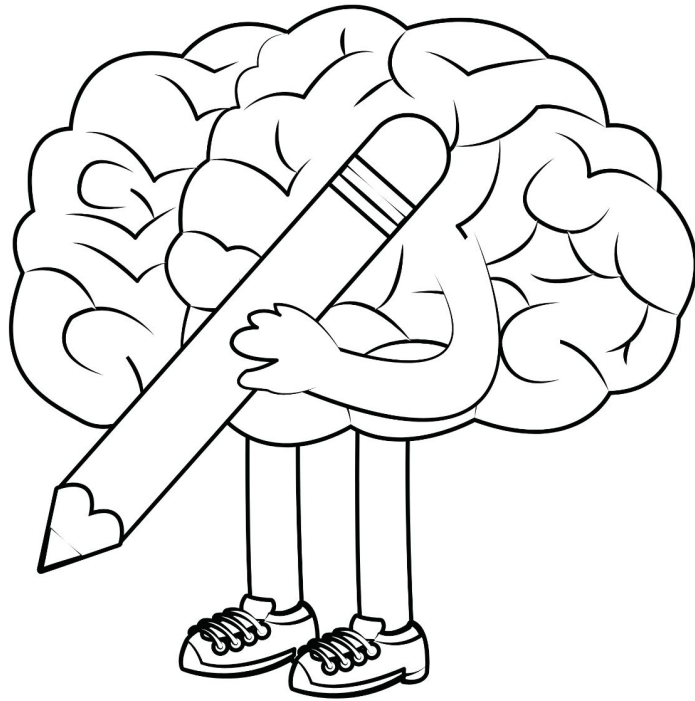


How to Kickstart a First Draft

A Writing Guide Presentation in collaboration
with the Office of Disability Services

Michele McGrath (ODS)
CK Kirch (Writing Center)





Today's Workshop

- What makes starting a first draft challenging?
- Strategies to make embarking on a first draft easier
- Discussion/Questions

Why is it so hard to start
a first draft?

What can make starting a first draft feel difficult?

- **Overwhelm**
 - Task ahead feels long and daunting
 - Notes/outline is overstuffed or chaotic
- **Blank Page Anxiety**
 - Intimidating!
 - Infinite possibilities, so we're unsure how or where to begin
- **Perfectionism**
 - Feeling a need to get it "right" the 1st time (& can't start until we know what that is)
 - Fear of getting it "wrong"

What can make starting a first draft feel difficult?

Executive functioning challenges can also make it difficult to...

- ... initiate a task
- ... organize thoughts into a specific structure (ie. essay)
- ... estimate how long the first draft process will take

What can make
starting a first
draft feel
difficult?

Why does it feel so hard?

Because it IS hard!

What can make starting a first draft feel difficult?

Research shows that writing asks a lot of our working memory (Kellogg 2001, 2013; McCutchen 1996, 2000)

Overburdened working memory

- When we try to figure out both what we want to say and how we want to say it at the same time, these functions compete for space in our working memory
- Too much pressure on ourselves to do it all in the first draft => too much pressure on our working memory!

Relieving the burden

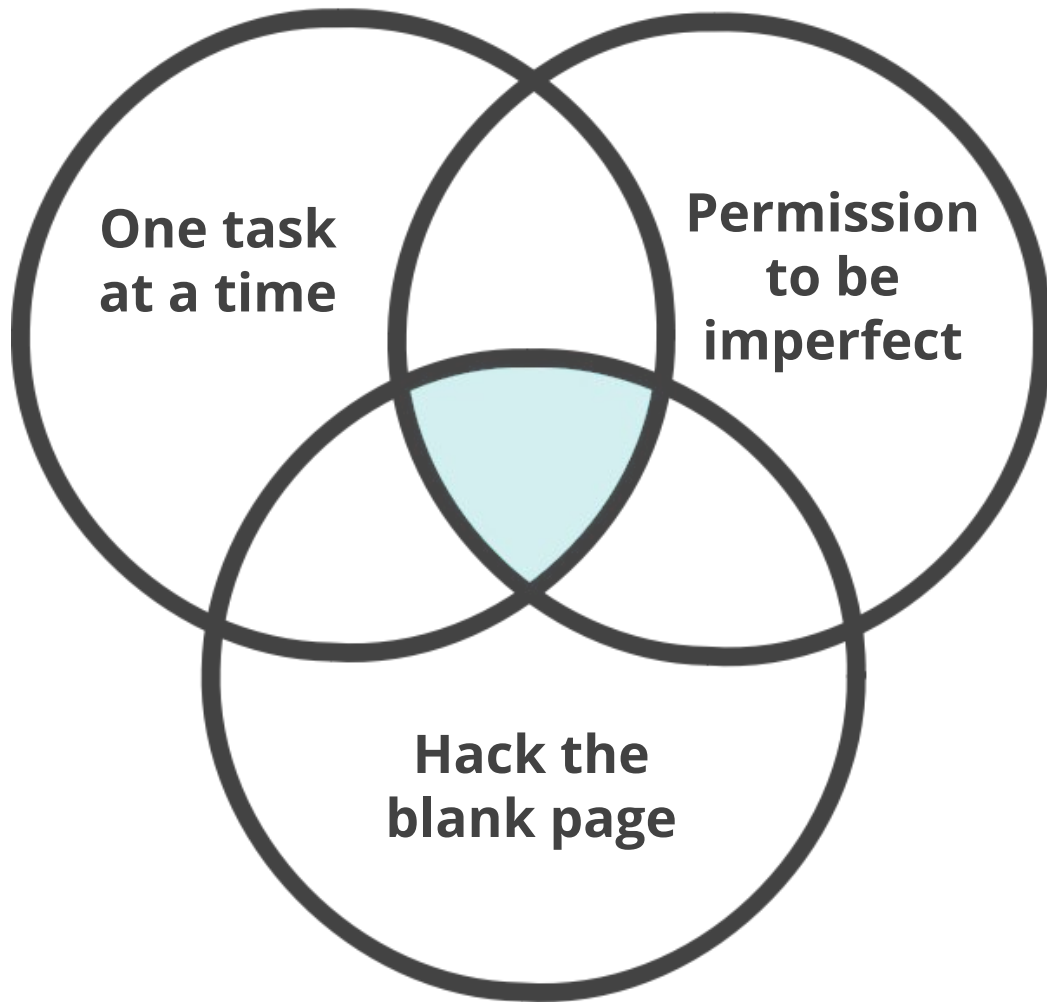
- The goal of most writing strategies (outlining, writing multiple drafts, etc.) is to relieve the burden on our working memory

