

What to do if you get stuck on a college writing assignment

- 1) Create a web of ideas/associations related to each of your main ideas.
- 2) Discuss with a friend your ideas for the paper. Ask them to listen and ask you questions when something you say is confusing or unclear. Avoid getting too much advice from them, because you want to make sure these are your ideas (and that you understand well what you mean to say). What you really need is a sounding board.
- 3) Make an appointment at the Writing Center with your ideas so far, and see if they can give you any advice on how to proceed when you're stuck. (I'm not sure how much help they can give you, but these are people who write a lot of papers, so they should be able to give you some pointers!)
- 4) Reread the book or research materials that relate to your paper, if appropriate. As you read, write down notes on postits or in the margins. As soon as you get an idea, write it down. Rereading can be very useful in helping you focus on what you need to do.
- 5) Write a fragmented draft, like a list, of everything you want to say in any order. Then go through and turn the list into sentences. Then rearrange the sentences into categories. Then add transitions and weave the sentences together. You may actually find that you have a paper when you are through!
- 6) Find a willing friend who will let you dictate your paper to them, and they will type it up. (Perhaps you can make a trade; I'll do it for you if you'll do it for me). See if it helps you break the writer's block.
- 7) Reread papers you've written that you (or the professor) think were really good. Ask yourself why, or just bask in a feeling of accomplishment. Remind yourself you can do it.
- 8) Visit the professor during office hours to ask for advice on starting the paper or to discuss your ideas further. Make sure it's a good time to talk, and be honest; just say that you're experiencing writer's block and you will do it, and you don't want any unusual help. You just wanted to ask them what they do if they get stuck and/or to discuss your idea and see if they have any comments. Some professors may be more helpful than others, so be ready. Sometimes, this will be the best experience ever and make the class a far better learning experience for you. Sometimes, you'll come away feeling embarrassed and irritated, but if that happens, try to remind yourself to pity the professor who obviously never learned good social skills. J

9) Write an ‘opposite’ paper. Write a paper taking the opposite stance of what you planned to write. This may strengthen your arguments, because you’ll have to come up with counter arguments, and help you clarify your thinking on your thesis.

10) Find a journal in the library full of academic articles or essays in the same field as your class (Literature, History, etc.) Avoid reading any on the exact same topic, because that will influence you a little too much and you may unconsciously plagiarize in your paper. Instead, just find a few fairly readable essays (avoid the ones full of isms and scary charts ;)), and get used to academic prose. It’s a little like watching a movie in a foreign language; you want to improve your ‘ear’ and get in the right mood to speak “academicese”. Plus those articles will be a great model for you, so you can become more comfortable with this kind of writing. (It’s a lot easier to write the kinds of things you read a lot). Be warned—sometimes the concepts and vocabulary will be simply too challenging for an undergraduate. Don’t be discouraged—just keep flipping through the journals until you find something a little better.)

Here are some titles of journals that you might read:

For English/Literary Essays:

English Literature Renaissance

Modern Language Review

Literary Imagination (lovely & readable essays)

Journal of Hellenic Studies

For History or Political Science:

Journal of Interdisciplinary History

Journal of International Affairs (very readable)

Science:

A very readable one for me was Journal of Nutrition

Journal of Geology was harder—but you can find some of these for any particular science you are taking.

A few contrasts:

Reading Teacher (yes, readable yet fits the model of essays you might write for Education classes) but Mailbox Bookbag would not be the right model (lots of great ideas for teachers, though, but not in the form of academic essays).

Psychological Bulletin is a good model of papers for a psychology class; Psychology Today is not (too much of a magazine format).

There are journals on almost every topic imaginable in the library—I love to browse and sometimes I really feel as if I’ve learned something just by spending a little time reading

there. And such reading is a good way to get yourself in the right mode for writing!

11) Let time be on your side. Start early and make yourself work on it for 30 minutes a day, no matter how good or bad your results are. You'll find yourself thinking about the project more often, and you will begin to break through (plus you'll have time to go back and improve some of the garbage that came out in the beginning).