

MAKING THE TIME TO WRITE (AND ACTUALLY WRITING)

Becoming a successful college writer depends on more than just developing an effective writing process and strong writing skills. Time management is an equally important part of the equation. Building adequate writing time into your schedule is the difference between submitting a rushed first draft and a thoughtfully revised final draft. Many college writers underestimate and deprioritize the importance of building writing time into their week, and this can be especially true for Caltech students, who must often balance a wide array of course-related and extracurricular activities.

We encourage you to think of your writing time as something that must be scheduled and protected. When establishing a schedule, factor in the assignment details (e.g., the length of the project, the required research). If, for example, this is your only assignment in the course, and it's due at the end of the term, it may be tempting to put it off for a few weeks and instead focus on assignments with earlier deadlines; however, that elongated assignment timeline is a clue that you are expected to do several weeks of research before you can begin brainstorming and writing. Starting on a writing project like this earlier than you might think you need to will ensure that you have plenty of time to choose your best ideas and then revise your work.

Below are some common challenges to getting started and some recommended strategies:

I STILL NEED SOME HELP GETTING STARTED; WHAT ARE SOME LOW-PRESSURE, LOW-STAKES WAYS TO DO THAT?

Make talking a part of your writing process and consider talking to someone about your writing project. One of the most effective approaches to prewriting is talking your ideas out with a friend or a classmate.

If you need more accountability, create some gentle pressure before the due date by scheduling some time to meet with your professor or someone in the Hixon Writing Center. Not only is this beneficial in creating a more enjoyable way to begin planning your writing project, but it also creates a checkpoint for a reader to let you know if your brainstorming or drafting is going in the right direction. Try setting yourself a personal deadline a week or two (or, for smaller projects, two or three days) before your paper is due. That way, you will have time to revise and think about your paper before submitting it.

WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE A LONG ENOUGH BLOCK OF TIME TO SET ASIDE?

Get away from thinking that writing must always consume long blocks of time and accept that the ideal writing conditions may never arise. When you do write, do so for a specific, realistic, and manageable amount of time. Instead of writing for six hours the night before an essay is due, schedule several 30- to 60-minute blocks of time across a few days or even weeks.

Busy people must find creative ways to work writing into their already crowded schedules. This might mean brainstorming notes on your phone between meetings or getting up a half hour early to find some quiet writing time. Not all preparation for writing involves formally sitting down to write. You can begin brainstorming while going for a walk or doing laundry. Beginning to think through the writing prompt and considering your response to it is a form of prewriting that adds value to your final product.

I'M STARTING MY ASSIGNMENT EARLIER, BUT I'M STILL STRUGGLING TO GET WORDS ON THE PAGE.

You may be putting unnecessary pressure on yourself to produce a polished draft. Keep in mind that it's easier to return to an assignment you've started than to approach one you haven't. Start a very rough draft by simply jotting down some ideas as soon as you can so that you do not return to a blank page in your next writing session. Attempting a very rough first draft early is much more productive than striving for a polished first draft close to the due date. The former is a great writing habit that allows you to gradually shape a draft, while the latter is a very challenging and unpleasant task.

Remember that the first draft is just a starting point. All the evaluating, reorganizing, and developing that happens while revising is when the paper really gets written, and without this important step in the process, you are essentially turning in a first draft. Plan to start early enough to spend at least as much time on revising as you did drafting, sometimes much longer.

OTHER HELPFUL RESOURCES

For more guidance on getting a rough draft going, see our handout titled "Generating a Draft Without Getting Blocked."

If you find that you are having trouble getting started beyond just budgeting and scheduling your time, see our handout titled "Writing and Procrastination."

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