What can make starting a first draft feel difficult?

And so it makes sense that starting the drafting process feels difficult!

- If we're putting too much pressure on ourselves to get it "perfect" on the first go, we're overloading our working memories
- If our process isn't actually helping us relieve the burden on our working memory, it's not making writing easier for our brains
- And if we have executive functioning difficulties on top of that, it can make it even more daunting

**So... what do
we need to do
to make
kickstarting
our drafts
easier?**

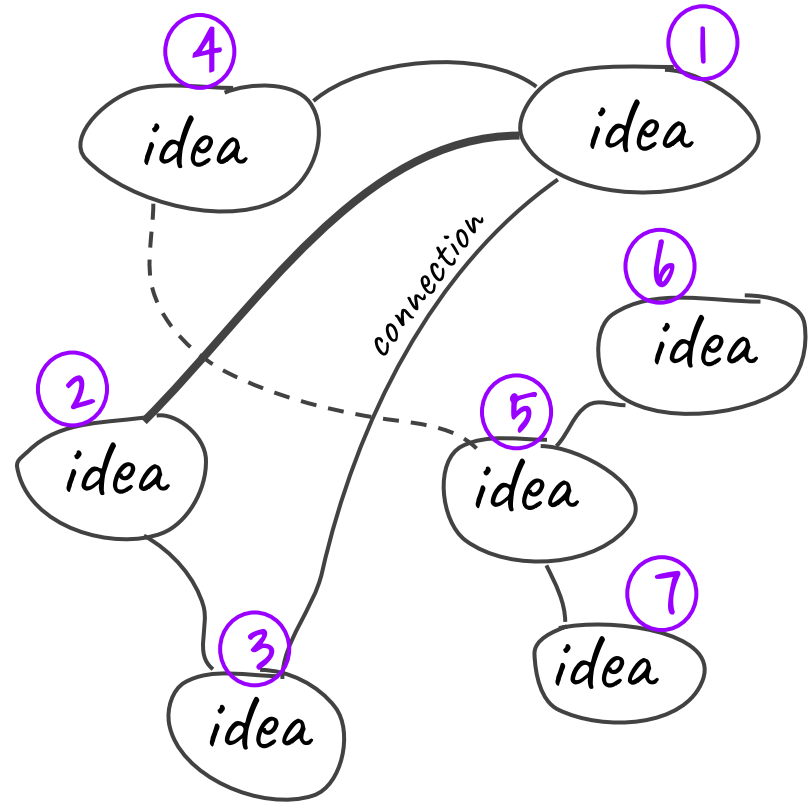


5 things you can do *right now*
to kickstart the drafting process

1. Rewrite your outline/notes
in a way that makes it easier to use

Rewrite your
outline/notes

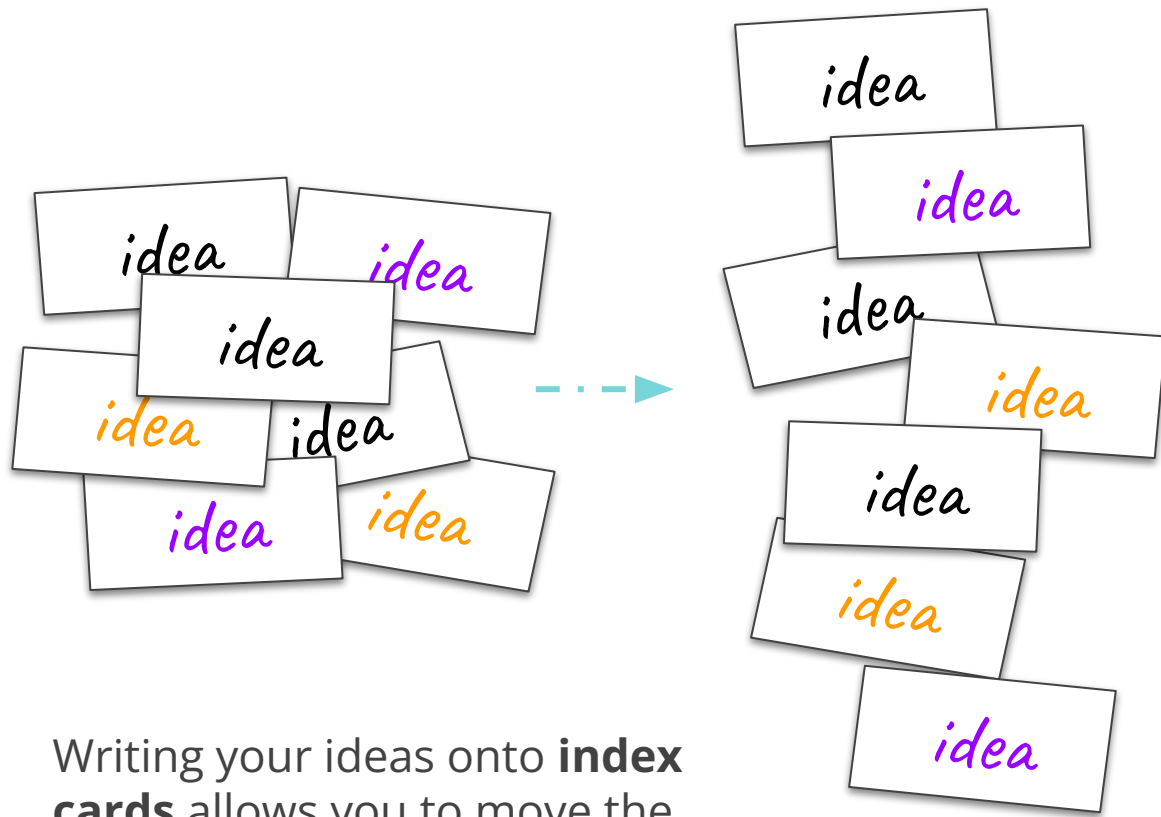
Make it visual



A “**mind map**” creates a visual representation of your ideas and how they are connected

