

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 are two very different thought processes—the creative arising from the right brain, and the critical from the left brain—and so they're most effective when you use them for different tasks. The steps listed below explain how you can break down the whole 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 process with something critical.

To get started, first **formulate a plan**. Determine when your paper's due, then figure out how many days you have to write the paper. 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."

The Creative

Step 1: Creatively choose a topic.

- Pick something that interests you, or that you have a personal connection to.
- 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 make it personal. Figure out something about the topic that *you* can be interested in.

Due Date:

Step 3: Creatively collect your ideas

- Brainstorm a quick list of ideas that may be related to your topic. Try recalling your *own* experiences.
- Consult a wide variety of sources: newspapers, journals, popular magazines, text books, films, etc.
- Be sure to keep thorough records of your research. Fully document bibliographic information for each source and write everything down in the same place.
- For more info on bibliographic formatting see www.lib.utexas.edu/ugl/researching/citing/index.html

Due Date:

The Critical

Step 2: Critically refine your topic.

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 1895 to 1900 → comparison of impressionism and symbolism in French art 1895 to 1900

Due Date:

See reverse

The Creative

The Critical

Continued from previous

Step 5: Creatively put your ideas on paper

- Gather all the materials you'll need: your notes, your computer, any sources, reference materials, etc.
- **Start writing.** Make no excuses and work diligently to get something down.
- Work quickly. Don't fret over selecting the perfect word or phrasing the most elegant sentence; allow yourself to edit and revise later.
- Use the outline you've already established and stick with the order.
- If you get stuck, **talk** about your ideas—with a friend, an instructor, or just out loud. The act of selecting words to voice your ideas can translate to selecting words to write.
- Next, quickly write your ideas out, then throw the piece of paper away. Do this again and again until the words and ideas start to flow.

Due Date:

Step 4: Critically organize your ideas

- **Make an outline.** There's no better way to put your thoughts in order.
- Group similar items together.
- Look for patterns in the ideas, notes, and sources you've collected.
- If you can't find any patterns, try to fit what you've got in the structure of the outline.
- Use a thesis statement as a magnet. Once you create a thesis, you can direct everything else towards it.

Due Date:

Step 6: Critically revise your rough draft

- 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, 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 they fit contextually.
- **Flowing?** Read the paper aloud. Does it sound awkward? Do you stumble over places or have to repeat them? Ask a friend—ideally someone who knows nothing about the topic—to read your paper, and see if makes sense.

Due Date: