

Advice for Writers Who Feel Stuck

Writing can be hard sometimes. Sitting down and putting words onto a page when you feel like you have nothing to say can be one of the hardest parts of writing. Whether you are struggling to come up with ideas, worried that your writing is not good enough, or getting distracted every few minutes, it can be difficult to know what to do. Here is some advice for writers who have trouble getting their ideas out and allowing themselves to just write.

Dear Advice column,

I have to write something, but I don't know how to start. I keep staring at the blank page and waiting for an idea to come to me. What should I do?

Dear Stuck,

The best thing you can do is just start writing, even if you don't know exactly what you want to say yet. It does not have to be good, organized, or even make complete sense at first. One of the biggest problems with writing is thinking that you have to know exactly what you want to say before you begin. Sometimes, you have to start writing before the ideas come.

If you do not know where to start, try a few different brainstorming techniques. You could freewrite for five or ten minutes, making yourself write whatever comes to mind without worrying about whether it is useful. You could also make a list of everything you know about your topic or create a simple outline with a few main points. Even writing down questions about your topic can help you figure out what you want to say.

For example, if you have a paper due tomorrow and you cannot think of an introduction, you could start by writing, "I don't know how to start this paper, but I know that..." and finish the sentence with whatever comes to mind. You might end up with an idea that you can use later.

I've done this before when I had to write something and couldn't figure out how to begin. I started putting random thoughts down, and most of them were not very good. However, after a while, I had a few ideas that I could actually work with. The important thing was that I had something on the page.

The worst thing you can do is sit there doing nothing while waiting for the perfect idea. Give yourself permission to write badly at first. You can always change your ideas later.

Dear Advice column,

I have started my paper about five times and deleted it every time. I feel like everything I write sounds stupid. How do I stop doing this?

Dear Perfectionist,

Stop trying to make your first draft perfect. Your first draft is probably going to be messy, and that is completely okay. The first draft is not supposed to be the finished product. It is supposed to give you something to work with.

I do this sometimes too. I'll write a sentence and immediately think, "That sounds stupid," and delete it. Then I'll write another sentence and delete that one too. After doing that for a while, I realize I've barely written anything. The problem is not that I cannot write; it is that I am trying to edit while I am still creating.

Instead, let yourself write badly. Do not worry about whether every sentence sounds amazing or whether your grammar is perfect. If you are working on a paper for class, you can go back through it later and fix your grammar, reorganize your ideas, and remove anything that does not work.

Think about it like building something. You cannot edit a paper that does not exist. It is much easier to improve a rough draft than to improve a completely blank page.

For example, if you are writing an essay and you have a sentence that sounds awkward, leave it there and keep going. You can highlight it or make a note to come back to it later. You might even write a paragraph that you eventually decide not to use. That is still useful because writing it may help you figure out what you actually want to say. Your first draft does not have to be good. It just has to exist.

Dear Advice column,

I have ideas, but I get distracted really easily. I start writing and then I think about my phone, what I'm going to eat for dinner, or what other people are going to think about my writing. How do I focus?

Dear Distracted,

You have to remind yourself that those things do not matter yet. When you are writing your first draft, you do not need to worry about what everyone else will think. Your job at that moment is simply to get your ideas onto the page.

Start by removing some of the distractions you can control. Put your phone somewhere you cannot easily reach it, close unnecessary tabs on your computer, and find a place where you can focus. If typing on a computer makes you want to check social media, try writing with a pencil and paper instead. Sometimes changing how you write can help you focus.

You also do not have to sit down and write for three hours straight. Try giving yourself a smaller goal. Tell yourself that you are only going to write for 15 or 20 minutes. During that time, do not worry about whether what you are writing is good. Just keep moving forward.

For example, if you have an essay due at the end of the week, you could put your phone away and spend 20 minutes writing one paragraph. You might not finish the

entire assignment, but you will have more done than you would if you spent that same 20 minutes thinking about writing without actually doing it.

All three of these problems, having no ideas, worrying about perfection, and getting distracted, can make writing feel harder than it needs to be. The solution is not always to find the perfect idea or the perfect writing environment. Sometimes, you just have to allow yourself to write.

Putting ideas on a page is already hard, so do not make it harder by expecting yourself to be perfect. Try a brainstorming technique when you are stuck, keep writing when your first draft feels bad, and remove distractions when you need to focus. Give yourself permission to make mistakes, experiment with your ideas, and even write something you'll eventually throw away.

Writing something, even if it is bad, messy, or unfinished is always better than writing nothing at all.