

## Write Before You're Ready: First Steps to Avoiding Writer's Block

Oh no; it's happening again!

You just sat down to write. In the back of your mind, you know what you want to say. But as you stare at the computer screen or your pad of paper, you realize that you probably haven't checked out all the literature on this subject.



Furthermore, you're not really clear about some of the articles that you've read. Perhaps you wonder if you really have anything to say after all.

So you decide to go back to do some more research, take some more notes, and check out a few more sources. Eventually, though, you find yourself back at the keyboard. Somehow you can't find a way to express those thoughts that were so clear when you were researching. Every sentence that you write sounds banal, weak, obvious or boring. "I'm not in a creative state of mind," you think. "I'd better wait until I have a bigger block of time" or "I'd better wait until I'm in the mood."

The cycle continues, as you try to get clear in your mind what your thoughts are. Eventually you grow to dread the process of sitting down to write, and you think of yourself as a procrastinator.

Many writers get caught in this endless cycle.

Is there a way out? One way is to practice what Robert Boice suggests in "*Advice for New Faculty Members*" and in "*Professors as Writers*." What he suggests is: write before you're ready. By observing "exemplar" new professors, and teaching their techniques to struggling professors, he found that blocked writers can be taught to write more easily. Here are the first few steps of his technique.

### **Pre-writing**

In this stage, which could be just a day, or might last a week or two, you spend 10 to 15 minutes per week day writing, sketching out, taking notes, talking through, or otherwise preparing for what you will be writing. This is not a reading/research stage, but a preliminary writing stage. You should start this stage before you feel fully ready.

## **Informal Outlines**

At the end of each pre-writing session, make a small outline of what you've just written and where you want to go next. This will be difficult, but if you make a practice of doing it for a minute or two at the end of each session, you will get better at it and reap the eventual benefits. Avoid making the outline better and better. Be satisfied with its imperfect state.

## **Avoid the Urge to Research (at this stage)**

You will be learning from the prewriting and early outlining what additional specific research needs to be done. This will help you avoid over-researching.

## **Revise and Expand**

In each succeeding pre-writing period, revise and expand your outline. Note what your main points are, and add supporting material. Start to use your notes from previous reading and research. If the notes are too detailed, cull out the pertinent information by making notes on your notes.

## **Write Informally**

At this stage you should write as you would talk. Fight the urge to be perfectionistic in your writing. Don't try to cover all the points at once. Simplify.

Why not try Boice's techniques if you have been feeling blocked? This article is a short introduction to a much longer series of techniques that we share in the [Academic Writing Club](#). Although these suggestions may go against every fiber of your academic soul, if your current writing techniques have gotten you mired down, "writing before you are ready" may be worth a try.

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