Rewrite your
outline/notes

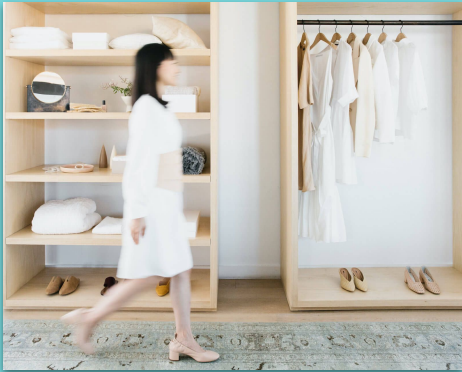
Make it less linear



Writing your ideas onto **index cards** allows you to move the pieces around to test out different possible structures

Rewrite your outline/notes

Declutter your outline *before* you start drafting



Method 1: KonMari

Useful when the outline has a lot of extra “stuff” you probably won’t use in the essay

- Re-read the assignment prompt
- Without looking at your notes, jot down the most important things you want your essay to achieve (these are the things that “spark joy”)
- Keep only what achieves your essay purpose
- For anything else, thank those ideas and move to a separate document for safe keeping

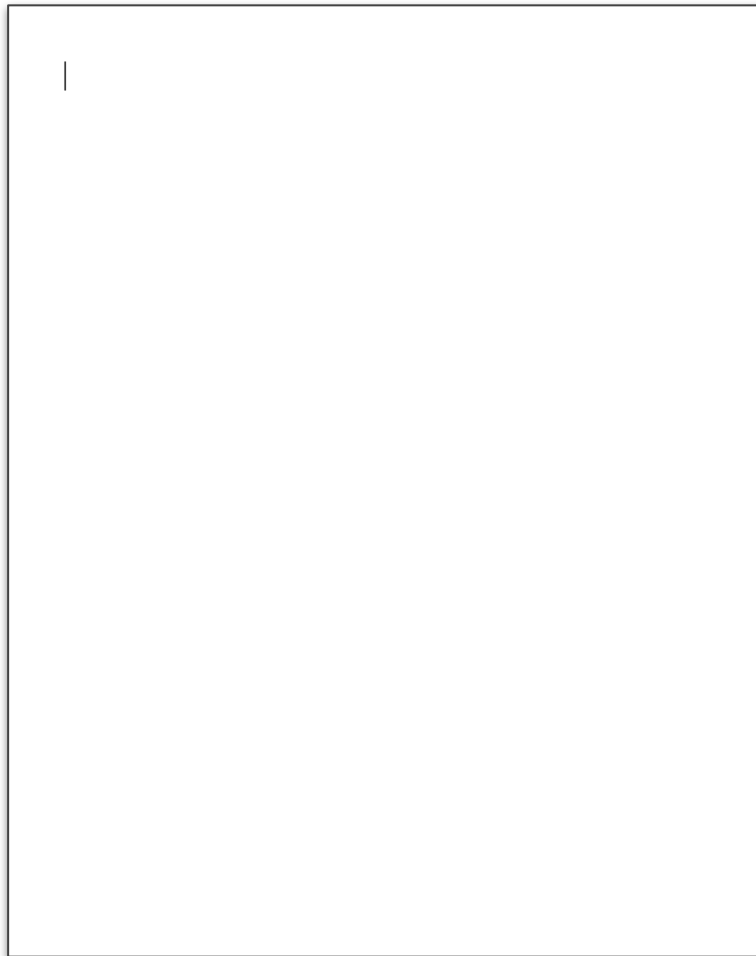
Method 2: Trim the Fat

Useful when the outline is so detailed that it no longer serves as a guide for drafting

