

Kenyon's WCC Explains How To:
Overcome Writer's Block

Here are some methods to you can use either with a tutor or on your own to overcome writer's block (at the beginning of a project) or to start generating ideas for an assignment:

Freewriting:

- Write without stopping for five or ten minutes. It's usually helpful to have the topic heading or a focusing phrase or sentence in front of you, just to keep on track. But what's most important is NOT to edit. Mistakes are ignored, false starts are ignored—just keep on writing.

Listing:

- If with a tutor, the tutor will have the student "talk aloud" about the assignment and list ideas, phrases, etc. down as he/she says them. The tutor can do the listing, too, but it's probably less directive to have the student do it. Then, using the right-hand column of the page, associate items on the list with each other. Gradually a structure for a paper will emerge. If not with a tutor, record yourself and then make notes as you listen to the recording.

Pro tip: don't worry about spelling, grammar, punctuation, and so forth (we call these areas lower order concerns as they impact your grade less). Just do what you can, when you can. You can always edit at the end. The goal is to get you writing, not writing perfectly.

Mapping:

- This is a graphical, nonlinear version of listing. As you talk to a student about an assignment, write down key words on a piece of paper. Start with the general topic, the broadest key word for the topic. From there add other key words, linking them to each other or to the general topic as seems most appropriate. Just discussing with the student how to draw the map gets him/her to think about relationships between ideas, relative weight of ideas, and relevancy of ideas.

HDWDWW:

- This stands for How Does Who Do What and Why? Basically, this is a variation on asking the traditional 6 journalistic questions (where, when, why, who, what and how). You could start with the general topic at the top of the page, then draw a column for Who, a column for DOES WHAT, and a column for WHY. Under each column list ideas related to those sub-areas. You can also map these ideas out in a web if you're more of a visual learner.

Double-Entry Listing:

- Essentially, this is just a double-column format that helps writers think about oppositions. In the left hand column you may put major points; in the right-hand column, you'd put down either related points or opposing points. This technique is very good for comparison/contrast papers and for "rebut an argument" papers.

Matrices

- (Also referred to as **Tables** or **Tabling**¹) This style of brainstorming might work if you're studying in the sciences or social sciences, because you'll be more used to it. Columns might represent sub-parts to a topic or different examples. (e.g., the topic is "Grunge Rock" and the columns represent groups like Pearl Jam, Nirvana, etc.); rows represent other subtopics. In the cells of the matrix put more ideas, phrases, words, sentences, etc.

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This document was compiled by Prof. Scanlon and was last updated September 2022 to be more accessible. If you notice an error, need it in a different format, or have further questions, please email her at scanlon1@kenyon.edu or stop by and visit one of our tutors in Chalmers library!

¹ We have a second handout on tabling ideas that your tutor can provide to you. Just ask!