Writing Process: Tips and Strategies

Sitting down to write can feel like the hardest thing to do, even for people who write for a living or consider themselves writers. The truth is, even the best of us need more than one draft in order to best articulate our thoughts. While a support system and other readers are important to successful writing (we would know—we’re the Writing Center!) the act of writing itself is often one we do alone. Below is a collection of tips and strategies from our consultants to help you with your writing!

The Writing Mindset
Sometimes the best thing we can do is change our mindset about writing. Having a mantra, or thing you remind yourself as you work, may help to keep your worries and fears away.

- Take your idea for a walk metaphorically. See what happens.
- Everything is a placeholder. Every idea and sentence is just saving a spot for the improved ideas and sentences you’ll come up with in an hour, tomorrow, etc. It’s easier to search for things to fix rather than staring at a blank page and trying to keep everything in your head.
- Anne Lamott says, “The first draft is the child’s draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later.”
- “Half my life is an act of revision.” John Irving
- William Faulkner says, “Get it down. Take chances. It may be bad, but it’s the only way you can do anything really good.”
- Write long, cut later.
- With time, everything can be fixed.

Strategies for Getting Started

- As soon as you get an assignment, create a blank document to host all of your ideas and questions. Keep it going with whatever ideas pop into your head. Then, when you do start a longer work session, you can start with reading over all the thoughts you’ve gathered so far.
- Fill your blank page with as many questions as you can think of about your topic. Then, start answering your questions. You can always go back and decide how to organize them. Even if only two of your “answers” make it to your final draft, it will get your words moving.
- Write how you feel about the assignment. Literally write, “I don’t know what to say. I’m confused about this topic. Do they want X or Y? I’ve found research on A, but I haven’t really found anything for B yet...” Look at what you’ve written, and see what actions you can take to answer your own questions. Do you need to do more research? Ask your professor for clarification on the assignment? Call a friend?
- Start in the middle or the end rather than with the introduction.
- Some people’s first step is to organize their thoughts in an outline. Others are the opposite. If an outline isn’t working as your first step, you can always organize your thoughts later.
- Think of multiple possibilities for your thesis statement, then pick the one that interests you most.
- What if your assignment had its own Twitter. What would it tweet?
- Look over your assignment sheet and pick out some key phrases. Do you need to analyze or persuade? Explore or define? What do these key phrases mean to you? Getting your thoughts on the page about big aspects of your topic may help you find some themes, and a direction to take your paper.
- Decide on direct quotes from research you’ve found and type those onto the page. Start analyzing them.
- Write in bullet points, different color font, or even a different color background to make your writing process more fun. Don’t forget to change it back to the correct formatting before you turn it in though!
Location, Location, Location

Where do you typically write? If you don’t have a specific spot or it isn’t working, try some of these and see how you feel. What your goal is for writing may depend on the assignment or your mood that day.

- Feeling more anxious than usual might mean finding an even quieter place to work.
- Feeling social might mean having a word war with your roommate. (As in, how many words can you type in an hour?) Whoever wins doesn’t have to clean the dishes.
- Normally face a window? Try closing the curtains, or moving so that you face a wall instead.
- Is your chair comfortable? Too comfortable? Do you have enough back support? If sitting for long periods of time is difficult, try standing. Set your computer on a high counter or bookshelf.
- Try a new location: Kitchen table, desk in bedroom, on a porch, the library (noisy floor or quiet floor, you decide), a coffee shop, another building on campus, a bench at a park. Each place has a different vibe to test out your writing in.

Atmosphere

When we start to write, it may seem easier to get up and do something else. Think about what else you can do within your writing space to encourage yourself to stay there.

- Listening to music while writing is a controversial bit of advice. It really works for some people, and it really doesn’t for others. If you want to try it, think about what would motivate you without being distracting. Try music from soundtracks, music without lyrics, slow paced music, and different genres. When you find something that works, create a playlist or favorite station that serves as your “let’s get to work” mix.
- What else is on your table? Eliminating clutter may remove the subconscious pull to do something other than writing. You can always put your things back on the table later.
- For those of us who fear the blank document on the computer screen, try keeping scrap paper or sticky notes nearby to write on. Writing on paper may feel less permanent, and may free you up to explore ideas before you put them into your “official” document. Bright colored pens and highlighters may also help you writing process be more fun.
- Try writing at different times of the day. Waking up thirty minutes earlier might allow you to fit 15 minutes of writing in before you leave the house. Or, try writing late at night instead.

Incentives

We all may be simpler creatures than we’d like to admit. Let’s embrace it by giving ourselves rewards for doing work. It will be up to you to set the rules of when the reward comes. Is it after completing a certain section of the assignment? After completing a full paragraph-form draft? Or do you work better in time limits, work for thirty minutes, and then a ten minute break? Of course, these will only work if you stick to your rules and don’t give in to distractions.

- For some of us, there are few things more satisfying than crossing off an item on a list. Create a to-do list for each homework assignment, breaking each project into the smallest pieces. Then, cross them off as you complete them.
- Exercise can do wonders for our energy levels. You don’t have to run a mile for every page you write though. (Unless that works for you!) Try going for a short walk after working for an hour. Bring some scrap paper in case a great idea comes to you.
- Cleaning or organizing, even something as small as emptying the dishwasher, might help keep your momentum going. If an object in motion remains in motion, then a student accomplishing might keep accomplishing.
- Setting boundaries with when you are writing can help you enjoy the time you want and need with others. Build in time to spend with family members, children, friends, and pets.
- Food, healthy or not, can be an enticing incentive. While you probably don’t want to promise yourself a whole cake every time, a treat might taste even better after finishing that second draft. A small snack might help fuel your outline. Be sure to stay hydrated. Try some coffee or tea in the Writing Center!
Distractions
Let’s be honest, we all have things that distract us from writing. Some of them are in our control, while others are not. Here is a list of things that may be distracting you, whether you realize it or not, followed by a possible solution.

- **Cell phone notifications or screens lighting up.** Turn your sound completely off and turn the phone face down. Better yet, put it in the other room. Leaving it in your writing space may be too much of a temptation. Build in a phone break to check it!

- **Other responsibilities.** You need to do laundry, get your car’s oil changed, walk the dog, pick up someone from piano lessons. It’s true, we have to do these things and more every day. For things we can control, give yourself a time limit. Take fifteen minutes and write a quick outline of your paper, then start the laundry. Doctor’s appointment? Bring scrap paper and write paragraphs you are sure about by hand. Type them into your computer when you get home. Picking up your kid, sibling, or mom from somewhere? Download a voice recording app and talk through your project with yourself on the way there. Sit in the car and write twenty questions about your topic.

- **Too little time.** Often we fall into habits of feeling we need a certain amount of time in order to get any writing done. Throw these assumptions away. Think in fifteen minute blocks. Waiting for water to boil for dinner? Do a freewrite. Thirty minute space in between classes on Tuesdays? Write three different introduction paragraphs. If you can fill your day with small amounts of work, when you do settle into your official writing time, you will have all kinds of places to start typing.