

GENERATING A DRAFT WITHOUT GETTING BLOCKED

APPROACHING A FIRST DRAFT

One of the most common ways that writers get stuck in their first draft is by attempting to draft and revise simultaneously. Peter Elbow writes that “writing calls on two skills that are so different that they usually conflict with each other: creating and criticizing. In other words, writing calls on the ability to create words and ideas out of yourself, but it also calls on the ability to criticize them in order to decide which ones to use” (7). While these two skills can coexist, such writing sessions are occasional and rare. It is often a helpful practice to separate these two tasks so that they don’t interfere with each other (Elbow 7).

As you draft, it’s important to be intentional about separating drafting from revising because drafting is creative, generative work, and revising is an analytical process. You cannot effectively switch between these two modes of thought without halting your creative momentum, and you may end up missing out on ideas that were emerging. Think of your creativity as a conveyor belt of ideas passing through your mind, and your goal while drafting is not to compose a complete and error-free essay; it’s simply to make sure you can capture all of those ideas going by on the conveyor belt and put them on the page before they vanish (you can always go back afterwards and decide what stays and what goes). The longer you let the conveyor belt run, the more evolved and sophisticated the ideas have the potential to become. Likewise, any time you pull the stop lever to revise or “correct” one of those ideas, you will lose the creative and generative momentum you’ve worked hard to build.

SEPARATING YOUR INTERNAL CREATOR AND CRITIC

As you begin working on your first draft of any writing project, the most important thing is to keep in mind that this draft will be one of many versions, so it will be far from perfect. An imperfect and even a heavily flawed first draft is a great start. We write imperfect drafts because they allow us to begin discovering what it is we want to say instead of falling into the trap of trying to plan out an entire essay first and writing it only after it has been fully thought out. More importantly, imperfect drafts give us an immediate entry point into a writing task.

One way to conceptualize this approach to writing is by imagining an “internal creator” and an “internal critic” in your mind that are responsible for developing and processing your ideas. Setting out to write a perfect first draft from scratch is an impossible task because it requires engaging the creator and critic in your mind at the same time, when they are each supposed to wait their turn. Instead, give the critic a break and give the creator permission to craft a piece of writing that may be ugly to start with but may have great potential. Practically speaking, ask yourself whether you are the type of writer who repeatedly backspaces and rewrites parts of

sentences while trying to get ideas down. If so, you are likely letting your critic infringe on your creator's space. While your critic's role is equally important, it should act only when your creator is ready to pause. Imagine everything that makes it onto the page as raw material the creator generates and is later refined and processed by the critic who determines the value it adds to your writing project.

TIPS FOR GENERATING A DRAFT

Practicing Freewriting

Freewriting is a brainstorming technique that can help you generate initial ideas. It involves writing down any and all thoughts that come to mind without stopping. Consider using this tool if you have ample time before your assignment is due and aren't yet sure what to say about your topic. To brainstorm with freewriting, set a timer, typically to 5 to 10 minutes as a starting point. Using a timer helps you stay focused and prevents overthinking. Write nonstop about your chosen topic until the timer goes off. If you get stuck, keep your pen moving (or keep typing) by repeating your last phrase until you come up with a new thought. Do not make any edits to spelling or grammar errors. This process is purely the domain of your internal creator, so let your thoughts flow naturally, even if they go on tangents. When you're done, read what you've written, and underline any interesting ideas that stand out to you. You can use that material as a starting point for drafting your essay or to start a new, more focused freewriting session.

Practicing Direct Writing

If you're working with a tight deadline and don't have time for brainstorming through freewriting, consider trying what Peter Elbow calls "the direct writing process." Like freewriting, the aim of direct writing is to help you avoid self-censorship and encourage the flow of ideas. However, unlike freewriting, it is less exploratory and not focused on producing completely unfiltered expression. The goal of direct writing is to produce usable text for a specific purpose while still prioritizing momentum over precision until the revision phase.

In freewriting, you are encouraged to write anything that comes to mind, even if it sounds "bad" or "wrong." In contrast, during direct writing, you still avoid backspacing, but Elbow advises that you "skip a line or two and get yourself back onto some aspect of the topic or theme" if you go off track (27). If you change your mind about a sentence as you're writing it, simply leave it as is without backspacing and continue on the next line with your new phrasing. This practice helps preserve your creative momentum, keeping ideas alive while you are developing them and preventing distraction from constant erasing.

The Easiest Point of Entry

If you are ready to start drafting but aren't sure where to begin, start with the lowest hanging fruit. Choose the easiest part and the most hospitable entry point into your writing project. Many writers assume that they have to begin a writing project at the introduction. The truth is that the first sentence of the first paragraph is often the hardest place to begin, and starting with a sentence that feels so important can often cause writer's block. Just because a reader will read your work linearly does not mean that you need to draft linearly. Instead, start with a support

paragraph you feel inspired to write or some evidence you are excited to analyze. You can then build the rest of your essay around that starting point.

Staying on Track While Drafting

It helps some writers to include the writing prompt they are responding to in the header of the document. This way, it will follow you onto each new page of your writing. Keeping the writing prompt close by will allow you to refer back to it regularly and frequently and will ensure that you are writing in response to it and not going off track by responding to a different writing prompt.

Keeping a “Scrap Pile”

You might feel the need to delete things you don't like right away. However, this method of perfecting while creating is at odds with the process of drafting, which is *supposed* to be creative and messy. Instead of deleting, consider keeping a “scrap pile” at the end of the document. You can banish anything you don't see an immediate use for to this part of the document, but you can always reach for it again if you change your mind. The things you impulsively cut may end up being exactly the analysis or phrasing of an idea you can use elsewhere in your writing project. Consider all the phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or ideas you've written as raw material that can be shaped for another purpose. Don't delete any of the raw material you've worked hard to generate until you have completed your draft and revision.

Make an Appointment with the Hixon Writing Center

Starting your writing process by meeting with us can be a highly productive way to generate ideas. While some writers think they must wait until they have a full draft to seek help, connecting with a Writing Specialist or Peer Tutor early on—especially if you're struggling to develop initial ideas—can make the drafting process much smoother. Whether you need guidance with freewriting or encouragement to sort through those rough, unfinished thoughts, having someone to support you can help you build confidence in your drafting process.

Works Consulted

We consulted a number of works on this topic to create this handout, and you'll find their references here. This is not an exhaustive list of all resources on this topic, and we encourage you to seek out additional resources as needed.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

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