

writer's block

Writer's block is a common complaint of beginning writers—but it is probably an unfounded one. In reality, writer's block is just another name for underdeveloped writing habits. This handout will suggest ways to establish a sustainable writing routine and to eliminate “blocks” to productivity and creativity.

The Myth of Writer's Block

While emotional and psychological blocks to productivity and creativity certainly do exist, writer's block has taken on a mythic status as *the* obstacle to successful writing sessions. However, most productive writers agree that writer's block is an **overrated phenomenon**. Echoing the sentiment of several successful writers, Philip Pullman suggests that writer's block might simply be a matter of attitude:

“I don't believe in [writer's block]. All writing is difficult. The most you can hope for is a day when it goes reasonably easily. Plumbers don't get plumber's block, and doctors don't get doctor's block; why should writers be the only profession that gives a special name to the difficulty of working and then expects sympathy for it?”

In other words, writing—like any other job—is hard work.

“Blocks” to Productivity

Unrealistic Ideas about the Writing Process

Some beginning writers labor under the idea that all good writing comes through inspiration or talent. These writers glamorize the writing process and think that if they don't have a brilliant idea when they sit down at the page, there is no point in trying to write. In reality, most writing comes from consistent, hard work and a flexible writing process.

Lack of Writing Routine

Closely linked with unrealistic ideas about the writing process is a lack of a writing routine. If you are only writing in your spare time or when you feel like it, it will be hard for you to make consistent progress towards a completed draft.

Lack of Clear Writing Goals

When you don't know what you need to accomplish during a writing session, it will be difficult to gauge the success and productivity of your time. A lack of clear goals also will make it harder to see how each day's progress relates to your larger writing goals.

Distractions

Sometimes you are not the only factor keeping you from writing: a distracting environment (e.g., technology, friends, family, etc.) can easily ruin a productive writing session.

Removing Productivity “Blockage”

Schedule Your Writing

Add time for your writing into your actual schedule. If you use a program like Microsoft Outlook or a smart phone to manage your schedule, make sure that you block out time for your writing. The idea is to find defensible time to write—time that can be kept sacred and protected from intrusions.

Note: For practice scheduling your writing, please see “Worksheet 1: Weekly Schedule” at the end of this handout.

Write Daily

To be a productive writer, you must accept a simple truth: writing is a job, and—like all jobs—sometimes you will not want to do it. Set a specific time to write, show up, and write. Think of this time as a second job: you *have* to be there. Even if you do not feel “inspired,” go to work.

Set Goals and Track Your Progress

Goals will help you give each writing session a clear purpose. Set monthly, weekly, and daily writing goals. These goals should be related to and build on each other. Mark these on your calendar and cross them off when you finish them. Reward yourself when you complete major goals.

Note: For practice setting goals and selecting rewards, please see “Worksheet 2: Goals” and “Worksheet 3: Rewards” at the end of this handout.

Identify and Reroute Distractions

Analyze your environment and list your biggest distractions. Maybe it is the internet. Maybe it is your loving spouse. Since many distractions can’t be eliminated entirely, think of ways in which you can reroute them.

Example: If you are addicted to Twitter, make a rule that you are not allowed to tweet until you finish your writing session.

Note: For practice identifying and rerouting distractions, please see “Worksheet 5: Distractions” at the end of this handout.

Blurt and Bracket

In your first draft, do not agonize over the wording of every sentence. In fact, you might just want to blurt out—in the most basic way possible—what you mean to say. Just get it on the page. You can fix it in your next draft.

Additionally, you might want to bracket information that you will insert later. If something is holding you up, bracket it and move forward.

Example: The soil in the Gila River valley has too much alkaline. This is bad. [Describe effects of alkalinity].

Outline

If you are stumped about what you should write next, try outlining the next section. Make a list of general points you need to cover, organize them, and then use them to create topic sentences. Use these topic sentences as the basis of new paragraphs. Start supporting your topic sentences with evidence, and, before you know it, you will have a full paragraph.

Storyboard

If outlining does not work for you or if you don't yet have the specifics for a particular section, try storyboarding your paper instead. To do this, use separate pages for each section of your paper, making sure to leave lots of space for your ideas. Sketch in the general ideas you want to cover. The point is to be more flexible than you would with an outline. You might even try posting this on a wall and using sticky notes for individual ideas.

Note: For more information on how to outline or storyboard, please see our “Organization” [handout](#).

“Blocks” to Creativity

Self-censorship

Self-censorship occurs when negative self-talk keeps you from putting words on the page. This self-criticism also might adopt the imagined voice of those who will read your work.

Example: “I can't put that. That's stupid. My committee chair is going to think that that's derivative.”

While it is important to write a reader-friendly text, too much focus on the audience in your first drafts will prevent you from getting your ideas on paper.

Too Few Ideas

Some writers complain that they have exhausted their topics and have nothing more to say. While there are instances where this is true, additional brainstorming can usually reveal other ways to approach the subject matter.

Too Many Ideas

If too many ideas are bouncing around your head, it will be hard to focus on any one idea, to prioritize areas of your draft, and to prevent some of your ideas from slipping through the cracks.

Lack of Context

Writing can seem daunting if you don't know what has already been said in your field, who said it, what your fields' genre conventions are, and how your work is contributing to the larger conversation.

Removing Creativity “Blockage”

Do Some Mental Housekeeping

Sometimes your mind is too cluttered to focus on writing: there are bills to pay, groceries to buy, floors to sweep, etc. Before your writing session, try dumping out all of this clutter with a freewrite. To do this, write out two or three pages of what's bouncing around your brain. No concern is too small or too petty. Just dump everything out on the page.

