

Composing

Writing is hard. Some students find starting an essay positively tortuous. A sure fire way to induce a paralysing mental cramp is this: sit down with a blank piece of paper or empty screen, with pen in hand or fingers poised over the key board, and say to yourself ‘This is going to be the first sentence of my 5000 word assessment essay on abortion’. This technique for producing paralysis will be even more effective if you ensure that you have given no prior thought to the topic, and have made no written notes of the ideas that you plan to develop in the essay.

The principle aim of this section of the module is to suggest ways to overcome that paralysis. My first, and most fundamental, suggestion here is this: **write all the time**. Here is a passage that captures nicely part of what I have in mind there:

Merchants have a waste-book in which they enter from day to day everything that they bought and sold, all mixed up together in disorder; from this it is transferred to the journal, in which everything is arranged more systematically; and finally it arrives in the ledger, in double entry after the Italian manner of book-keeping This deserves to be imitated by the scholar. First a book in which I inscribe everything just as I see it or as my thoughts prompt me, then this can be transferred to another where the materials are more ordered and segregated, and the ledger can then contain a connected construction and the elucidation of the subject that flows from it expressed in an orderly fashion. (Lichtenberg, *Aphorisms*)

Once you have decided that you are going to write an essay on some topic, you should – every day – make brief notes of ideas that occur to you in relation to it. If you are fully engaged with the material ideas should be floating around in your head as you wash the dishes, walk to work, or eat your breakfast. (If they are floating around as you try to get back to sleep at 3 am that is less fortunate; and you may find that, when you try to write them down in the morning, some of them turn out to be less earth shattering than they seemed at the time!) You need to get these ideas onto paper as rapidly as you can. Philosophical ideas have a way of slipping out of reach if they are not on paper; and a way of seeming rather more profound than they are if they are kept conveniently out of focus within the wanderings of the imagination. So *write everything down*. Write ideas down in complete sentences – or something close to that – in such a way that you can be sure you will understand your notes when you return to them, and in such a way that you can be sure that you have captured a real thought. This process of writing will itself stimulate further ideas.

Write while you are reading. Write your own summaries of what you take to be the important ideas in an article, or those that are particularly relevant to your essay. It can be best here to digest a section of the article, and then to summarise it in your own words without actually looking at the text while doing so. This can help to ensure that you really have taken in the ideas; it can help too in the avoidance of inadvertent plagiarism. (See the section on *Plagiarism and Paraphrase*.) All of this is hard work; but if reading that you are doing is not hard work you are probably wasting your time at it.