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Blockbusting II

Tips for Preventing and Breaking Writer's Block

by Chris Edwards

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Abstract

This article concludes a two-part series on diagnosing and overcoming writer's block. It describes methods that will help the struggling writer create a productive physical environment, develop a regular schedule, manage emotional states, and improve the planning and organization of the writing process.

A [recent HMS Beagle article on writer's block](#) described defeatist attitudes that can prevent scientists from completing their grants and articles. Perfectionism, combined with unrealistic assumptions about the writing process and ill-defined goals, can make writing a tough, miserable experience for some people. You can help prevent or remove writer's block by making three positive changes: (1) creating a productive working environment, (2) planning the content and schedule of your drafting, and (3) using specific techniques to start and finish each writing session productively.

Drafting text is a loner's job, requiring sustained and self-directed concentration over long periods of time. Distraction can be a dangerous enemy. Writers must initiate each composing session, without relying upon others to spur them on. If it is impossible to create the necessary isolation at the lab, find a permanent place to write (perhaps at home) where you will not be drained by interruptions or reminders of other tasks.

**First, eliminate
all distractions
whatsoever.**

Eliminate all sources of distraction from your permanent workspace. Let the answering machine take your calls, close that browser, shut the door, and strictly inform others not to disturb you unless there is an emergency. Like a baseball player who spits in his glove before pitching, adopt a little ritual to signify that a state of comfortable productivity is near. Simply bringing a cup of coffee to the desk, adjusting your chair, or saying goodbye as you enter your office can signal your readiness.

A regular writing schedule will help immensely, especially if you are tempted to multitask. Unless you

**Like baseball players,
adopt a starting ritual.**

are a night owl, consider composing in the early morning. Your energy is fresh at that time, your mind is not cluttered with short-term memories of other tasks, and you can finish this demanding work before the regular workday begins.

If you have a history of writing problems, begin by working for a half hour or an hour at a time, then gradually extend your session as needed. Regular periods of writing build productive habits while moving you towards your goal. Even a little text is better than nothing. To be consistently productive, you should keep to your regular writing limit. If you decide to write for two hours at a time, quit at the end of two hours - not before or after. When blocked, let yourself experience the anxiety and boredom without leaving your workspace; sometimes simply attending to these feelings can help them dissipate, providing relief and placing you in a more productive state of mind.

People who struggle with writing can become blocked because they have defined neither their project nor the discrete stages of writing. Pre-writing, the stage in which you generate ideas about what you want to write and outline them, will help you know what to write about and how. Scientists sometimes believe that by immediately writing up the methods and results sections, the rest of the paper will flow. In fact, outlining ideas for the entire paper will show where you are going before you begin your narrative. It may even help you decide what lab data to include and what to exclude. For example, you might find that your vaguely conceived idea about one paper is more suitable for two complementary papers. Outlining will also give you a sense of the length, difficulty, and duration of the writing project. Finally, your outline may inspire a fresh realization of the significance of your paper, and generate enthusiasm for communicating your work.

**Separate
pre-writing,
writing, and
editing tasks.**

When you start to compose, consider this maxim - draft quickly, revise slowly. Avoid any temptation to edit your draft as you write; writing paralysis can set in if you evaluate each word you produce. Consider writing and editing to be entirely separate tasks, like the difference between running an experiment and checking the results. Expect to go through many drafts; the two-draft writer is probably a rare exception in science or anywhere else.

Writing teachers and coaches often suggest that writers begin their sessions by practicing "freewriting" - scribbling down whatever comes to mind - for a few minutes. You can write about how much you hate to write the manuscript, or write shopping lists, imaginary letters, or most anything that will put words on the screen. This method is a warm-up, just as stretching your muscles is a warm-up for jogging. Many writers counter a bout of writer's block by composing their thoughts and frustrations about the writing project in a journal.

**Draft quickly,
revise slowly.**

Make an inventory of tricks you have successfully used in the past, or try techniques used by other writers. (Some interesting and funny examples can be found at the Web site [Inkspot](http://www.inkspot.com).) One method is to consciously alter your mood through exercise or music. I regularly use nonvocal music for orchestrating my moods to improve writing productivity (classical for anxiety, jazz for boredom)

Your writing may also flow more smoothly if you place a very sympathetic

Orchestrate

editor between yourself and the journal or granting agency. Sharing a near-final draft with a close colleague or friend can ease performance anxiety over the paper's reception, reduce self-imposed pressures during editing, and provide extra editorial insight.

What do you do if you remain blocked, despite all of your best efforts to write? There are two alternatives. First, you can hire a writing coach. Writing coaches have experience working with blocked writers of all kinds. They can work with you in person, over the telephone, through email, or with any combination of these methods. A good coach will provide structure, emotional support, accountability, and proven methods. You can often find them through local university writing centers, and many advertise their services on the Web. One group, the International Coach Federation, maintains a [referral list](#) of coaches for writing and other life tasks. I have personally seen tremendous increases in writing productivity, quality, and self-confidence by scientists who have used writing coaches.

If writer's block is due to underlying life problems, get a couch instead of a coach. Some psychotherapists specialize in treating writer's block. Psychologist Robert Boice, formerly of the [State University of New York at Albany](#), has studied different techniques psychotherapists use to help blocked writers. His empirical studies describe success with the use of behavioral techniques (such as contingent reinforcement), cognitive-behavioral methods, and more humanistic approaches such as freewriting [1]. In his practice as a clinical psychologist, Boice reports greatest success when clients are given structured assignments of graduated difficulty, with built-in rewards of the client's choice. He measures benchmarks of success for his clients in all stages of the writing process, and clients chart the number of pages they write in each session.

**Still blocked?
Get a coach
or a couch.**

Most of the approaches mentioned above consider ways to provide structure to the task of writing, build reliable and productive habits, and jump-start your work when the proverbial pen runs dry. Learning to write steadily, with minimal frustration, is a discipline in self-management. Your ability to master other tasks in self-management, such as planning and executing experiments, can carry over to the act of writing. Improvement will come, however slowly, by carefully attending to the physical and emotional, as well as the mental dimensions of the task

[Christopher Edwards](#) is a science management consultant, writer, and editor. He was founding editor-in-chief of [Nature Biotechnology](#) and is coauthor of [Entrepreneurial Science: New Links between Corporations, Universities, and Government](#) (Quorum Books, 1987).

[Andrzej Krauze](#) is an illustrator, poster maker, cartoonist, and painter who illustrates regularly for HMS Beagle, The Guardian, The Sunday Telegraph, Bookseller, and New Statesman.

Endlinks

[Blockbusting: Understanding the Causes of Writer's Block](#) - the first HMS Beagle article in this two-part series.

[Learning Skills Centre: Writing Skills](#) - assists in improving writing skills, including organizing, revising, editing, and overcoming writer's block. From the University of Northern British

Columbia.

[References for Writers](#) - a list of writing, grammar, and mechanics resources for writers.

[Tip Sheets: Resources for Writers](#) - outlines the writing process, with tips on strategies, language, and punctuation.

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