- Keep one outline with “all the stuff” so you can refer to it when you need to
- Create one streamlined version that only has the major checklist items to serve as a guide

2. Make the **blank page** NOT blank

De-blank-ify the blank page



De-blank-ify the blank page

Add “scaffolding” to your blank page that you can then fill in

Name
Class
Date

1

Working Title

[INTRO]

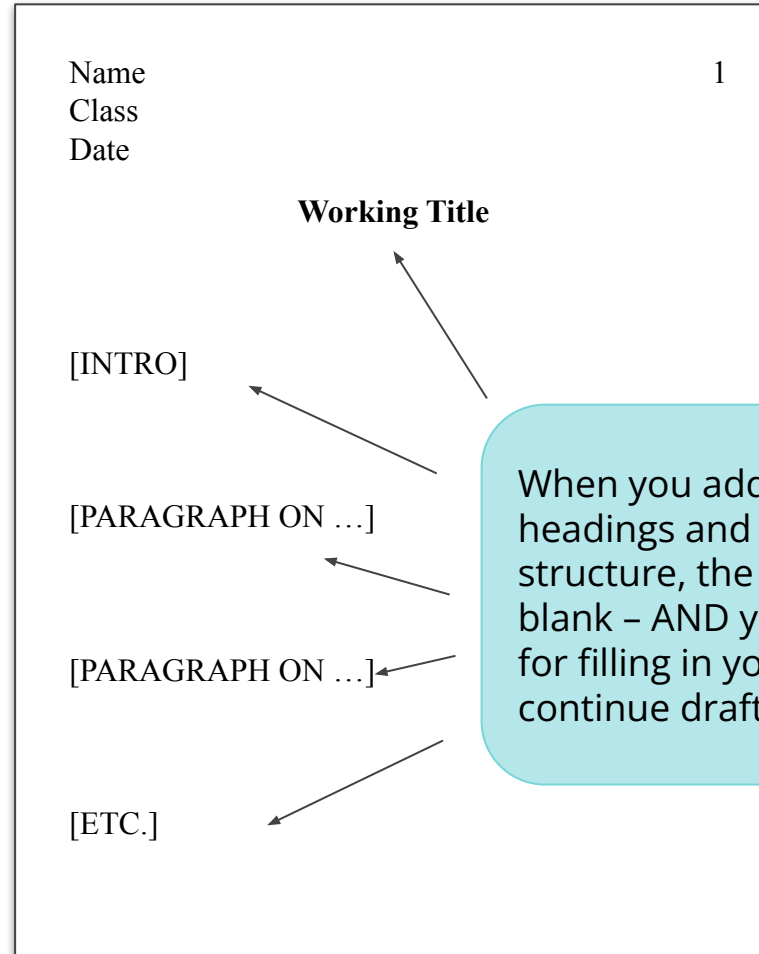
[PARAGRAPH ON ...]

[PARAGRAPH ON ...]

[ETC.]

De-blank-ify the blank page

Add “scaffolding” to your blank page that you can then fill in



De-blank-ify the *paragraph*

Having troubles diving into drafting a specific paragraph?

You can use the same “de-blank-ifying” strategy by outlining the paragraph, adding scaffolding for the structure of a paragraph that you can then fill in

De-blank-ify the *paragraph*

Add scaffolding at the
paragraph level

Here's a method for scaffolding a paragraph:

1. Outline the paragraph by **identifying the functions** each sentence/part of the paragraph needs to serve
2. Fill in a **sentence** (or multiple, if needed) for each function
3. Insert the paragraph into to your draft

Function	Sentence(s)

De-blank-ify the *paragraph*

Function	Sentence(s)

^ What goes here?

Function: What does the sentence need to *do* in the paragraph?

Examples:

- Introduce a topic
- Introduce evidence
- Analyze evidence
- Explain reasoning
- Transition btwn ideas
- Summarize a source
- Define a term
- Draw conclusions

De-blank-ify the *paragraph*

Examples of sentence
functions:

- Introduce a topic
- Introduce evidence
- Analyze evidence
- Explain reasoning
- Transition btwn ideas
- Summarize a source
- Define a term
- Draw conclusions

Function	Sentence(s)

Need more ideas for functions (and/or order)?

- Return to the **prompt**: the assignment may dictate what needs to go in the paragraphs. What task are you being asked to do?
- Look at an **example** paragraph, if you have one (i.e. reverse outline on the paragraph level)
- Look at a **paragraph** of your own! (e.g. from a previous assignment)

De-blank-ify the blank page

Here's an example of what this might look like in practice:

(from *The Morningside Review*)

Function	Sentence(s)
Introduce Pratt source	In “Arts of the Contact Zone,” Mary Louise Pratt explores what happens when cultures intersect, whether on a linguistic, colonial, or ethnic level.
Synthesize Pratt source	She draws on examples that vary as widely as her son’s discovery of the world through baseball cards to a seventeenth-century letter written by an indigenous Andean to King Philip III of Spain.
Define “contact zones”	Pratt pulls these disparate sources together to define contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34).

