

The Academic Success Center's Writing Support Services wants to help you with...

Getting Started On a Writing Project

(Taken in part from the Holyoke Community College Writing Center webpage)

- Make a list of fears or anxieties that you have about writing. Then one at a time, ask yourself how each one can be overcome. You will find that some of the fears are weaker than others. Overcoming these weakest fears is where you may have your first breakthrough.
- Ask other people how they get started with their writing. People are your best resource.
- Read another piece of writing and see if it inspires you.
- Talk to other students in the class and see what they are writing about.
- Just start writing...it may lead you to places you hadn't thought of before.

BRAINSTORMING

When brainstorming, you should try to stay as structure-free as possible. The most important element of brainstorming is creativity. Structure creates boundaries, and boundaries may impede creative thought. Think of the term *Brainstorm*—a storm of the brain, a rush or deluge of thought.

As you brainstorm, jot down anything that comes to mind, whether it is words, phrases, names, events, ideas, quotes, pictures, dialogue, etc. Do this for a specified time and then stop. Go back over the list and look for related topics or themes, no matter how loosely they may be tied together. You may repeat this as many times as you wish. Imagine these brainstorms as a series of doors you pass through, each door revealing a more focused realm than the one before. You may eventually settle on a topic that is worthy of your full attention. Do not expect gold every time you try this, but *never* expect disappointment.

The Academic Success Center has a software program, *Inspiration*, which is an excellent tool for **Brainstorming** and **Clustering** using visual icons and text.

CLUSTERING

This is a technique that is visual, and also has a more hands-on feel to it than most other brainstorming type techniques. If you've ever seen a model of a molecule column, then you will find some similarities with a finished cluster.

A cluster begins with a word or phrase written in the middle of the page. This will be your central word from which the cluster will radiate. From there you free-associate with the term, writing down any relative terms that come to mind. As similarities develop between the terms, circle each term and link it to related terms with a line or arrow. Eventually, you may see organizations (clusters) of words come together that might be

developed into an organized train of thought or even a topic. This can be repeated many times as you expand and narrow your field or interest. Unlike brainstorming in its truest sense, clustering produces a little more organization between these random thoughts.

FREEWITING

The object of freewriting is to write nonstop, keeping your pen/pencil/keyboard constantly busy while you write free form any structure or, sometimes, even meaning. Freewriting works much the same way as a casual conversation between friends or associates, only the talk is between your imagination and the paper. The “talk” may begin with a topic, but eventually branch out into any number of areas. In some ways, the freewrite is like a rambling dialogue or even a daydream on paper. It may wander as freely as your mind allows, alternating between sense and nonsense or somewhere in between. There is nothing too important or unimportant in a freewriting exercise. This is perhaps the most risk-free writing you can pursue. The object of freewriting is to open all possibilities of the mind and put them down on paper. You can establish your own increments of time and write within that allotted time. Once that time is up, read over what you’ve written to see if there are any pearls worth saving for a subsequent freewrite.

ENVIRONMENT

Taking control of your environment may produce dramatic results in your writing. Environment is often the key to your mood, your ability to concentrate, your physical comfort or *discomfort*, even your inspiration.

- Sit family members or roommates down and establish your time when they are not to disturb you under any circumstances except for emergencies. If this is not possible, then go somewhere away from them if possible.
- If you like quiet places, then write in a park, the woods, or a library. Some people can concentrate in loud, bustling environments like bus terminals, train stations, restaurants, cafes, or busy sidewalks. Some of us prefer to write alone, some like writing with others.
- Experiment with different environments. Try writing in a noisy place if you like quiet or *visa versa*. Try writing while listening to different types of music or after reading certain types of writing such as poetry, newspapers, short stories, novels, or magazines. Try writing inside or outside, in a cold room or a hot room; find an unusual place like a greenhouse, a bus, a train, a parked car, a playground full of kids, a church, or a concert. When experimenting, be as open with the environment as you would be with your subject matter when freewriting.

These are just a few of the many ways you can bring your writing to life. Keep in mind that these are tools for early stages of writing and that later you will strive for more coherence, organization, and clarity of thought.

