



## Quick Tips (“Hacks”) for Essay Writing

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“I hate to write, but love having written” famously quipped poet and essayist **Dorothy Parker**. Many students quickly understand the first part of this quote. Given a writing assignment, they feel overwhelmed if not beleaguered by the task before them. Though they may have the requisite information and skills, they may experience blankness or a flight of thoughts resulting in consternation and complete inaction. Parents can be mystified by what seems like their child’s procrastination.

Essay writing can be daunting and extremely labor intensive. However, when properly “project managed” it is surprisingly rewarding. Once having experienced the success of writing an essay using best practices, future essays become more routine.

### A Manageable Plan

Here are some frequently overlooked steps which provide strategies and solace for those on their writing quest:

- **Create a schedule.** Use a full-size calendar (preferably paper) to write out the days and exact times for work. Add contingency time, and plan to have the paper complete before the due date. Building the habit of being done with extra time left over is both a rewarding and efficient time management skill.
- **Create a numbered, step-by-step procedural checklist.** In virtually all domains of consumer experience, clarity and comfort come from knowing exactly how and when events will occur. When online shopping, we receive an email seconds after clicking “confirm” just to acknowledge the order was received. This is followed by continuously updated delivery tracking messages. In the same way, students benefit from a “You are Here” map and knowing exact progress towards completion. Essay writing checklists are easily available online, and checking off each completed step significantly eases anxiety. Each completed step yields an energy boost, satisfaction, and frees the mind for higher level processing as overall demands are reduced.
- **Simplify and operationalize the prompt.** Read the prompt out loud at least three times. Read with exaggerated expressions to get the exact meaning of the prompt. This works because it increases awareness of prosody, which is the intonation, rhythm, and stress in speech. Awareness of prosody has been found to correlate with reading comprehension. It



originally meant “a song sung to music” in Greek drama and explains why humans pick up so well on music and lyrics, regardless of their demonstrated level of reading skills. Finish by crossing out unimportant words and circling key words to turn a bewildering prompt into an actionable command.

- **Write the draft in a natural, casual language (“register”).** Students should be encouraged to write in simple language as if they were explaining something to a friend or young child. Embellishments can be added later, but an essay will be judged by its ideas, not the number of multisyllabic words. For example, a student definition for the word “experiment” might be “what scientists do to test something” instead of “a procedure utilized to support, refute, or validate a hypothesis.”
- **Enlist allies.** **Jane McGonigal**, a survivor of a catastrophic brain injury which forced her to rebuild her most basic cognitive and physical capabilities, discovered that enlisting trusted friends is an extremely powerful motivator for sustained and highly difficult behavior changes. People generally respond best to a chosen friend who can help with the essay or provide support in keeping to a schedule. Even a quick text from an “ally” can have greater impact and surpass in efficacy the entreaties and admonitions of concerned parents trying to extract academic output from a struggling student. For McGonigal’s complete, free motivational system, inspired by elements of gaming, go to [superbetter.com](http://superbetter.com).

## In Conclusion

Use of these steps, along with judicious and positive parental support, can help establish best practices for essay writing and generalize to other applications of organization, time management, and overall academic success. Good luck!