De-blank-ify the blank page

Here's an example of what this might look like in practice:

(from *The Morningside Review*)

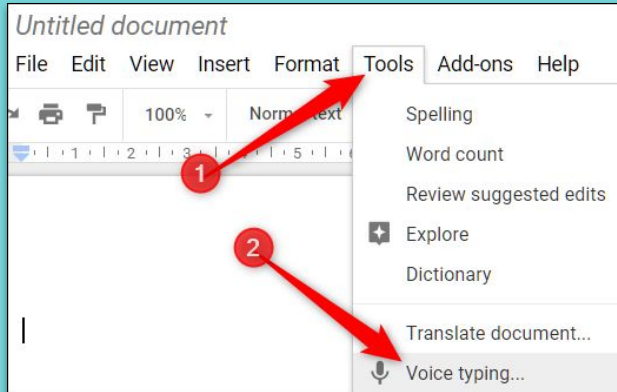
Function	Sentence(s)
Introduce Pratt source	In “Arts of the Contact Zone,” Mary Louise Pratt explores what happens when cultures intersect, whether on a linguistic, colonial, or ethnic level.
Synthesize Pratt source	She draws on examples that vary as widely as her son’s discovery of the world through baseball cards to a seventeenth-century letter written by an indigenous Andean to King Philip III of Spain.
Define “contact zones”	Pratt pulls these disparate sources together to define contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34).

In “Arts of the Contact Zone,” Mary Louise Pratt explores what happens when cultures intersect, whether on a linguistic, colonial, or ethnic level. She draws on examples that vary as widely as her son’s discovery of the world through baseball cards to a seventeenth-century letter written by an indigenous Andean to King Philip III of Spain. Pratt pulls these disparate sources together to define contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34). [...]

3. Do something **low-stakes**

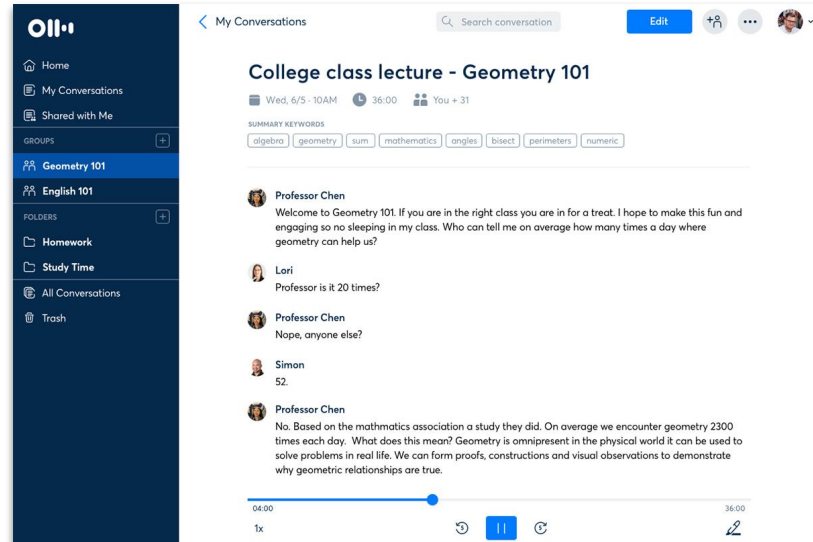
Do something low-stakes

Speech to Text



Speech-to-text technology:

1. Google Docs Voice Typing (Tutorial video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIz9UWi5z4w>)
2. [Otter.ai](https://otter.ai): online speech-to-text program w/ high accuracy (sign up w/ Columbia email)
3. Mac dictation feature (instructions for enabling dictation in system preferences: <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-to-dictate-on-mac>)



Do something
low-stakes

Speech to Text

Record Yourself

- Talk through your ideas while recording your voice with speech-to-text / dictation program
- Unsure how to begin speaking? Try starting with: "What I'm trying to say is..."
- Paste the speech-to-text transcription directly into a Word doc (if it's not there already)

Record a Conversation (*ask before recording*)

- Talk through your ideas with a friend, classmate, roommate, family member, counselor, etc.
- Ask permission to record your conversations during office hours, Writing Center sessions, etc.
- Paste transcription into doc! (It's not blank!)

**Do something
low-stakes**

Have a
Conversation

Talk through your ideas with someone

- Chat with a friend, roommate, classmate, family member, counselor, etc.
- Can also come to the Writing Center!
- Describe your project – walk them through your ideas and what you’re trying to accomplish

Even if you can’t record, this can give you insights into your direction and how to get un-stuck

(If you’re not recording, be sure to take notes during OR shortly after your conversation so you don’t forget what you said!)

Do something low-stakes

Freewriting



Freewriting (or “brain dumping”) is a great way to get ideas out of your head and onto the page!

- Set a timer (5-10 minutes)
- Write stream-of-consciousness until the timer goes off, without worrying about form or style
- Working memory only has to hold onto WHAT we want to say, not HOW

Some ways to incorporate this into your draft

- Option 1: Insert (copy/paste, retype, etc.) the whole freewrite into the doc (no more blank page!) and revise from there
- Option 2: Read the freewrite and highlight selections that are especially useful; add those selections to the draft doc
- Option 3: Pull selections from the freewrite over to the draft doc as needed

4. **Draft** somewhere **other** than a word processor

Draft outside a word processor

The blank page can be intimidating, but we can start the draft elsewhere so it feels less like a manuscript

Draft outside a word processor

Writing Longhand

If you're having troubles getting into the draft on your computer, try switching mediums! Try writing by hand, using actual pen and paper.

