

TURNING WRITING BLOCKS INTO BUILDING BLOCKS

Understanding Writer's Block

Definition of writer's block: Writer's block occurs when apprehension over a writing assignment ceases to be productive, and the writer is unable to put his or her thoughts on paper.

Many writers suffer from writer's block at some time:

- Professional writers
- Teachers
- Businessmen and women
- Technicians
- Students, housewives, anyone

Writers who suffer from writer's block often believe some common myths about writing and the writing process:

1. "Writing is easy." (It's not. Some people are just a little more skilled at it than others.)
2. "I should be able to sit down and produce perfect prose without revising." (Every writer produces differently. Maxine Hairston suggests that there are three main composing styles:
 - sprinter** — These authors write their ideas down quickly, thinking of the first draft as a discovery draft. They do not stop to fuss with words or revise because they plan to write another two or three drafts.
 - plodder** — These authors may take two or three hours to produce a page or two, but they usually make fewer changes on the second draft.
 - bleeder** — These authors write a draft in halting, sporadic sessions, agonizing over decision. When they do finish, however, they do not usually plan to rewrite.Whatever your style, permit yourself to make mistakes on your drafts. You can always go back and fix them later, providing you didn't wait to start the paper at midnight the night before it is due.)
3. "Big words are better than short words." (Not necessarily. Word choice depends on the paper's audience and purpose.)
4. "Long sentences are better than short ones." (There should be both in a paper. Variety is important.)
5. "I am supposed to sound like Hemingway." (If a teacher really expected you to write like a professional, you wouldn't be in that course.)
6. "Revising a paper means correcting spelling and punctuation." (It means cutting out unnecessary sentences, adding others, combining paragraphs, rewriting to provide necessary evidence, elaboration, etc.)
7. "The teacher is always the audience." (The teacher doesn't think so. You must read the assignment carefully to determine the audience; it is often an "invented" one.)
8. "You have to follow a set order of procedure." (Teachers might require that you compose your paper in a certain order, but no system works well for all writing all the time.)
9. "You absolutely must stick with the topic or thesis." (If you are not enthused about an assignment, try to come up with a topic that you are interested in and that the teacher might accept. Showing an interest in your paper is impressive. And if you change your mind about your thesis, change your thesis. Be flexible.)

Some mental symptoms associated with believing these myths are:

- Feeling overwhelmed by the task (You don't see how you can complete the paper and don't even know where to begin.)
- Being convinced that there is only one correct way of writing (Miss Watson back in *Yellowstone Jr.* High told me to do it this way, and since it worked back then, it should work now.)
- Lacking confidence about your writing abilities (You feel that if you write you will do something wrong, so not writing is "safe." This is avoidance behavior.)
- Having a negative attitude (Some people simply don't have a positive attitude. They say "I CAN'T!" Persisting in this negative attitude will probably make you fail. If you find yourself saying "I CAN'T" in a variety of situations, writer's block probably isn't the only problem. But there may be some specific reasons why you say, "I CAN'T.")
- Believing that good writing is a "mysterious gift" given only to a select few (Writing well is a skill that requires practice.)

Some common physical symptoms associated with writer's block are feeling:

hot/cold
nauseated

shaky
tense

sweaty
dizzy

Coping With Writer's Block

Some of the techniques given in this handout will apply to in-class writer's block, while others will work better for overcoming out-of-class writer's block. Many will work in both situations, but some may not work for you at all. You have to discover what works best for **you**.

What if you can't get started?

1. **Relax.** Getting upset produces tension that is counterproductive to the creative process. Some popular ways to relax include yawning, meditating, exercising, and showering.
2. **Try to control your environment.** You must discover for yourself what writing conditions are best for you. This may be difficult in a classroom where you have to consider the wishes of others. At home, you can decide if you work better at the desk, the kitchen table, the coffee table, or in bed. Try it in total silence or with the television or radio on. You may find that you work better outdoors or in the library than at home. Be comfortable. Don't wear your tightest jeans or a button-down shirt with a tie. Don't try to write when you're hungry, cold, hot, or tired—these things will distract you from your purpose. You might want to develop a sort of ritual you must perform before settling down to write. Willa Cather read a Bible passage before sitting down to write. Sherwood Anderson wrote a letter to a friend. Ernest Hemingway sharpened 20 pencils. Do whatever you feel helps you to get ready and then repeat that ritual every time you write.
3. **Recognize that writing is a recursive process.** There is no "right way" of producing an essay. You must be flexible when creating your paper and complete (or redo) each phase of the writing process at your own rate. See the handout "The Writing Process."
4. **Be prepared.** This means that you need to have read the assigned chapters or researched the topic.
5. **Plan to procrastinate.** The time you spend delaying actual writing can help you formulate ideas for your paper. Be sure to set realistic goals for yourself. Make up a schedule of how you plan to progress on your paper. It can cover minutes or weeks. Give yourself an earlier due date than is required because you'll probably run over.

Allow time to sharpen pencils, grab a cup of coffee, clean your room, brush your dog, etc. A set routine will help

to mentally prepare you to write.

6. **Write something down.** Often, seeing something other than a blank page will make you feel less tense. It doesn't matter if what you've written is good or makes sense. Some writers like to do some free writing on the topic before attempting more structured prose.
7. **Talk about it.** Tell your friend or roommate about what you have to write about. Explain whatever the subject is and consider the questions he/she asks about it. This is a good way to get started because you can do it while you're doing laundry or driving a car. Fellow classmates are usually excellent listeners. Don't forget that your teacher and writing counselors are there to help, too.
8. **Do the easiest part first.** You may not know exactly what you're going to say throughout the paper, but you might have at least one good point in mind, so start with that point. You may have a dynamite ending, so begin there. You don't have to begin writing the introductory paragraph first—do it later.

What happens when writer's block strikes after you've begun to write?

There are several activities you could do to unblock in the middle of a paper.

1. **Relax.** Take a walk, visit with a friend, or take a long, hot bath.
2. **Time permitting, set it aside for a while.** Instead, go do laundry or take a walk. If you're in class, stretch, look out the window, or walk around if possible.
3. **Change your environment or tools.** Move to the couch or use a pencil instead of a pen.
4. **Note other matters.** If you're afraid that you will forget that you need dog food at the store, grab a piece of paper and write it down so you won't forget. Jotting things down on paper will free your mind to concentrate on your paper.
5. **Talk to a friend or visit your teacher or a writing counselor.**
6. **Read what you have written so far.**
7. **Try a variety of revising strategies:**
 - Read what you've written aloud.
 - Consult a checklist or handbook.
 - Check for your "usual" errors.
 - Read your paper out of order.
8. **Finally, let go.** Nothing in this world is perfect. If you've given your writing your best shot, accept that. And the next time, do what works for you: change what doesn't. Whatever you do at any stage in the writing process, don't give up hope. Look at your difficulty as a *temporary condition* that you will overcome.

THINK POSITIVELY!