

PRODUCTIVE COMPOSING

Writing, especially longer college papers, can be a difficult, time-intensive, and stressful task. However, you can make writing less problematic and even more productive and rewarding.

When beginning to write, try keeping these guidelines in mind:

1. Mentally Situate Yourself

Give yourself some time to think about the topic (consciously and unconsciously). Consider the topic and then go do something else for awhile.

Consider this:

Have you ever had an important thought (perhaps the solution to a problem) make itself evident at the wrong time? One of our colleagues admits that his best ideas come during his “showers.” He complains that he is never by a pen or pencil when he receives these “epiphanies.” Likewise, another colleague admits that he has some of his greatest ideas when he is using the toilet. Oddly enough, he sometimes springs from the toilet seat to write down his idea.

Some of us receive inspiration while driving, playing video games, running, reading the work of others, etc.

Why do you suppose we receive ideas this way? Well, honestly, we don't really know.

The idea seems to “cook” to perfection while the body is doing other things. Furthermore, when the brain is finished processing a problem, the solution simply appears (oftentimes, without any warning).

You see, we theorize that the brain seems to need time to synthesize information and create the proper connections needed to compose well.

With this idea in mind, we suggest that no one procrastinate. Start early. And, instead of writing the entire paper at one time, write in short spurts (using short bursts of energy). If you spread out the task of writing, you may help your brain to think more productively and improve the quality of your text. You will help the body in its processing of the idea and allow more focus for even greater ideas.

2. Physically Situate Yourself

Prepare a writing space (or a sort of nest). Familiar environments actually reduce the stress of performance and encourage productivity. Be consistent with your surroundings.

The practice of writing, especially longer works, involves stressing your body to some capacity. Therefore, try to make yourself as comfortable as possible. Get comfortable to write (work out the ergonomic aspects involved in writing) and get anything you need to help you.

Consider the height of the computer monitor (lay a few books under your monitor). If the monitor is at eye level, then you will reduce stress to your neck. You might want to consider an external keyboard and mouse if you have a laptop.

Sit in a comfortable chair. Remember, you may be on your "rump" for hours and hours, depending on how long the paper must be and/or your writing session may be.

3. Think of Reward

A grade is a reward from the teacher; and consequently, good grades are earned.

Usually, if you just want a decent grade, you simply complete the work, while following the rules/guidelines on the assignment. If you want a good grade, give the paper plenty of your attention. If you want an even better grade, give the paper plenty of your attention and call in the "reinforcements" (that is, ask other people to help you to revise/edit your paper).

Last but not least, do not forget to reward yourself personally. Do something special for yourself (when you can) to reward yourself for your hard work. Regardless of whether you are consistent in rewarding yourself every time, operant conditioning (working for a reward) has shown effective in conditioning us to carry out the task every time.

EX:

One of our colleagues likes to reward himself with a very simple chocolate bar for his work. Because he is on a strict diet, this type of reward has incredible meaning for him, and it provides some great satisfaction for him. Another colleague of ours likes to take her dogs for a walk after some substantial work.

The reward need not be monetary or expensive. But, the reward should be positive and consistent (as much as possible).

4. Give Yourself Breaks

Similar to the idea of a grand reward, give yourself mini-rewards in the form of breaks. Take breaks enough to encourage productivity, but also enough to reduce stress.

5. Leave Holes When Needed.

Start your paper with the idea that you will not finish it in a single sitting. For example, leave holes in the paper (or blank sections), which you will fill-in later. When you are ready to resume working, return to paper and finish filling in the holes. Remember: Let your mind process the paper (consciously and subconsciously).

6. Consider Your Natural Rhythm.

Your body has a "natural rhythm" which helps you to access higher amounts of energy throughout the day and night. Researchers call this the "Circadian Rhythm," a natural rhythm of the body which is based on routine as well as the prevalence of daylight and the need for food and sleep.

You see, the body stores energy for tasks and makes such energy available later. Likewise, the body allows you to sleep or rest to recuperate that energy. So, listen to your body. Try to find out when your "peak energy" is present. Then, decide to do your writing during that time. Heck, even do all your homework at that time of the day. You may find that you are more productive.