After, you may want to:

1. Type up your handwriting on the computer
2. Or read your writing aloud and use speech-to-text technology (see strategy #3: low stakes tasks) to convert your handwritten text to typed text

Depending on where you are in the drafting process, you might:

- A. Retype the whole and then revise
- B. Revise/restructure as you transcribe
- C. Transcribe and insert pieces from the handwritten text into the draft only as needed

Draft outside a word processor

Spreadsheets

(e.g. Google Sheets, Excel, Numbers)

	A	B	C
1	You can use a spreadsheet to outline in one column and then move right into the drafting process in the next column (and you can re-order at any point in the process)		
2	Ideas	Draft	Notes
3	<i>Add your ideas in this column and reorder to create your outline!</i>	<i>Use this column to begin drafting the pieces of your outline. You can always re-order the rows if you discover you need a different structure.</i>	<i>Need to remember something about this section? Drop notes here.</i>
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			
14			
15			
16			
17			

Yes: you *can* draft in a spreadsheet! This is an especially great option if you:

- Value being able to move back and forth between the big picture and the details
- Want to be able to restructure / move around your paragraphs easily
- Want to be able to leave notes or other details for yourself as you go

Drafting in a spreadsheet: example

Outline	Draft
introduce exhibit	<p>Michel Tuffery produced Pisupo Lua Afe (Corned Beef 2000), an entirely metal artwork, in 1994 for an exhibit in Wellington, New Zealand. The piece is one of several metal bulls Tuffery has created; another, Povi Christkeke, Tuffery created to be included in a parade that included Samoan drumming and dancing, a celebration that involved several such bulls moving on wheels down the streets. Lights and fireworks also illuminated the works in a simulated "bullfight" (Hay 2). Both works stand life-size, bulls made completely of red and yellow flattened metal cans. The labels on the cans read "Corned Beef" and Tuffery has aligned the silver metal lids to outline the bull's face and hooves. The word pisupo arose from the initial tinned product brought to New Zealand mid 20th century, pea soup, but the word now specifically implies canned meat. The tinned food is sometimes given as a gift at celebrations (Lythberg 3). Tuffery, a New Zealander of Samoan, European, and Rarotongan ancestry, has worked in the past to synthesize traditional tapa cloths, sculptures or carvings, with contemporary drawings and figuring.</p>
complicate exhibit / introduce problem	<p>In her writeup for the Christchurch Art Gallery in New Zealand, where Povi Christkeke resides, Jennifer Hay interprets Tuffery's piece as a "wry socio-political message" concerning the place of foreign imported goods in Samoa as part of the larger presence of colonialism in the Pacific Islands (2). The introduction of canned foods contributed to a change in the diet of Pacific Islanders, and Hay describes a resulting "decline in indigenous cooking skills" (Hay 2). She states that Povi Christkeke also touches on the "impact of global trade and colonial economics imposed upon the Pacific Island culture and environment" (Hay 2). Hay closely ties dietary and economic changes to a loss of traditional culture. While Hay's interpretation makes the power dynamic clear, Povi Christkeke is not so explicit. In using the literal cans of beef, Tuffery may be depicting a change in the dietary lifestyle, but he does not provide us with answers to what it means on a cultural level. Tuffery's subtlety propels us to examine the relationship between the pre-colonial Samoan culture and influence of foreign colonialism.</p>
introduce Pratt / establish contact zone	<p>In "Arts of the Contact Zone," Mary Louise Pratt explores what happens when cultures intersect, whether on a linguistic, colonial, or ethnic level. She draws on examples that vary as widely as her son's discovery of the world through baseball cards to a seventeenth-century letter written by an indigenous Andean to King Philip III of Spain. Pratt pulls these disparate sources together to define contact zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (34). Guaman Poma's 1613 letter, modeled on a typical Spanish "Nueva coronica 'New Chronicle'" of conquest, delivers, in a European colonial genre, a novel trajectory of the story of the Creation of the world. Poma seeks to rewrite the history of the Christian world, but with "Andean rather than European peoples at the center of it—Cuzco, not Jerusalem" (Pratt 34). Poma also alternates between Spanish and his native Quechua. Throughout the piece, he replicates, substitutes, reverses, and creates anew. Poma grapples with how colonialism has attempted to define his world, as he stands at a crossroads of cultures.</p>
connect exhibit to Pratt	<p>Just as Poma's letter is undeniably a purposeful culmination of components, so too are Tuffery's bulls. Pisupo Lua Afe and Povi Christkeke are themselves contact zones. Their multi-layered construction forces us to consider their different parts—the physical tins themselves, their spatial arrangement, Povi Christkeke's dance through the parade—in their own right, but also in the narrative of Samoan history. In synthesizing a new form of communication, Poma sought to redefine the order of the colonial world. Pratt discerns that it is not merely the content, but also the structure of Poma's letter that enabled him to speak so clearly of reconstructing history to include indigenous Andeans. By using the Spanish genre of the chronicle as a vehicle for his own original content, Poma comments on what this genre means in itself. Pratt asserts that Poma's letter is autoethnographic, "a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in</p>

Note: this text was taken from a final essay published on TMR – their first draft didn't look like this!