Example: I have nothing to write about today. I've got so much work to do. I have to clean the kitchen and scrub the bathtub. And then the rent is going to be due. Things are going to be tight. I'm going to have to eat pasta this week. Why do they call it pasta? I don't know. I don't have anything else to say. I have to fill this page though, so I am just going to keep putting down my thoughts. Man, I really didn't like *The Man of Steel*. It just didn't feel like a Superman movie. I need to go on a date...

Once you have filled out these pages, throw them away. Their only purpose is to help you clear your mind.

Give Yourself Permission to Make Mistakes

First drafts don't have to be perfect. Allow yourself to write terrible rough drafts, initially ignoring what your future audience will say. Consider saying this sentence out loud: "I am [your name], and I am giving myself permission to write a lousy first draft."

Topoi (Topics) of Invention

Sometimes looking at your topic from as many angles as possible can help you find new ideas to write about. One way to accomplish this is by using a heuristic such as the topoi (topics) of invention. The topoi are a set of questions designed to help you think about your subject in new ways.

Note: For more information on how to use the topoi of invention, please see our "Brainstorming: Invention" [handout](#).

Keep a Creativity Journal

Record questions, ideas, and observations in a central place for future use. This will allow you to focus on your present writing task while ensuring that your ideas aren't forgotten. There are many formats for a creativity journal: some people use a note book, others a Word document or Google Doc. Regardless of the format you choose, keep your ideas in a centralized location.

Read in Your Genre

If you want to write X, you have to read X. As you read texts in your field, pay attention to both content and form. For example, when reading for content, you should keep track of fundamental works or ideas, major figures, and the current state of the conversation. Additionally, you will want to pay attention to any divisions, camps, or schools of thought in your field. When reading for form, pay attention to genre conventions, argumentative form (i.e., what counts as evidence), and style.

Bonus: Other Tricks

Do Something "Mindless"

Doing something menial and repetitive can fire different parts of your brain. If you are having trouble thinking, try washing dishes, folding laundry, or taking a shower.

Sketch

Although it is counterintuitive, taking out a pencil and paper to sketch an object can help you be more attentive to details and connections in your writing. When you feel blocked, try sketching an object in the room for five minutes. Try to *see* the object: do not merely *look* at it. Your brain constantly tells you what objects are supposed to look like, but try to fight past this. Sketch what you actually see. If you are not an experienced artist, try placing an image upside down before you draw it. This will defamiliarize the object in your brain and help you see lines and shapes more clearly.



Writing Center
SMC Campus Center
621 W. Lombard St. Room 307
www.umaryland.edu/writing
410-706-7725

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Worksheet 1: Weekly Schedule

Using the chart below, plot out everything that you have to do during the week. Be sure to include time for work, class, meals, sleep, etc.

Once you have finished, identify time to write. Make sure that you can make this time sacred (i.e., set apart) and defensible. You *must* be realistic about your time. If you have trouble waking up in the morning, planning your writing sessions for 6 a.m. might not be realistic. Ask yourself, “Why am I not already writing during this time?”

Weekly Schedule							
	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
12 am							
1 am							
2 am							
3 am							
4 am							
5 am							
6 am							
7 am							
8 am							
9 am							
10 am							
11 am							
12 pm							
1 pm							
2 pm							
3 pm							
4 pm							
5 pm							
6 pm							
7 pm							
8 pm							
9 pm							
10 pm							
11 pm							

Worksheet 2: Goals

Create clear goals for each day's writing session by breaking down larger goals. If your goal for the week was to complete the "Materials and Methods" section, you could assign specific tasks to each day. On one day, your goal could be to write about participant selection. On the next day, you could write about instruments. And so on.

Goals		
Month	Week	Day
Monthly Goal:	Week One Goal:	Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:
	Week Two Goal:	Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:
	Week Three Goal:	Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:
	Week Four Goal:	Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:
		Daily Goal:

Worksheet 3: Rewards

For some writers, rewards provide extra motivation to meet goals and deadlines. When planning out your writing sessions, consider attaching rewards to specific goals. These rewards don't have to be costly or elaborate: they just have to be something that you enjoy doing.

When You Complete a Daily Goal, You Will...

When You Complete a Weekly Goal, You Will...

When You Complete a Monthly Goal, You Will...

When You Complete Your Project, You Will...

Worksheet 6: Environment

Some surroundings are more conducive to writing than others. For example, you probably should not write in your bed at 11 p.m. Analyze your environment, thinking about locations which are either effective or ineffective.

Environment	
Effective Locations	Why is this place an effective working environment?
Ineffective Locations	Why is this place an ineffective working environment?

What Can You Do to Make Your Writing Space Sacred?

Once you have decided on an effective location, think about what you can do to make this place sacred (i.e., set apart). You need to mentally dedicate this place to writing. For example, your bedroom is dedicated to sleeping—your mind associates that space with that activity. Think of ways to set your writing space apart as a *work* space.

Worksheet 7: Relationships

Writing is much easier if you have a support group. Maybe your support group consists of other writers who can give feedback on your work. Maybe it consists of family members who will hold you to your goals and help you celebrate when you complete them.

Support	
Name	Type of Support

How Can You Help Your Family and Friends Respect Your Writing Efforts?

Who Else is Working on a Writing Project?

Other Writers	
Name	Type of Project

Worksheet 8: Resources

Some beginning writers waste valuable time by looking for materials they think they need—materials that they have already found (i.e., they aren't doing research) but that they have not kept organized. Plan ahead—decide what resources you will need to have a productive writing session.

Resources
What books/articles do you need on hand?
What other data do you need on hand?
What food, drink, or snacks do you need on hand?
What writing material do you need on hand?