

THE TUTOR'S GUIDE TO OVERCOMING WRITING ROADBLOCKS

Do you ever find yourself in a session where both you and your writer don't know where to start? Begin by figuring out where the confusion lies.

Some of the issues could be because of a difficulty understanding the assignment sheet, or simply coming up with ideas to begin writing the paper.

If you find one of those two issues to be present, we have some tips and tricks for you to use to help get the session moving.

IF THE PROBLEM IS UNDERSTANDING THE ASSIGNMENT SHEET

If understanding the assignment sheet is standing in the way of getting started, try some of these methods to help you and your writer begin.

Finding Keywords

Within the assignment sheet, the professor will most likely use action verbs somewhere in the prompt, such as "explain," "summarize," "compare," or "assess." The use of these verbs can help you and your writer understand what kind of response the prompt is asking for, and it should give your writer an idea about which direction to go next. If your writer is all set to summarize the topic, but the professor uses words like "argue" or "defend," then you know you need to have a discussion about writing an argumentative essay rather than a summary. If your writer still seems unsure, ask her to explain what different elements she thinks a summarization essay might contain versus an argumentative essay.

Breaking Down the Prompt

Another way to tackle an overwhelming assignment sheet is to break the main prompt down into manageable tasks. For example, say your writer has a prompt like, "Write an essay examining the issue of violence in fairy tales. After a review of several articles and books, you may want to focus your attention on one or two tales" (taken from Linda Simon's article *Decoding Writing Assignments*). You could break this prompt down into several tasks, such as:

1. write an essay
2. examine an issue
3. review articles and books
4. focus on some texts

This method could help you and your writer figure out what exactly the assignment is asking from you, and it also makes the assignment seem a little less daunting.

Learning Objectives

One method that could really help you and your writer better understand an assignment sheet is by asking the writer why they think their professor set this assignment. What are the learning objectives of completing this assignment? What do they think the professor wants them to get out of this assignment? How does this assignment fit in to the overall scope of the class? If you and your writer figure this out, it might make the assignment sheet a little clearer, and you'll be able to get started with brainstorming.

IF THE PROBLEM IS BRAINSTORMING

If you and your writer understand the assignment sheet, but just can't seem to get your collaborative creative juices flowing, try some of these methods to get things going.

“Three Perspectives” Method

Figuring out what direction you want to go in for an assignment can be a difficult step. Your writer may know a lot about the topic but be conflicted on what aspects of it she would like to discuss. In this situation we suggest creating a connection between perspectives of the topic.

1. Describe It: What is your topic? What makes it unique? How does it correlate with the class you're in?
2. Trace It: What is the history of your topic? What sources do you have available to discuss the topic? What do you plan on using as evidence or support?
3. Map It: So what? What is the connection? What is the importance? What has your topic been influenced by? What connections can you draw from step 1 and 2?

“Simile” Method

Ideas are the tools necessary to complete your paper. One way to create those ideas is to create a comparison of a term or concept from your topic that will lead you to an idea that will then lead to the start of brainstorming for the assignment. A model for this method is: “(insert term or concept from assignment) is/was/are/were/like (insert one or multiple answers that could make a good comparison).” Utilizing this method might look something like this: “Conflict management is a complicated and delicate process that must be handled carefully.” Your writer would then elaborate on why it is complicated and delicate and her ideas would then grow.

“Journalistic Question” Method

One way to brainstorm that could seem like common sense is by asking your writer to answer the five journalistic “W” questions we've dealt with since elementary school: who, what, when, where, and why. Using these questions to look at her topic might help her start to flesh out what she wants to write about. Again, this might seem like something we've all known for years, but it can be a really helpful way of getting ideas flowing for you and your writer. This method is also useful because it can function as a “checklist” when considering all parts of your topic while brainstorming.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

When faced with a session where you and your writer can't decide where to begin, remember to take a few things into consideration before using any of these methods. Give your writer some options on how to proceed, and ask her what method would work best with her learning style and the way she normally approaches academic work. Remember that every writer is unique, and a method that worked for one writer might not work for the next. Try to avoid using these tips to “categorize” your writer; use them as a way to broaden your tutoring options when faced with a writer who has no idea where to start.