



# Stuck in a rut: why we struggle to begin an essay

One of the most difficult stages of writing an academic essay is the beginning, when the cursor blinks merrily on a whitewashed page and you wonder how to get the essay off the ground. Even when we've spent a lot of time researching, and are fairly confident of the argument we want to make, we often find ourselves struggling when it comes to starting the actual writing. Why is this so? By reflecting on my own struggles as a writer and by observing a number of my peers going through the same, I have realized that the difficulties many of us face in beginning the actual writing of an essay are a product of a deeply rooted approach to writing which, for lack of a better name, I call the one-draft approach.

The one-draft approach is one practiced and taught in schools across the country. From kindergarten until high school, we are taught that the best way to begin an essay is, first, brainstorm ideas; then, come up with an outline, organizing those ideas into different paragraphs; think of a catchy introduction; and, only after these preliminary steps, begin the actual essay. This strategy works well when attempting school exams when we have 60-90 minutes to tackle the essay question, and whatever is produced in that time is assessed and graded.

Unfortunately, the one-draft approach to writing, repeated and internalized over many years in school, is fundamentally different from the approach that good writers actually use. Usually, when assigned an essay, we look for ideas and try to come up with a rough outline of the essay, and then....we stop. How do I begin this? we wonder, looking for an ideal opening, something that would immediately engage the reader. This anxiety of starting the right way stems from the subconscious but deeply rooted belief that *what I write now is what the reader will read*. In other words, despite knowing that I am free to revise the essay as many times as the deadline permits, I am, nonetheless, conditioned to approach the writing of the essay as something designed primarily for the reader. The idea of multiple drafts is new and not particularly attractive ('will I have to write this again?'); 'revision' might appear to be akin to 'fixing'—and hence unnecessary if you can make it good the first time. But it is precisely this desire to 'get things right' in the first go which so often leads to long, frustrating spells of brooding over the correct opening, typing out a couple of sentences, feeling that they aren't good enough, erasing it all and starting over.

To escape this situation then, we must unlearn the one-draft approach and understand and internalize the principle that *the first draft is only and exclusively for the writer*. Once we accept that what we're writing now is for our eyes alone, we will no longer be concerned about beginning the right way or choosing the right word. Instead, we can focus on the important part: the purpose of writing the essay in the first place.

The primary concern of any essay is to make a central argument, and the purpose of the first draft is to clarify that central argument *by writing down whatever we know about it at that moment*. This means writing down any thoughts that are simmering in our mind when we think about our argument (or rather, when we think about the assigned question/topic, for often it is only *after* writing the first draft that we discover the argument that we want to make.) “If I don’t see what I write, how do I know what I think?”

Consider, for instance, an essay on the famous 1998 Disney movie, *Mulan*. The essay asks whether, in the movie, the character of Mulan subverts or reinforces gender stereotypes (such as the idea that a woman’s primary domain is the home). If you sit down to write the essay and find yourself thinking too hard about where to begin, stop. You are still using the one-draft approach. Instead, begin by writing down your initial ‘hunch’ regarding the topic.

For example, your first reaction may be that Mulan challenges gender norms because she dresses as a man to protect her family’s honor. Write it down.

*In most Disney movies the heroine waits for her prince to rescue her. But Mulan is different.*

Next, write about the scenes that immediately come to mind when you think about Mulan and gender norms.

*Mulan saves the emperor in front of all of China by defeating the villain and is offered a place on the Emperor’s council.*

As you write, however, try to think more carefully about your ideas. ‘But Mulan needs a lot of help from the hero and her guardian-dragon. And what is her reaction to the offer? She refuses and returns home. So, isn’t she right back where she started?’ Throughout the process, *remember to keep writing* these and whatever other thoughts come to mind. After hammering out the different sides of a particular scene, move on to other scenes and repeat the process, until you have a fair amount of material related to gender norms in *Mulan*. At that point, the first draft is ready. The next step is to evaluate what you’ve written and decide what your position on the topic is. This position will then become your argument and form the introduction to your second draft.

For instance, you could begin:

*Although Mulan is generally considered a movie that challenges stereotypical representations of gender—such as those portrayed in the rest of the Disney Princesses line—this essay argues that Mulan ultimately succumbs to the very same gender stereotypes that it tries to avoid.*

Once you have the introduction, the rest of the second draft is simply putting together your analysis of the different scenes.

To sum up, recognizing the function of the first draft is central to moving away from the one-draft approach. The next time, then, that you’re handed an assignment and you don’t know where to start, simply remind yourself, “this is the first draft,”—and begin writing.