Helping Students Get Unstuck

Tips for Tutors

Whether we're students, tutors, or professionals, we *all* sometimes get "stuck" on a task.

Everyone knows what getting stuck feels like.

- We might not know how to start or to proceed with the task.
- We might feel we've been going around in circles, or that we keep hitting a wall.
- We might procrastinate work on the task, feel anxiety about it, and experience self-doubt that we can complete it – even about subjects and skills we know very well.
- And if we're getting stuck in a subject that's new to us – like many tutees are – we might anxiously question our capacity to learn or practice it at all.

But luckily, there are ways to get unstuck on tasks, and we need them no matter our level of expertise.

In fact, part of becoming good at anything we do is becoming more fluent in getting unstuck. And the earlier we start practicing, the better.

You've likely already gotten yourself unstuck from countless tasks countless times, perhaps without even thinking about it.

When we work with students who may have less practice and fluency in getting unstuck on their own, using specific language and concrete strategies can help them -- and can help your work as a tutor.

Where to start: Meet students in their stuckness

First of all: We should encourage students to accept that they're stuck. It's happened to us too; it happens to everyone! Model being honest, generous, and kind with ourselves about being stuck.

Second: Remind students how powerful it can be to **name *why* we are stuck**. What happened to shut down their forward momentum? Encourage students to fill in the blank: "I am stuck because_____. "

Third: Emphasize that being stuck doesn't mean we can throw in the towel. It means we just need to try a different approach or action.

Whatever we do, we need to do *something.* This resource lists some strategies that we can help students use to start getting unstuck.

We can think of getting unstuck as a process of **"Task Interpretation, Planning, and Initiation,"** that is:

1. **Interpretation:** Understanding what an assignment is asking for and what specific actions it entails; and
2. **Planning:** Creating a flexible sequence of actions to take to accomplish assigned tasks
3. **Initiation:** Finding a good action and attitude with which to start.

How the Task Interpretation and Initiation process works in action differs across the disciplines, with a range of discipline-specific resources available to you as a tutor.

But here are **five general tips for getting unstuck**, which can apply to many assignments.

Five General Tips to Get Unstuck

Not all students will need to use all of these strategies, or to use them in the same way or sequence. Think of this list as a pool of resources that you can dip into. Use what makes the most sense in the moment.

1. Contextualize: Look at the bigger picture. "Frame it up."

Thinking about one assignment in isolation can make it seem meaningless and confusing. But that's what many students do, especially those who haven't familiarized themselves with the course's larger goals and schedules.

Determining an assignment's larger context can help give a student a sense of purpose, focus, and how to best complete it. And the act itself of discovering this context can help struggling students feel more agency over their course work.

- **Questions to model:**
  - How does this assignment connect to or build upon other work or ideas in course?
  - What skills or knowledge does your professor hope you will learn from and demonstrate in completing this assignment?

- **Resources to model consulting:**
  - **The course schedule** and **Learning Objectives.**
    - Which **unit and chapter** is this assignment a part of? How does the assignment fit in to what else you have been doing or are about to do?
    - Which larger course goals and concepts does this assignment involve?
  - **The assignment prompt** itself**.**
    - What are the **key concepts** and **directive verbs** involved in the assignment, and how do they connect to larger course goals?
    - Based on the larger context of this assignment, what does your professor hope you will get out of completing it? What **skills or knowledge** does your professor hope you'll practice and build?

2. Interpret: Understand the assignment's meaning, requirements, and standards of success. "Name what you're doing."

When students say they don't know how to start an assignment, they're often still fuzzy about what it's asking them to do.

By spending a few minutes close reading and annotating the assignment prompt, students can gain a more solid understanding of what the assignment is asking of them and what it means to complete it well.

- **Questions to encourage:**
  - Which **concepts and ideas** will I be engaging? (Intellectual parameters)
  - Which **materials** should I be using? (certain texts, lab results, technologies, etc.) (source parameters)
  - What **form** should the finished product take, and for what **audience**? (rhetorical parameters)
  - What are the **basic logistics** of this particular assignment? For example: length, due date, where and how to submit it. (logistical parameters)
  - What **qualities or attributes** make an assignment of this type successful? What should it include (and not include)?
  - What should my **process** be like to successfully complete this kind of assignment? (for example: brainstorming, rough draft, and revision; showing work as I do the math, etc.)
- **Resources to model consulting:**
  - The assignment **prompt** and **rubric** (if there is one), of course. Encourage students to **annotate the prompt** with interpretations, translations, and actions.
  - The **syllabus**, for general guidelines for this type of assignment.

o **Notes, memory,** and/or **prior knowledge**. Have students recall what they've already been taught already about this *type* of assignment. What should it include and do? How is this *particular* assignment similar and/or different?