Draft outside a word processor

Spreadsheets

(e.g. Google Sheets, Excel, Numbers)

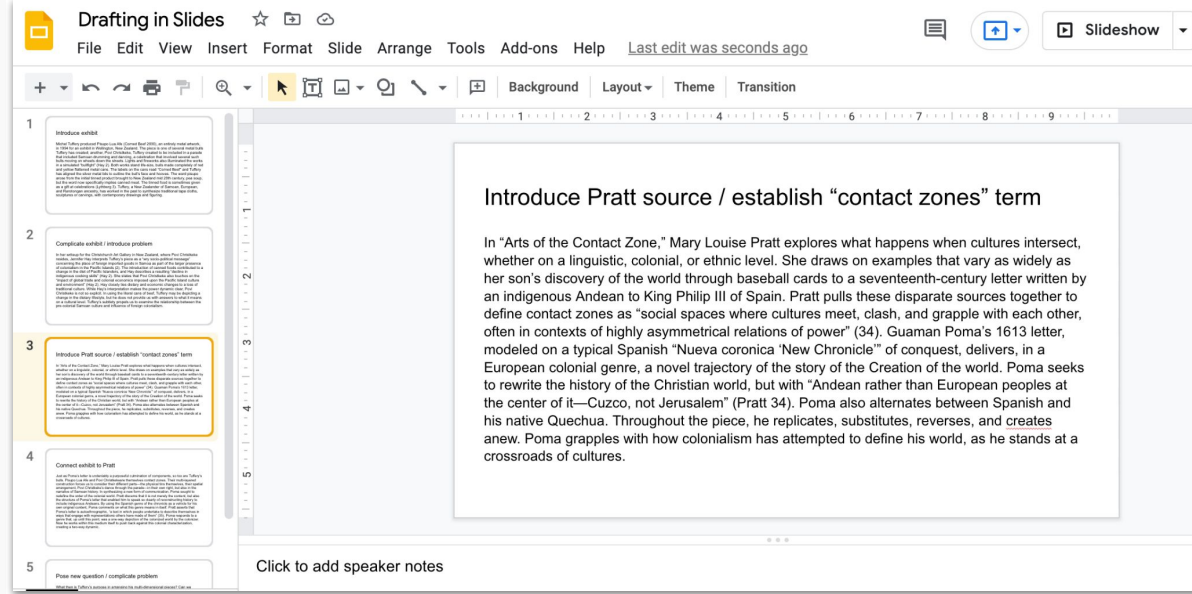
	A	B	C
1	You can use a spreadsheet to outline in one column and then move right into the drafting process in the next column (and you can re-order at any point in the process)		
2	Ideas	Draft	Notes
3	<i>Add your ideas in this column and reorder to create your outline!</i>	<i>Use this column to begin drafting the pieces of your outline. You can always re-order the rows if you discover you need a different structure.</i>	<i>Need to remember something about this section? Drop notes here.</i>
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			
14			
15			
16			
17			

Once you're ready to move to a word processor:

1. Select the cells with the text you want to use
2. Copy
3. Paste and match style into your document!

Draft outside a word processor

Digital Slide Deck
(e.g. Google Slides,
Powerpoint,
Keynote)

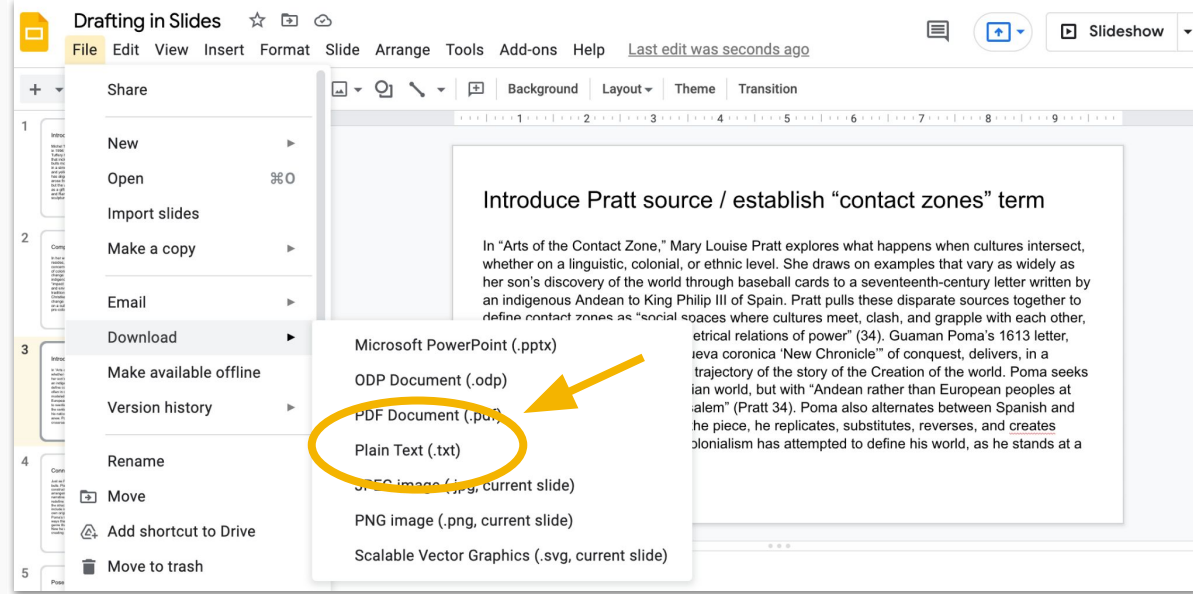


Drafting in slides is a great option if you:

- Value focusing on one paragraph at a time
- Want to be able to restructure easily
- Want to be able to make notes while drafting (can do this in "speaker notes")

Draft outside a word processor

Digital Slide Deck
(e.g. Google Slides, Powerpoint, Keynote)



Once you're ready to move to a word processor:

1. File >> Download >> PDF or TXT (note: TXT docs will include speaker notes; PDFs will not)
2. Select all
3. Copy
4. Paste into your document!