OVERCOMING WRITER'S BLOCK

There are some people who do not believe writer's block exists. Whether it does or not matters little, because many of the following suggestions will help anyone to write, whether they are stuck or not. For the sake of this discussion, we will assume that writer's block *does* exist. Most writers will encounter some sort of difficulty getting started or restarted with their writing. It is good to remember that writer's block is often the result of anxiety, and that temporary diversions from the task at hand can often be helpful, as long as they are temporary.

- 1) Get in touch with your wittiest/zaniest/most eccentric friend and engage them in conversation for at least five minutes this is to relax the mind, and believe me it works most of the time.
- 2) The best thing to do is to brainstorm...it may not help immediately, but it gives you ideas that can lead to more ideas.
- 3) Get away from your normal surroundings. View different scenery, or interact with different people. The change helps restore creativity.
- 4) Writer's block is sometimes an excellent clue that the material you're writing about hasn't quite jelled in your mind...go back and look through your notes and research material and then reread your story/essay (however much you have completed).
- 5) Don't get too hung up on sitting there and writing. Do other things but have paper and favorite pen or pencil handy. Things often pop into your head when you're doing something else.
- 6) DON'T WATCH T.V. or PLAY VIDEO GAMES!
- 7) Read everything you can get your hands on and continue to experiment in journals. You never stop thinking, so why stop writing. Frustration comes from not being able to meet expectations so reassess what you expect from yourself and continue to write in your journal. Go for walks. Talk to people. And write in your journal.
- 8) I find the "one sentence at a time" philosophy helps. I don't commit to more than one sentence for an entry, but so far I've not found myself stopping at one sentence.
- 9) Write. Pretend this isn't the real (assignment) you are working on. Pretend you are only rehearsing your story and it doesn't matter what you write. Pretend no one will ever see what you have written, unless you want them to.
- 10) A specific time and place to write, plus a goal. I write every evening from 8:00 to 11:00 PM, and I stay at it until I have at least 500 words.
- 11) Get right to the point. Write exactly what your readers need to know and worry about polishing up later. Often a creative idea will hit AFTER you've gotten into the first few paragraphs.
- 12) To overcome writer's block, I tell myself it doesn't exist. I read somewhere that painters don't have painter's block, dancers don't have dancer's block. When I tell myself there's no such thing, I can't use it as an excuse to not write.

- 13) Write! Write! Write! That's the only method that has worked for me. Sitting around thinking up an idea doesn't work. Pounding away on the keyboard does. So what if it takes a hundred pages before something worthwhile surfaces.
- 14) Go out and talk to people. I get more ideas from people than any other source. People are just damned weird, and I like to write about it.
- 15) Listen to the strangest music you can find.
- 16) Over the years I have come up with these rules for myself and they work:
 - a. Have a purpose "to write" and execute it every day.
 - b. Observation – the ability to look and be interested and curious in everything is most important.
 - c. Write about what *you* are interested in.
 - d. Keep any upsetting persons out of your space—this particularly means those who offer criticism of a destructive kind on a consistent basis.
- 17) Write only what you know about. When you don't know, *find out*.
- 18) Never force the work. Relax. Take time out to "look" at in your own mind.
- 19) Take a short break (five minutes max.) and then force yourself to write. I think that writer's block is partly due to being lazy or having a 'tired mind'. The way you get the creative juices flowing is not by sitting around wishing you could write, but rather by sitting down and doing it.
- 20) Subways... Malls... Church... Go wherever there are people congregating. Suddenly, you'll observe them and think of anything and everything to write about.
- 21) Grandma used to tell me I could go swimming when I learned to swim. Of course, I didn't learn to swim a single stroke until I finally jumped in the water. Dive in soon and WRITE!
- 22) Make a wheel with spokes coming off. At the center of the wheel write the name of your subject. On the spokes list all the possible things you can mention about this subject. Look at the list. Do you want to discuss one aspect of any topic listed or combine several to create an essay? If only one, place that topic at the center of the wheel and create spokes using that topic alone. See how completely you can develop your topic just by using these key words.
- 23) When I have a topic to write about...I find I usually get blocked when the subject doesn't interest me, or interests me TOO MUCH—that is, I'm too close to the topic.
- 24) Then it helps greatly to step back and look at it from a slightly interested readers' point of view. What would THEY most like to know about the subject? If I had to sum up the subject in two sentences, how would I do it?