



Talk It Out

Encourage students to communicate their ideas without worrying about writing. Conversations demystify the process by reminding students that communication, not writing, is the primary goal. Ask students how they would discuss the topic with a friend to lessen the pressure; writing feels more permanent, and scarier, than speech.

Invite A Conversation, Then Write Down Their Ideas

Ask the student to envision a friendly audience: a close friend or non-judgmental family member. Imagine that person saying, “Oh, you’re writing an essay? Cool, what’s it about?” How would the student respond? Even if she’s not sure, ask her to explain the assignment or its underlying concepts. Draw her out with friendly, opinion-based questions: “Did anyone say anything interesting about that in class? What do you think about it? Did you like that text? Why?” When she starts to talk substantively, write it down.

Work Together To Identify A Clear Direction

After ten minutes, give or email her your notes. Remind her that the ideas were hers and you simply transcribed them. If necessary, having a conversation about the notes can identify the beginnings of an argument. If she still can’t proceed, help her add “why” and “so what” questions to the transcription, asking where she can expand and what evidence she needs. For some students, transcription alone will jumpstart the process; others need more direction.

Make The Most Of Office Hours

Although transcribing can be time consuming, if you are already holding office hours, notating a conversation can be far more effective than a conversation without notes. Students may gain clarity during a conversation, but if they leave your office with nothing in writing, they may find themselves stuck again. Written documentation likely means fewer meetings and less intervention later.