BONUS TIP

You can also OUTLINE in spreadsheets or digital slides!
(and then move right into drafting!)

Check out the Writing Guide materials on “Outlining for the Scattered Mind” on the Writing Center Resources page:

<https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/uwp/writing-center/writing-resources>

5. Start where it's **easiest!**

Start where it's easiest!

Research shows that more advanced writers tend to work on whatever is easiest at the moment!

**Just because a reader will read your text linearly...
...does not mean you need to write it linearly!**

Research shows that expert writers tend to work recursively, moving from one writing task to another based on what is easiest in the moment.

While these expert writers' practices may *look* messy – they are actually placing less of a burden on their working memory by working in a less linear way.

Translation: instead of trying to force yourself to move linearly through a draft, start with what's easiest!

Ritzenberg, Aaron & Mendelsohn, Sue. (2020).
How Scholars Write. Oxford University Press

Start where it's easiest!

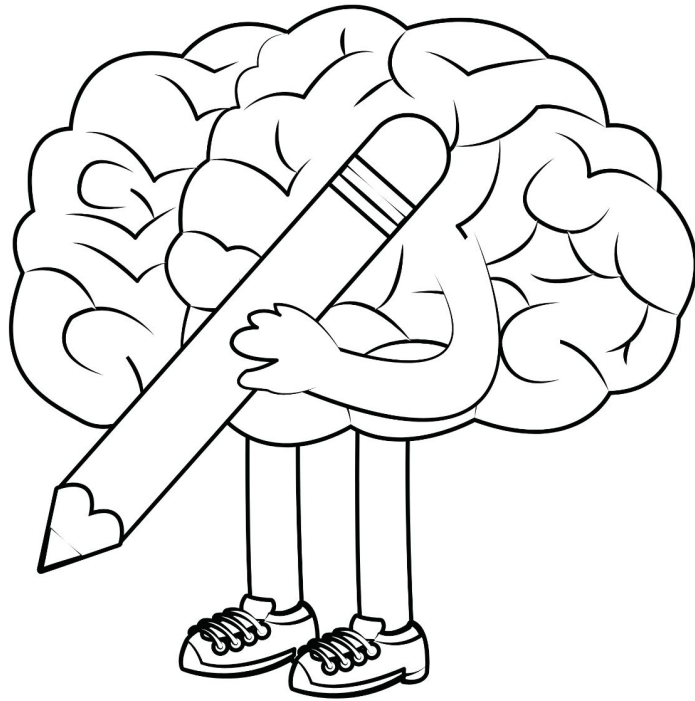
Research shows that more advanced writers tend to work on whatever is easiest at the moment!

Instead of starting with the introduction, write whatever feels easiest right now (even if it's something for the middle of a paragraph!)

Look at your outline or notes:

- Where do you feel most inspired/excited to begin writing? What are you most interested in?
- Where do you have the clearest idea of what that section will look like or include?

Ritzenberg, Aaron & Mendelsohn, Sue. (2020). *How Scholars Write*. Oxford University Press



5 things you can do ***right now*** to kickstart the drafting process

1. Rewrite your outline/notes in a way that makes it easier to use
2. Make the blank page NOT blank
3. Do something low-stakes
4. Draft somewhere other than a word processor
5. Start where it's easiest!

References & Further Reading

- Kellogg, R. T. (2001). Competition for Working Memory among Writing Processes. *The American Journal of Psychology*, 114(1), 175-191. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1423513>
- —. (2013). A Model of Working Memory in Writing. In C. M. Levy and S. Ransdel (Eds.) *The Science of Writing: Theories, Methods, Individual Differences and Applications*. Routledge, 57-71
- Learning Express. (2012). *Write Better Essays in 20 minutes a Day, 3rd Edition*. LearningExpress, LLC.
- McCutchen, D. (1996). A Capacity Theory of Writing: Working Memory in Composition. *Educational Psychology Review*, 8(3), 299-325. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/BF01464076.pdf>
- —. (2000). Knowledge, Processing, and Working Memory: Implications for a Theory of Writing. *Educational Psychologist*, 35(1), 13-23. https://www.joycerain.com/uploads/2/3/2/0/23207256/memory_and_writing_theory.pdf
- Ritzenberg, A. & Mendelsohn, S. (2020). *How Scholars Write*. Oxford University Press.
- Simes, M. (2018). Tin Can Transmission: Using Corned Beef to Talk About Cultural Change. *The Morningside Review*, 14. <https://journals.library.columbia.edu/index.php/TMR/article/view/3466>
- Sommers, N. (1980). Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers. *College Composition and Communication*, 31(4). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/356588>