnight Disease: The Drive To Write, Writer's Block, and the Creative Brain, Alice W. Flaherty
- Unstuck: A Supportive and Practical Guide to Working Through Writer's Block, Jane Anne Staw

²³ See Allen Brizee, *Reverse Outlining: An Exercise for Taking Notes and Revising Your Work*, PURDUE OWL ONLINE WRITING LAB, (Apr. 17, 2010) <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/689/1/>.

²⁴ 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.