3. Analyze: Break down the task into a list of actions. "Chunk" it. "Break it down."

When professors write an assignment as one dense paragraph (as they frequently do), students often struggle to even read all the way through it, let alone identify each specific action it calls for.

When we help students break an assignment down into a list of actions, we make it easier for them to see -- literally see -- what they need to do.

Actions to model:

- Read through the prompt carefully, find, annotate, and translate each action, cross out or distill unnecessary language, and **write them all out as simple directions in a list.**
- Encourage special attention to **directive verbs,** like "Read," "Analyze," "Summarize," etc. **Translate these directive verbs** as needed, right there in the list. "Verbal translation" -- take a written word and turn it into a math symbol.
- Identify which **materials** should be used for each action (certain texts, lab results, technologies, etc.).
- Look carefully for **implicit actions** that aren't spelled out in the prompt, but that are nevertheless required or recommended. Is there a formula that's required?
- Encourage attention to the **sequence of actions** in the list and **how they connect**. Emphasize that **actions often build on each other**, and that skipping actions or doing them out of order can make it difficult to complete the assignment correctly.
- Help students **check the list** back against the assignment. Add any missed actions; correct for sequence.
- Have students **identify and mark any actions in the list that they don't understand how to do.** Help them **articulate a specific question** they'd like answered. If it's a question you can't answer, help them **write an appropriate email to the professor**.

Resources to model consulting:

- If the student isn't sure what any of the directive verbs are asking them to do, **refer to this list** that defines common academic verbs.

4. **Inventory:** Rally the resources that can help.

Students are often unaware of how many resources are at their disposal, including ones they already have in their own heads or hands.

When we help them spend some time at the outset reviewing what they know and what resources they can access, they're empowering themselves for this assignment and cultivating a practice that will serve them for the rest of their lives.

- **Questions to encourage:**
    - **What do I already know** about these concepts and skills?
    - **What have I already done** that's similar to this assignment? How did I do that, and how did it turn out? How is this assignment similar and different?
    - What resources do I already have on hand?
    - Where else can I look for resources?
- **Resources to model consulting:**
    - The course **syllabus**, once again. Remind students that it often includes general guidelines for different types of assignments.
    - **Memory and previous knowledge**. Encourage transfer of skills and knowledge.
    - **Similar previous assignments (and professor feedback)**. What did you do, how did it turn out, and what does the professor feedback suggest you could do better?
    - **The professor.** Remind students about the benefits of reaching out to professors and/or attending office hours.
    - **SASC's Sharepoint site**, which contains resources about a range of types of assignments.

5. **Plan and Assess:** Come up with a strategy and check how it's working as you go.

Students have often had coaches and teachers give them a strict schedule to train or complete something and improve their performance.

Students might have not yet realized that they can also play this coach/teacher role for themselves, and this is a powerful agency we can help them cultivate.

- **Questions to encourage:**
    - What **strategies** will help you complete the assignment's actions well, in the right order, and in time?
    - What's a **realistic timeline** for getting everything done?
    - How have you strategized similar assignments in the past, and how has it gone?

- **Self-regulation to encourage:**
    - How well is my plan working?
    - Are my steps getting me closer to the goal?
    - Do I have enough time left to get everything done?
    - Do I need to change my plan and/or timeline in order to be successful with the assignment?
    - If I need help coming up with a new plan, what can I consult or who can I ask?

Finally: Getting unstuck can take a lot of cognitive and emotional energy. Try to encourage and model behaviors that can help students recoup some of it.

- **Know when to give it a break.** When a student seems to be at a saturation point, encourage them to get up for some water, a snack, or a stretch. Or pause for a minute to chat about something unrelated.
- **Celebrate the small successes.** Taking a moment to appreciate completed steps in a larger process goes a long way in sustaining energy and motivation. It's something we can do for ourselves as well as others, and you can model it for students by giving praise as they go.