

## Fact Sheet: Getting Unstuck in Writing

In this sheet you will find a selection of strategies for getting unstuck in writing. These come both from our experience and from academic, peer-reviewed literature on what interventions are effective.

There are broadly three kinds of strategies: *reframing* strategies, *self-regulation* strategies, and *co-regulation* strategies. There is considerable overlap between them. But broadly, reframing strategies are about intervening in your thought process when you are feeling stuck. Self-regulation strategies are about noticing your energy and intervening in time so that you can write sustainably. Co-regulation strategies are about getting out of your own head and body, finding support from others, and making the process of writing less lonely.

No strategy works for everyone, but some of these will likely work for you. Try to find at least one strategy from each of these categories that fits your situation. We can also support you in tweaking and executing the strategies.

### Reframing strategies

Being stuck in writing is usually a matter of fixation. Writing is a fluid skill set, and so getting fixated on any one piece of what you have to do often makes simple tasks feel overwhelming. Fixation is at work when elite athletes choke under pressure, or when students blank out in an exam situation. It's roughly the same with writing. When we are stressed, distracted, or depleted, we tend to fixate and lose sight of the big picture. The strategies below are all ways of reducing fixation, either by zooming out, or by introducing a bit of chaos into your mind-body to give your thinking space to resettlement. They are ways of negotiating with our automatic and unconscious tendencies.

#### *Reverse outline*

Read every paragraph you have written and try to summarize it in a sentence. Then gather each of those sentences into a list and see if your sense of the general drift of your writing has changed. Sometimes this helps us see our own writing from a slightly wider vantage point.

#### *Prospective outline*

Maybe you are stuck on a particular paragraph or sentence, but you know where you are going. Try to write out how you will get to where you are going in very rough form. By the time you get back to the troubling sentence or paragraph, things might have shifted.

*Working backwards*

Shift your focus away from the trouble spot and see how you can connect it to the previous paragraph. Ask yourself: what move am I making in going from one paragraph to another? Repeat this process until you are back at the beginning of the piece of writing. Then return to the trouble spot and see if anything has shifted.

*Talking through your writing*

Talk through each paragraph you have written and try to summarize the main idea. It helps to talk out loud. If you have a figurine or toy handy, try talking to it. Pretend that the figurine is a smart 15-year-old and explain what you are doing so that the figurine can understand.

*Active open-mindedness*

Active open-mindedness is essentially training yourself to be an annoying 7-year-old, constantly asking "why?", even when it may not be entirely appropriate. The attitude of active open-mindedness might be helpful when you are stuck in writing. You can ask yourself many sorts of why-questions: "What am I trying to say?", "Why am I getting stuck?", "Why is this confusing?". Sometimes our brains surprise us with answers! And even if there are no answers, the process may help re-invigorate the writing process.

*Changing context*

Sometimes our brains get tired of the same old context, and we need to freshen things up with new context. If you always write in Microsoft Word, try switching it up to another word processor. Maybe you can use specialized apps such as Notion or Scrivener. Or maybe switch from typing on a keyboard to writing it out by hand. Change locations at your desk or go out to a coffee shop. Maybe this is the nudge your mind-body needs to get re-interested in the task.

*Brain dump*

Sometimes you are stuck because there's a different train of thought occupying your mind. In that case, it might be helpful to write out that train of thought in some very rough form. Usually writing it down keeps it from looping in your brain, which might free up energy to get back to the main task.

*Leaning into your idiolect*

Everyone has an idiolect. This is like a dialect, but unique to you. Sometimes switching from more "formal" writing to just letting it flow in your own unique way is the way to get past whatever is blocking you. Turn off your editor brain. You can "clean up" the language later.

## Self-regulation strategies

Sometimes being stuck with writing is a matter of energy depletion. Most people only have 2-3 hours of peak performance in them per day, and so sometimes there is not much you can do about depleted energy. However, sometimes we can extend our peak energy if we are mindful of what is going on in our mind-bodies. These are ways of harmonizing the various energies that we manage on a daily basis. Many of these techniques are just ways of giving ourselves little bits of mindfulness: nonjudgmental awareness of what is going on in our minds and bodies. Writing typically gets us "into our heads". These strategies are ways of giving the body its due.

