

APPROACHES TO THE FIRST DRAFT

The Easy Way

When you were in high school, your English teachers told you to sketch out a point-form outline for your essays before you started to write. It was sound advice — if you were fortunate enough to have a clear idea in mind of what you wanted to say. As you'll see below, this is not the only way to approach the task. But if you are able to at least take a stab at a point-form outline, you are likely to save yourself a good deal of time.

Once you have an outline, you can then add content to it piece by piece, much as a builder would follow a blueprint in placing bricks, mortar and lumber to put up a well-designed house.

The Hard Way

Another approach is to simply start writing and rewriting until you have a clear idea of where you are going. It's hard work, but sometimes it's the only way.

If you need to take this approach, that's fine. But after you've finished writing the first draft, do go back and develop a point-form outline of what you've written. You should be able to assign a descriptive label to each paragraph, much as you would if you were preparing a very detailed table of contents. Then group these paragraph labels under major headings and sub-headings. This will provide valuable insights into how well your material is organized and will equip you to improve the organization significantly in the next draft.

The Third Way

Another approach to the first draft is to jot down notes randomly as thoughts come to mind. Before long, you may have several pages of such notes. Next, try grouping those notes under themes and major headings. This will give you a framework that could save you from writing one or two early drafts.

Writer's Block

If you have no idea at all where to start, don't despair. It happens to everyone at times, and there are steps you can take to get beyond it.

Try writing a single paragraph at random about some aspect of the subject — any aspect — that you are confident about. Don't worry about how it fits into the big scheme of things. That can come later. The important thing is to put something — anything — on paper. Then pick another aspect — any aspect — and write a paragraph on it. Again, don't worry for a moment about what place, if any, that paragraph will have in the final product. Then write another paragraph and another, and then another, until you start to get a feeling for where you're going. By that point, you should be able to pursue one of the three approaches described above.

If that doesn't work, then it's time to ask for help. Ask your boss, a colleague, a friend down the hall — anyone who might be able to give you some perspectives that will help you to get things off the ground.