

Five strategies to get your academic writing “unstuck”

To help fight off the January blues and to further inspire a productive year ahead, we have coordinated a [series of posts on academic writing](#). To kick-start the series, here are some general tips from [Dr Raul Pacheco-Vega](#) on what to do when the words just aren't flowing. From conceptual maps to short walks, here are some practical ways to tackle the blank page. Have another strategy you'd like to share? Tweet your tips at #AcWri2016.



When I blog about academic writing, I do so from the vantage point of [someone who does it on a daily basis](#). Someone who recognizes his own time limitations (because I'm pretty busy), and his challenges (because I write academic prose both in [English and Spanish](#), each with their own challenges). Even though I have an incredibly [well-organized schedule](#), sometimes life happens and my schedule gets somewhat derailed. This doesn't happen often, but it does happen. Moreover, sometimes, I also get stuck. I want to write, but my brain doesn't want to push words out through my fingers.

The more I work with myself and think about how I approach my research, the more I can see how I can improve my writing. In particular, lately, I've found five strategies to get myself “unstuck”. If I feel that the words aren't flowing, I use one of these strategies (or all combined).



Image credit: [Drew Coffman Writer's Block CC BY 2.0](#)

1. Write an outline.

This is pretty basic advice, but one that has helped me think through my research. When I feel that I am stuck, I write an outline, either of the paper I am already writing, or of a new paper. By liberating my busy mind from the worry of not having anything to write and plotting a new idea or conceptual map, I allow my thinking to flow freely.

2. Set a few sentences or a paragraph as your target.

When I set myself a hard target (e.g. 2 consecutive hours of writing), I often see it as a challenge. However, if my goal is to just write a paragraph in a paper, I often find myself that the writing flows more and more. Also, there are very few things that are more fulfilling than seeing the blank spaces being substituted by words, sentences and paragraphs. That feeling of completing an explanation or outlining an idea is just amazing.

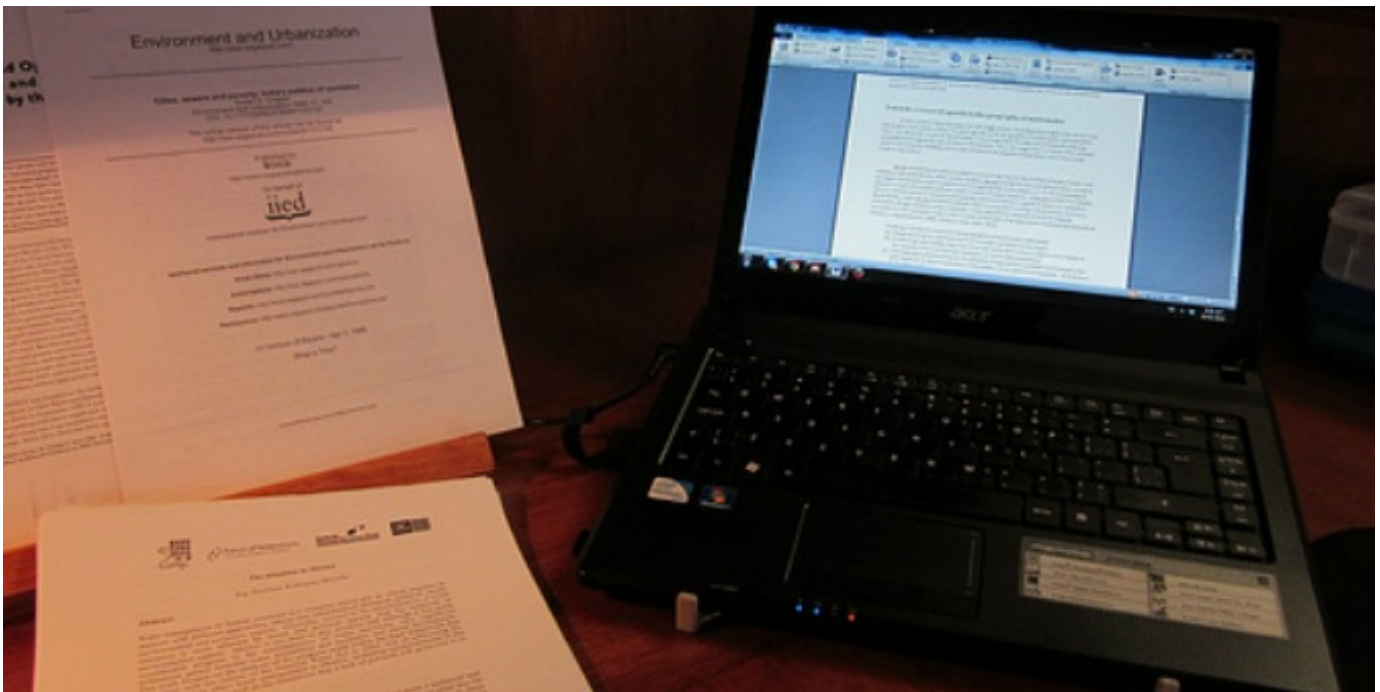


3. Answer questions related to your research/paper.

This is related to the first strategy, and I found it helps me quite a lot. I am currently writing on water privatization in Mexico, and I found that the easiest way to write about it was to answer questions. When somebody is reading my paper, what kind of questions do they have, and how can I help them answer them? I find that when I answer a question, that response usually forms one or two paragraphs, and more often than not, a full section.

4. Read a paper and summarize it (in writing)

This is another strategy I've been using lately. Instead of getting frustrated about why my writing isn't flowing, I simply grab an article that I already have read, and I type my notes. I usually type those notes (which are often handwritten) to then transform them into a "memorandum" or a "memo". I took the idea of writing memos from when I took a course in qualitative methods during my PhD. These "memos" are simply messages to yourself, crafted in such a way that you can generously lift text from them to add them to your paper.



5. Go for a short walk, armed with a pen and paper pad.

I have a small travel handbook (Moleskine is your best friend) similar to the one that I always carry on the field, when conducting interviews, doing participant observation while on fieldwork. So when I feel stuck, I take my “ideas” notebook and go for a short walk. I usually listen to classical music while I write, so I grab my iPod and play some classical music while on my walk. This usually puts me in a thinking mood and therefore I am able to more quickly jot down ideas that I then come back to my office and type.

As I have told other people, I write about what works for ME. Hopefully [these strategies](#) will work for YOU too.

This piece originally appeared on the [author’s personal blog](#) in 2014 and is reposted with permission.

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About the Author

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