

How do you overcome writer's block?

Writing papers, theses or essays can be a stressful task. There you are, in front of an empty computer screen... How to begin?

Is what you have written interesting enough? You notice that you endlessly rewrite the sentences you have written. Or you don't dare to put anything on paper and keep postponing it... Both endlessly rewriting and postponing can cause unnecessary delays. How to break this pattern?

Good preparation is half the work

Getting stuck occasionally while you're writing is normal. In many cases you get stuck because you did not make a clear outline beforehand, and you're not sure what it is you want to say or research. Make sure you have a plan of action before you begin to write and have a rough idea of where you want to go with your piece. The best way to make a plan of action, can be read in the articles on 'Academic writing'.

Build 'writing stamina'

In addition to a plan of action for what you want to write about, realistic planning and time management are of importance. By making a good work schedule you will stay on track. Divide the writing task into conveniently arranged blocks, and plan ahead what you will be doing in these blocks. This way you can cross off your list what you have completed and gives you a clear view on what is left to do. This helps prevent writing work piling up and you dreading it. It is advisable to write at fixed hours and create regularity.

Especially when you dread the writing and feel insecure or powerless, it helps to build your writing stamina with little steps. Start by 'loosening your writing muscles' for half an hour every day for a week and gradually increase. Try to bear the feelings of powerlessness and insecurity during this half hour. You will notice that they gradually decrease.

A good schedule has room for relaxation. Plan moments in which you will not be preoccupied with writing and you are able to recharge. Beginning right before a deadline leaves no room to find a good balance between relaxation and the writing task

Correcting is forbidden

You have a good plan of action and a realistic schedule yet you keep getting stuck? This happens often because you are already editing and correcting while you are writing. You are in fact, accelerating and decelerating at the same time. Realise that writing consists of two different phases. The first phase is putting a rough version on paper. In this phase you try to write as much down of what you can think of without being too critical. You don't necessarily have to start at the beginning. It often works best if you start with a chapter which you know a lot about, so you can make a confident start. If you have doubts about something or are not sure how to, for example, make a strong connection, you can write down those doubts in italics or in a different colour. For example: "*make another connection to the research here -elaborate further.*" In the first phase it is forbidden to make corrections. Only when you have enough text, you are ready for phase two and you can start correcting and editing.

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STUDYING SUCCESSFULLY

Analyse hindering thoughts

Doubts about your capabilities, worrying and excessive perfectionism can have a paralysing effect on writing. You put so much pressure on yourself that you become stuck and try to avoid writing. You can break these kinds of (thinking) patterns by analysing your negative thoughts. Write down your negative thoughts as soon as they occur on a separate notepad and ask yourself the following for every hindering thought:

- Is this thought true?
- What proof do I have against this thought?
- Does this thought help my writing process?

Then you convert the thought into a more stimulating thought. An example of this method: You keep thinking '*I can't do this or I will never succeed*'. You can never prove this thought is true because you will only know if you can do it and if you will succeed if you've tried. Difficult moments, or not being able to express something are a part of that. Besides, it is not true that if you have tried and failed before, you will again at your next attempt: **Writing is a learning process and learning is a process of trial and error.**

It can help not to take the writing task to personally. Should you, at the worst, receive a negative assessment of your piece, this does not mean that you as a person are negatively assessed. It only means that you have something to learn and to improve when it comes to writing.

You don't have to write alone

Writing can be a lonely activity. Try to ensure that you keep in contact with your fellow students during a writing period. Preferably with students with a comparable writing task. You can stimulate each other by meeting up to write or by taking breaks together. Or you can help one another by reading each other's work. When you are working on your thesis, make sure you have regular contact with your thesis supervisor. They can also stimulate you or tell you if you are on the right track.

Most important points

- Writing is easier when you make a writing schedule ahead of time.
- Try and build a writing stamina. Plan in time for relaxation.
- Write first without correcting. Only when you have a lot written down, do you start to edit.
- Convert hindering thought into stimulating thoughts. .
- Meet up with someone to write!

Questions?

If you still have questions about writer's block, please contact the Student Psychologists' Office: 020-525 2599.

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