

Stanford Help Center

Writing Productivity Problems

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The following issues are frequently associated with writing blocks and decreased productivity:

Procrastination and Avoidance

- Ongoing difficulty with sitting down at desk to write
- Fear of failure or success
- Sense of dread: “It will be unbearable”
- Loss of confidence
- Impatience
- Resentment or rebelliousness
- Time management and planning difficulties
- Repeated cycle of failure and self-promises to improve
- Binge writing at or after deadlines

Negative Self-Talk

- Self-criticism
- Catastrophizing
- Dread and overwhelm
- Pessimism

Perfectionism

- Rigid rules about the process or product of writing
- Unrealistic expectations
- Process of writing is excruciating and slow
- Over-editing on early drafts
- Difficulty declaring a project finished
- Exaggerated fear of criticism

Anxiety

- Panic attacks
- Going blank
- Catastrophic thinking
- Reinforced patterns of avoiding writing to reduce anxiety

Psychosomatic

- Cramps, headaches, fatigue, nausea, dizziness

Difficulty Finishing

- Excessive pre-writing research
- Unable to decide what to edit out as unnecessary
- Pursuing peripheral issues, lose sight of main focus
- Working on multiple unfinished projects
- Completing projects but not showing anyone, or submitting for publication

Interpersonal Issues

- Isolation
- Reluctance or inhibition about asking for help
- Unresolved conflict with advisor, colleague, boss, publisher
- Reactions to criticism or rejection of a manuscript submitted for publication
- Lack of mentor or colleagues to discuss writing with
- Preoccupation with personal relationship problems

Mental Health Conditions

- Depression, anxiety, substance abuse, grieving, post-traumatic stress, bipolar disorder
- Attention deficit disorder, learning disabilities

Improving Writing Productivity

Time

- Create a routine time for writing: daily is best.
- Schedule an optimal daily amount. Short, regular sessions (under an hour) are recommended following a non-productive period.
- Protect and defend your writing time against encroachments from the external world.
- Be realistic in planning projects and setting expectations. Start with smaller, realizable goals.

- Maintain a balance between writing and other responsibilities and activities in your life.
- Increase planfulness and consistency of output when working with deadlines. Binge writing at deadlines maintains patterns of blocking.

Space

- Have a place to write that is comfortable, easy to get to and functional.
- Arrange your space to minimize exposure to your highest risk distractions (away from cookie jars, televisions, whatever).
- Do not begin a writing session by cleaning and organizing your work space. Do this after you have written.

Getting Started

- Have your writing place stocked with necessary materials and ready to go.
- Recall times in the past when you wrote productively. What were your patterns of writing then? What can you apply from those times to your present situation?
- Establish or re-establish a consistent habit and ritual of daily writing. This is hardest in the beginning.
- If you are just staring at the monitor or page, and are having difficulty getting started, experiment with warming up with a brief period of free writing. This could be 5 or 10 minutes of writing down anything that comes to mind without concern about the nature or quality of the content.

Behavioral Approaches

- Make a chart of your daily writing productivity. Put it on the refrigerator.
- Analyze each writing project and break it into bite-sized chunks.
- Generate specific, concrete daily goals that are realistic.
- Make success unavoidable each day by having goals that would be hard not to attain. Start with modest expectations, especially after a non-productive period.
- Make a list of your most common work avoiding behaviors (e.g., eating, taking a bath, emailing, television watching, non-essential busy work, etc). Develop strategies for reducing the likelihood of engaging in each of those activities during writing time.

- Notice if you are reinforcing the pattern of avoiding writing by rewarding yourself when you do not write, by engaging in pleasure seeking activities instead of writing during writing time.
- If need be, make a desired daily activity contingent upon having done some writing. This might mean denying yourself exercise, reading the paper, talking on the phone, playing piano, watching a favorite show, or taking a shower unless a minimum amount of writing has occurred.

Cognitive Approaches

- Notice your "self-talk" about writing. Pay particular attention to those thoughts which are frightening, critical, demoralizing and overwhelming. What are your most consistent patterns of negative thinking? Are these accurate thoughts or do they contain distortions? (Normally they do).
- When you notice negative thoughts invading, think "STOP!" and consciously replace distorted messages with positive, hopeful thoughts; reminding yourself of previous successes, and the abilities you possess. This process becomes more effective with practice.
- Be mindful of patterns of placing perfectionistic, unrealistic demands on your writing process or content. An unreasonably harsh internal editor is a common feature among blocked writers. Practice with 'free writing' can help temper these influences.

People Issues

- Develop and utilize relationships with colleagues and other writers who you can share your work with.
- Work collaboratively with another writer(s) on a project.
- Avoid isolation: keep up or rekindle professional and personal contacts - especially if blocking is a problem.
- Determine if there are any unresolved interpersonal issues with significant people (ie. colleague, mentor, dissertation advisor, boss, spouse) that may be affecting your writing. Make efforts to address these problems.
- Where there is a difficulty showing writing to others; begin with people who you like and trust, and are unlikely to savage your work. Slowly branch out from there to include others. A group or class often provides a good environment for going public with your writing.

- Make a public commitment pertaining to your ongoing writing productivity.
- If anxiety or depression becomes chronic or intense, seek professional assistance.

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