

WRITER'S BLOCK

Writing can be a big source of stress, and “writer’s block” is a common response. There can be many factors at play when we get writer’s block, so the first step is to figure out why you’re having difficulty filling the page or screen. Ask yourself, “What do I need to get past this block?” and try some of the following strategies.

Read your assignment carefully.

Understanding your professor’s expectations is key. The verbs in an assignment are often direct instructions on what you have to do. For example, “analyze” asks you to move beyond the surface presentation of the object of study to find things like assumptions, cause-and-effects, hidden meanings, parallels and relations between various parts of the object. “Compare and contrast” asks you to find both similarities and differences between objects, and “agree or disagree” asks you to give an opinion. Look for the verbs and make a list of the corresponding things you want to say.

Use all your resources.

If your professor or TA has office hours, use the opportunity to get feedback on what they are looking for and what *you* think the purpose of the assignment is. This will help make sure that you’re on the same page, and they might have advice on how to proceed with your ideas. You can also book appointments with the Writing Centres to help you understand what to do in your assignment and how to communicate your ideas: writing.utoronto.ca has links to all of the different centres at U of T, to the Writing Plus workshop schedule, and to PDFs for you to use on your own.

Figure out what you really think.

If you’re struggling to come up with something to say, set yourself a brainstorming exercise. Take 20 minutes to write down all your ideas without stopping, looking anything up or even worrying about grammatical sentences. What you’re creating doesn’t need to be a coherent text: instead, you can make a mind map where ideas, words and phrases each have their own spot on the page, and relationships are shown by lines between them. You could also talk out loud about your thoughts, possibly recording them for yourself or sharing them with someone else. Hearing or seeing your ideas can help you get a better grip on them. Don’t try to self-censor! You might end up with a short paragraph about what you think, or you might come up with a handful of ideas that you think are interesting. Either one can be the basis for your final product.

Make an outline.

It’s faster and more effective to write to an outline, especially with longer or more challenging projects. Generally, you can estimate 10% of your word count for your Introduction and your Conclusion, and then set parts of the remaining 80% for the various components of your essay. Writing is an accumulation of ideas, sentences, quotations, paragraphs, drafts, and so on. Even though your outline might change as you write, be specific about what you have to say when you’re planning things out: if your outline is made up of many prompts that each require 100 or 200 words, writing each part will be relatively easy.

You don't need to start at the beginning.

The hardest sentence to write is sometimes the first one: we all want to have the killer opening line. But writing your first paragraph when you haven't written your paper can be like introducing someone at a party whom you haven't yet met. If you're able, jump ahead to the most interesting part of the project, and write that piece. And then do it again for the next-most interesting. You'll soon realize what you need to add before and after the parts you've already written.

Don't be critical when you're being creative.

The most common source of writer's block is the desire to write the perfect piece right away: each sentence is correspondingly difficult, and we start to dread the process. Academic writing is a specific mode of communication that doesn't always feel natural, so express your own ideas in your own language first, and then translate or edit the language afterwards. Try not to disrupt your flow: you can make notes to yourself to "find that resource" or "fix this sentence"—but do it later. Especially if you're typing, figure out a system so that these notes don't make it to the final version: you can highlight them or use a special symbol that the Find function will flag when you're editing.

Give yourself time.

Sometimes, making a habit of writing at certain times (and editing at others) can be helpful. Trying to write all day, every day can be counterproductive: we all get tired or distracted. Some people find that writing at the start of their work day is best, before other things occupy their mind. Everyone is different, so find the times of day when you feel most energized and creative, and set yourself achievable goals for each session. When we set these goals the night before, sleeping on them often helps get our creative juices flowing.

Go to a Study Hub or join a Graduate Writing Group.

Find a supportive community that understands what you're trying to do, because they're doing the same thing. It can keep your mind focused and your writing going! Check out [UofT.me/StudyHubs](https://uoft.me/StudyHubs) and (if you're a graduate student) [UofT.me/GWG](https://uoft.me/GWG) for details.

Check out more resources.

There are many guides out there that have more suggestions for managing your writing process: for instance, there's Gabriele Lusser Rico's *Writing the Natural Way*, Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, Eric Hayot's *The Elements of Academic Style*, Paul Silvia's *How to Write a Lot*, or Joan Bolker's *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*. Ask your professors and peers for suggestions on what guides are best for writing in your academic field.

Want to know more?

Academic Success has resources, workshops, events and appointments to support you:

→ find us in the [Student Success Centre \(214 College Street, main floor\)](#),

→ look us up online at uoft.me/AcademicSuccess,

→ or give us a call at [416.978.7970](tel:416.978.7970)