

## The doldrums

‘The doldrums’ refers to low-pressure areas of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans around the equator that can experience low or zero winds for days or weeks on end. So ships and boats sailing in ‘the doldrums’ could end up being stranded for long periods – unable to pick up enough wind to take them out of ‘the doldrums’ into less calm waters. It’s because of this that someone who suffers from listlessness or lacking in energy – a mental state that used to be referred to as *accidie* – is often said to be ‘in the doldrums’.

Students are particularly prone to suffering from the doldrums. The reason for this is quite simple, but not very well known. One of the major differences between studying at school and at university is that at university you have a lot more scope for choosing how you spend your time. You will, of course, have certain fixtures in your schedule – lectures, small group teaching sessions – but if you put those aside, that still leaves a huge amount of time in the week where you have to decide how you will spend it. It is this, more than anything else, that accounts for the doldrums. Wondering ‘What will I do today?’ or ‘What shall I do now?’ is an open invitation for you to become overcome by feelings of stagnation and an inability to get on with anything. I am as prone to this as anyone. I am writing this in a hotel room in Hong Kong, where I am spending a few weeks teaching. Today is a day off from teaching. The weather outside is absolutely miserable – so I can’t go out. So I have to decide how I’m going to spend my day inside my hotel room, and as soon as I start thinking about what to do, I can just feel cold hands on me luring me towards a state of hopeless inertia where I’m thinking I ought to get on and do something, but get nothing done.

Avoid the doldrums by *always having a plan of action*. At the start of term, draw up a detailed day by day schedule which tells you what you should be doing and when. Even if you depart from the plan from time to time as circumstances dictate, having the plan will ensure that you don’t ever have to ask yourself ‘What’s next?’