### *Pomodoro technique*

Work in bursts of 25 minutes, with a 5-minute break in between each burst of work. Set a timer. You can fiddle with the specifics, but make sure to take regular breaks and do not skip breaks. The key idea for this is working sustainably.

### *Ten deep breaths*

If you are stuck it may be subtle anxiety or agitation scattering your energy. Close your eyes. Sit up straight. Take 10 deep breaths. Open your eyes. Notice if anything in your energy has shifted or settled. Repeat as necessary.

### *5-4-3-2-1 technique*

If you are stuck, you may be getting too much into your head. Take a step back from the writing. Notice five things you can see, four things you can hear, three things you can touch, two things you can smell, one thing you can taste. This tends to ground people in the present moment. Feel free to fiddle with the specifics of sense modalities and numbers. Find what works for you.

### *4-7-8 breathing*

If you are stuck, it may be more intense anxiety or self-criticism rearing its head. Breathe out deeply. Then breathe in for a count of 4, hold it for a count of 7, and breathe out for a count of 8. Repeat a few times as necessary. This intervention dampens down your fight-or-flight response and usually opens up more space to think.

### *Box breathing*

This is similar to 4-7-8 breathing, but you breathe in, hold, breathe out, and hold all for the same count. Start with a count of 5. Experiment with longer or shorter intervals. This has a similar effect to 4-7-8 breathing, but people tend to respond to one or the other more readily.

### *Tapping*

Some people respond well to patterns of rhythmic tapping on their bodies when stressed. After a while, it tends to be very calming. There are a many specific techniques out there, adopted from

psychological intervention into stress and trauma responses. Start with [this simple one](#) and see if it works for you.

### *Dancing*

Take a break and dance or wiggle. Be as silly and ridiculous as is appropriate. This will help reset your body and mind.

### *Brief burst of exercise*

If you are sleepy or distracted, try doing a few push-ups, sit-ups or squats. This tends to re-energize the body and allows you to keep working sometimes.

### *Quick walk*

Go out for a walk around the block, or out to a park. This reframes and resettles your thoughts in a gentle, and somewhat interesting way.

### *Hydration*

Many of us get dehydrated without realizing it. Try drinking some water. This can be surprisingly helpful!

### *Make food/coffee/tea*

Treat yourself to a little break and treat your body to something it may be craving.

## **Co-regulation strategies**

Reframing and self-regulation can only take us so far. Writing is, at its most fundamental, a social process—even if it rarely feels like it! The strategies here require more planning, more sociability, and more relationship management. But they can be great complements to reframing and self-regulation. Nobody finishes major writing projects without support from others.

### *Accountability friends*

It may be very helpful to have a friend to whom you explain your writing goals and with whom you periodically check in about how writing is going. Make sure your accountability friend is not someone to whom you owe writing as a professional or educational demand. This relationship should be peer-to-peer.

### *Peer writing groups*

Maybe you know a few people who are struggling with the same kinds of writing. Try setting up a group for mutual support and mutual accountability. Regular meetings can be hard to establish, but they can be very helpful for all involved.

*Co-working groups*

This strategy is similar to peer writing groups, but co-working groups involve people working on a variety of tasks in close proximity. The advantage of co-working groups is that it's easier to get started and to maintain momentum. The disadvantage is that they may get more distracting than the peer writing groups.

*Writing boot camp*

This is becoming an increasingly popular method with graduate students, and there might be boot camps happening at your institution. You gather for three days in a classroom or office with many other people working on their writing projects. Discipline and timing is imposed externally, and is occasionally interspersed with discussions and teaching of strategies such as the ones covered here. Writing boot camps are highly recommended for restoring momentum for big writing projects.

*Writing retreat*

The writing retreat is an even more intense version of writing boot camp. Writers go (somewhat) off the grid for a week or more. These can be great for building writing momentum, but they require preparation and somewhat intense scheduling well ahead of time.

**Sources and Further Reading:**

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