

Filling In the Blanks

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The empty page is one of the trickiest obstacles for a writer. This pristine instrument for creation happens to be challenging for both acclaimed artists and inexperienced English students who face this monster on a regular basis. In the attempt of vanquishing this enemy, they all at some point fall a victim to the same phenomenon: a mental blank. Those ideas that flow constantly appear to be gone at the moment when we need them the most. The nothingness of the blank sheet of paper looks as deep as hell, and our creative powers (no matter how strong) seem as harmless as a dove. As the minutes go by, this becomes more and more like an uphill battle.

Although not even the brightest minds can escape the occasional blank, this struggle becomes clearer in the case of students. Most of these “wannabe” young intellectuals may know the techniques for overcoming these obstacles, but they still lack the practice to face the beast and maintain their composure. At university, they are supposed to polish their skills and learn to diminish those white outs. It is trial and error for them, as they are exposed to the same situation over and over again: a topic must be chosen and the expected result is an original essay. In other words, they have to fill in that blank with contents of their own. Every student has a different reaction to the same situation. Some, consumed by resignation (not before indulging in a good share of the utmost creative profanities), will write about the first trivial topic that comes to mind, but the most self-demanding ones will dig into their minds trying to detect a thread that will allow them to knit some original theme to reflect upon.

However, those thoughts worth unravelling in an essay are not always the consequence of hours of deep concentration. Ideas flow constantly. Commutes and long showers are proven to be the moments of deepest introspection. Students rarely turn this into a real product, though. That is the first difference between beginners and experts, to whom experience has taught to take notes when they detect “essay potential”. Actually, this piece of advice may work only when we have days to come up with an interesting, preferably innovative subject. Under the pressure of a final exam or any kind of immediate deadline, the urge to produce, combined with that evil blank page, may defeat the most emotionally fragile students. Moreover, it is difficult to obtain a top quality piece of work even for the most talented and better prepared students. Nevertheless, the latter are more likely to be able to grasp an idea that may be hovering over them or flash through their minds for an instant.

The choice of a proper subject is an easier task when a starting point is provided. It may be a title, a topic, even just a word around which an essay may be built. However, there are two words greatly feared by every student, a catalyst for mental blanks and mental crises: *free subject*. It is that moment of ultimate self-expression in a piece of writing that might reflect the deepest corners of mind and soul. The possibility of developing the topic

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which we feel more comfortable with, actually, has the opposite effect. Is my subject good enough? Is it serious enough? Do I know enough about it to write a decent essay? Students begin doubting not only what to write about, but their own beliefs as well. When they cannot come up with a real subject, their lives seem trivial in their own eyes, they consider themselves incapable of producing some serious piece of literature. They may even question their adulthood. There is a mental process very similar to the I-know-nothing state some minutes before an exam, during which we have all at least once daydreamt about sunbathing in some heavenly Caribbean beach. Of course, those with their minds wide open will notice that this may well trigger a topic. Why not write about daydreams? Or sunbathing? Or the Caribbean?

Every subject has ideas that may work as satellites, but these are raw and must be turned into a coherent product. Then, once the topic has been found, the following step is to polish it up. The means for achieving this goal are the main contribution of Language courses. This process is merely automatic for careless conformist students, but the meticulous ones will put more emphasis on an appealing presentation. For an alluring subject may be demolished by poor display, while an embellished essay may turn even the dullest theme attractive. Those seeking this last approach run more risks, for they are prone to fall victim of mental blanks. Anyway, that love for the written word is the fuel that drives these potential artists in their quest for the best product ever achieved. Once that barrier has been broken and the first word has been inked (or nowadays typed), ideas begin flowing again. The enthusiasm students feel about their essays is proportional to the fluency of those ideas. Hence, only the most devoted will produce a piece of writing that remotely resembles those of acclaimed intellects.

Hemingway once stated that the most frightening thing he had ever encountered was a blank sheet of paper. García Márquez compared that feeling to claustrophobia. Indeed, if this universe of emptiness can entrap even the brightest minds, imagine how a first or second-year student, armed with the most rudimentary weapons, might struggle to survive under the harassment of a deadline. A mental blank, often source of emotional meltdowns that range from tears to the most condemnatory curses, might in turn trigger an idea for an essay. The latter does not only apply to Ernest and Gabriel, who were used to overcoming these obstacles, every now and then. The greatness of the great should not be a valid excuse for surrendering to an empty page and -allegedly- an empty mind. The deadliness of those rudimentary weapons is irrelevant; the ability to use whatever is at hand to detect and exploit a potential reflection is what really counts. The result may not be “The Old Man and the Sea” or “Cien años de soledad” (as though our expectations were that high). Again, any trivial idea may be developed into an interesting, if not innovative subject. Yes, even the blankest blank.