

The Blank Page

Has the sight of a blank page in your notebook ever given you writer's block? Have you ever sat in front of a computer, staring at a blank screen, panicked because you don't have a word to say? Howard Becker, a professor of sociology, has been there. Here's his advice on how to triumph over the blank page.

Is the first thing I write on a page important?

"If I don't begin at the beginning, where do I begin? What do I write first? Won't anything I write commit me as much as a first sentence? Doesn't every sentence somehow contain in itself, at least by implication, the whole argument? Sure. So what? Remember that any sentence can be changed, rewritten, thrown out or contradicted. That lets you write anything at all. No sentence commits . . . because nothing bad will happen if it is wrong. You can write utter nonsense, things that turn out not to be what you think at all, and nothing will happen. Try it."

So what next?

"Once you know that writing a sentence down won't hurt you, know it because you have tried it, you can do what I usually ask people to try: write whatever comes into your head, as fast as you can type, without reference to outlines, notes, data, books or any other aids. The object is to find out what you would like to say, what all your earlier work on the topic or project has already led you to believe. . . . If you can bring yourself to do this . . . you will make some interesting discoveries. If you follow the directions and write whatever comes into your head, you will find that you do not have the bewildering variety of choices you feared. You can see, once you have your work on paper, that most of it consists of slight variations on a very few themes. You do know what you want to say and, once you have the different versions before you, you can easily see how trivial the differences are. Or if there are real differences (though there seldom are) you now know what your choices are."

Taken from Howard S. Becker, *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 54-55.