



# Overcoming Writer's Block

Are you struggling with writer's block? It may be because while writing you are trying to be both creative and critical simultaneously. These two thought processes are very different—the creative arising from the right-brained mode of thinking, and the critical from the left-brained mode. You don't want these impulses to compete with one another as you write, so it is best to separate them out by function.

The steps listed below explain how you can break down the writing process into discrete elements. Make note of the alternating sequence; the idea is to alternate between thought processes. First, do something creative, then complement that creativity with something critical.

To get started, formulate a plan. Work backwards from your paper's due date and create a customized calendar or time line for your project. Follow the steps listed below in the sequence given, and set a target date for each step.

NOTE: in this case, critical doesn't mean "harsh" or "disapproving;" it means "analytical."

# 1

## Creatively choose a topic

target date:

- Pick something that interests you, or to which you have a personal connection.
- To generate ideas, review the indexes and bibliographies from class readings, talk to your instructor, and brainstorm with classmates.
- If your instructor chooses the topic for you, make sure you understand it thoroughly, then see how you can personalize it. Figure out what about the topic interests you.

# 2

## Critically refine your topic

target date:

Choosing a topic that has a narrow scope can make the writing process far more manageable. Think about moving from the general to the specific, as in the example below:

*history of French art* → *history of 19th century French art* → *history of French art from 1895 to 1900* → *comparison of impressionism and symbolism in French art from 1895 to 1900*

# 3

## Creatively collect your ideas

target date:

- Scan a wide variety of sources about your topic, including Wikipedia and Google Scholar, to develop an overview.
- Based on that overview, start reading and taking notes from the sources most relevant to your topic.
- Take advantage of Noodlebib (<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/noodlebib>) or other bibliographic citation software to keep track of your sources and simplify documentation issues.

# 4

## Critically organize your ideas

target date:

- Make an outline. There's no better way to put your thoughts in order.
- Look for patterns in the ideas, notes, and sources you've collected.
- If you can't find any patterns, try to at least block your ideas into a sequence that would make sense to a reader.
- Use a thesis statement as a magnet. Once you create a thesis, you can direct everything else towards it.

# 5

## Creatively put your ideas on paper

target date:

- Start writing anywhere in the paper you feel you have something to say. It doesn't need to be the beginning. Work diligently to get something down and set a goal for each writing session.
- Work quickly. Don't fret over selecting the perfect word or phrasing the most elegant sentence; allow yourself to edit and revise later. This is only a draft.
- Use the outline you've already established but be prepared to modify it if necessary; it is not cast in stone.
- If you get stuck, talk about your ideas—with a friend, with an instructor, or just out loud. The act of selecting words to voice your ideas can translate to selecting words to write.
- Imagine a real reader for the paper; think of yourself as telling a story to an interested audience.

# 6

## Critically revise your rough draft

target date:

- Give yourself time to edit. Make sure you finish your paper at least 24 hours before it's due. Is it...
  - Organized? Does one paragraph follow another logically? Look for good transitions between sentences and between paragraphs.
  - Unified? Do all the paragraphs support and develop your thesis? (Don't forget to make sure you've stated your thesis very clearly at the beginning of the paper). Is each paragraph unified around a topic sentence?
  - Grammatically correct? Are sentences varied in length and structure, and designed to emphasize key ideas? Do they indicate relationships clearly and express ideas economically? Are they punctuated correctly?
  - Well-worded? Are your words concrete? Appropriate? Use a thesaurus for new ideas, but make sure the words are contextually appropriate.
  - Flowing? Read the paper aloud. Does it sound awkward? Do you stumble in certain places or have to reread particular passages? Ask a friend—ideally someone who knows nothing about the topic—to read your paper, and see if makes sense.