

THE SOUNDING BOARD

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DIAGNOSIS: WRITER'S BLOCK A SELF-HELP GUIDE

The dreaded writer's block finds its way into the mind of almost every writer. And when you're under a deadline, oh the horror! If you haven't ever experienced this phenomenon, please get in touch with us. We would like to conduct a few tests. But until the day we develop a bottled cure, here are some common causes and strategies to get us mere mortals writing again.*

SYMPTOM: You're sitting at your computer. The cursor is blinking on a blank screen. It marks each second ticking by, bringing you closer and closer to your deadline. This paper has to be finished by tomorrow afternoon. How could you let this happen?!

POSSIBLE CURE: Begin a free write. Don't censor any of your ideas until you feel that you've emptied your brain onto the page. Go back and choose your strongest points. You just may know more than you thought you did.

Now, create an outline to give your essay structure and organization. This will prevent you from cutting and pasting paragraphs all night.

SYMPTOM: You weren't sure what you wanted to write about, so you randomly chose a topic. Now you think it might be boring, but it's too late. You must write an essay about it.

POSSIBLE CURES: Talk with your professor about how you might draw out aspects of your topic that you do find interesting.

Make an appointment with your Writing Colleague to discuss how you would like to develop your paper. Having an outsid-

er's perspective on your topic might help you to despise it less.

Resign yourself to believing there is good in everything and find something about your topic in which you can be interested.

SYMPTOM: You would rather spend your time doing anything else but writing or don't understand the assignment.

POSSIBLE CURE: Resign yourself to completing this writing assignment, and perhaps reward yourself with an evening free of obligations.

SYMPTOM: It's simple. You are freaking out.

POSSIBLE CURES: Replace the negative thoughts in your head with positive ones. Focus all your energy on planning the steps you are going to take to complete the assignment.

Develop a few rituals for your writing process, such as drinking tea, listening to jazz, or talking over your ideas with a Writing Colleague or friend before you begin writing your paper.

Assure yourself that you don't have to create a work of genius with your first draft--and make sure you leave yourself time to write several drafts.

Force yourself to get something written down--no matter how poorly written it is. Move on to the next idea, and then the next. Repeat. Begin your revisions when you have a better idea of what direction you will take in this paper.

* For further information, please go to:
www.owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/

TIPS FOR WRITING YOUR THESIS STATEMENT

1.) What kind of paper are you writing?

Analytical Paper

- Breaks down an issue or idea to reveal its component parts
- Evaluates the issue or idea
- Presents the breakdown and evaluation to the reader

Expository Paper

- Explains an issue or idea

Argumentative Paper

- Makes a claim about a topic and supports this claim with specific evidence (this could be an opinion, proposal, evaluation, cause-and-effect or interpretation)
- Convinces the reader that the claim is true based on the evidence provided

If you are writing a text that does not fall into any of the above categories, a thesis statement somewhere in the first paragraph might still be helpful to your readers.

2.) Your thesis statement should be specific. It must cover only what you will discuss in your paper and be fully supported with specific evidence.

3.) The thesis statement usually appears at the end of the first paragraph.

4.) Your topic may change as you write, so you may need to revise your thesis to reflect what you have discussed in the paper.

“Writing is the hardest work in the world. I have been a bricklayer and a truck driver, and I tell you--as if you haven’t been told a million times already--that writing is harder. Lonelier. And nobler and more enriching.”

Harlan Ellison, Science Fiction writer

Why do we outline?

Outlines support the writing process in a number of ways. They help you to:

- 1.) Organize your ideas
- 2.) Present material in a logical format
- 3.) Show relationships between ideas in your paper
- 4.) Construct an ordered overview
- 5.) Define boundaries of concepts and groups of ideas

How do we outline?

There are a few things you must have clear in your mind before you begin to outline:

- 1.) Determine the purpose of your paper.
- 2.) Identify your audience
- 3.) Develop the thesis of your paper.

Then:

Brainstorm: list all the ideas you would like to include in your paper.

Organize: group related ideas together

Order: arrange material in sections from general to specific

Label: create main subheadings

Interested in a Writing Colleague for your course next semester? Interested in becoming a Writing Colleague? Please contact us:

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Check out *The Sounding Board* online:
www.hws.edu/academics/enrichment/writingcolleagues.asp

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: Sometimes my Student Colleagues will ask me for proofreading tips. How can we, the Writing Colleagues, help students to proofread better?

A: There are a few things your Student Colleagues can do before they hand their papers to you or their professor. Below is a list of things you could suggest.

1. Let the paper rest for a while--even if it’s only for 20 minutes. Allowing yourself some space before you revise what you’ve written will help you approach your work with a fresh eye and mind.
2. Don’t procrastinate to the point that you must rush. Rushing through a draft is a recipe for overlooked errors.
3. Read your paper aloud. This allows you to read more slowly and carefully.
4. Role-play in your mind while you read. Pretend that you are your professor reading this essay. You will read more carefully and critically, which could help you to pick up on things you might have otherwise missed.
5. Ask a friend or roommate to read your paper.

IDENTIFYING YOUR AUDIENCE

“Writer and audience are Siamese twins. Kill one and you run the risk of killing the other. Try to separate them, and you may simply have two half-dead people.”

Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating the Dead: A Writer on Writing*

What do you tell writers who have difficulty identifying their audiences? Try asking:

Who wants to read this?

What do you know about your readers?

When have you gathered enough information about your subject?

How can you make this paper interesting?

What level of discourse is appropriate for your audience?

It is important to use language that fits your purpose as well as your audience. Consider:

Formality: Writing in the style that your audience expects is important to successful writing.

Jargon: Only use in-group jargon when your purpose is to write for only those who are in your specialized field.

Slang: Avoid slang and idiomatic expressions in academic writing.

Bias: Avoid any biased language--stereotypes, racial, ethnic and the like.