

Composing an essay without a writer's block

Writing can be a routine, reliable process. It does not need to be a dreaded miracle.

Identify known information

1. State the **assignment in 1-2 sentences**.

Gather information

2. Make a **list** of potentially relevant **topics**.
3. Write the name of **each topic on a 3"×5" sticky note** (index cards are good too).
4. Perform the following research for each topic

- (a) Carefully **read** 50 pages of material.
- (b) **Highlight** at least 10 key **vocabulary words**
- (c) Copy each vocabulary word onto a **sticky note**.

Additionally, for historical and literary topics,

- (a) **Highlight** at least 20 **quotations**
- (b) Copy each quotation onto a **sticky note**.

For topics that are conceptual perspectives (systems of thinking/philosophy),

- (a) **Highlight** at least 5 **thematic statements**
- (b) Copy each thematic statement onto a **sticky note**.

For mathematical and scientific topics

- (a) **Highlight** starting principle **equations**.
- (b) Write each equation onto a **sticky note**.
- (c) **Circle figures** illustrating models, physical systems, concepts, etc.
- (d) Copy each figure onto a **sticky note**.

Develop outlines

5. Lay out the sticky notes on a large board.
6. Repeatedly **move the sticky notes around** the board until they **form relationships**.
7. When you see a potentially interesting relationship among sticky notes, write the relationship down on another **sticky note** in the form of a **sentence**.
8. Continue to write down sentences and shuffle the sticky notes around the board until you **satisfy the structure requested by your writing assignment**.
9. On a **sheet of paper**, summarize the arrangement of the board using 1 or 2 **major points** and 2-3 **minor points**. Place this sheet of paper alongside the sticky notes.
10. Take a **photograph** of the sticky notes and accompanying summary of points.
11. You can **continue to shuffle** the sticky notes around to identify other possible essay outlines. Summarize each interesting arrangement of the board using 1-2 major points and 2-3 minor points. Photograph each interesting arrangement of sticky notes and accompanying points as they are identified.

Fill in details

12. Translate each photograph into a **bulleted outline**.
13. Copy each outline to a new file.
14. **Render prose**.
15. Do not overwork transitions. Sometimes, suddenly picking up a new topic reads more smoothly than a forced connection.

Edit

16. Consult your outline and sheet of major and minor points. **Did you make the points you wanted to make?** Are you satisfied with the points you actually made? Edit accordingly.

Polish

17. Proofread by reading the essay **out loud**.
18. One way to proofread for typos is to read through the essay in **reverse**.
19. Get at least one night's **sleep** before a second proofreading.