

Rx for Writer's Block:
Cognitive Causes, Cognitive Treatment

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She sits, chewing her lower lip, bent over the papers on the desk in front of her. She writes a few words, stops, re-reads them, picks up the assignment sheet and reads it, crosses out what she's written, and begins again. After dotting the end of her first complete sentence, she re-reads it, crosses out a word or two and reads again. Still not satisfied, she wads up the sheet and tosses it toward the wastebasket where it joins a paper snowdrift. Finally, she puts down her pen, gets up, and walks away, the victim of a disabling attack of writer's block, a malady that has plagued her to varying degrees all her academic life.

Writer's block is the inability to begin or continue a writing task, even though the sufferer has the desire and the necessary writing skills to do it. In a mild case, the writer may only feel anxious, frustrated, and confused but struggles to complete the writing job anyway. When blocking is at its worst, nothing is produced; deadlines are postponed and finally missed altogether. Severe writing anxiety that inhibits writers so totally that they avoid altogether any situation that might require writing and other psychological problems that produce blocking need to be dealt with by means of psycho-therapy and methods such as those of Lazarus and Minninger.¹ But, as classroom teachers, we can treat those blocks that we encounter in our writing students which have a cognitive basis.

Recent studies by Mike Rose have turned up a number of cognitive causes for writer's block.² Among my students, I've seen the same blocking behaviors that Rose found in his research, and have come to recognize six kinds of blocks which stem in large part from writers' lack of information or misunderstandings about how writing works.

The first kind of writing block I call "Bitter Medicine." The student feels that writing is work, hard work, and the harder the work, the better the product. Like medicine, if it tastes awful, it must be effective. In other words, if it hurts, it's good, and the writer derives a perverse pleasure from the pain of waiting until the last minute to meet a deadline. "I do my best work under pressure," he says, but the pressure can become intolerable, the deadline too close to be humanly met, and the writer becomes hopelessly blocked.

Some of this behavior may arise from an unconscious notion that if he waits long enough and isn't able to produce, he can escape critical evaluation of the product. Or it may be that the writer has a fear of success, of raising others' expectations--and his own--to a level that can't be met. Both amount to "If I don't try, I can't fail." Whatever motivates such behavior, a faulty sense of the writing process--of how much time co-operating with it instead of fighting against it takes--contributes greatly to the problem.

The second kind of block is the result of the Gold Star Syndrome and is characterized by the need to be perfect the first and every time. The fear of failure becomes paralyzing because of the writer's unrealistically high expectations for herself and everything she puts her hand to. It isn't just the desire to get an A grade for the paper or for the course that drives her, but a high need to please others, in this case, the teacher. In all writing situations, the Gold Star sufferer is so overly concerned about her readers that she imagines they can see right through the piece of writing to the writer and how she made it. Such writers block themselves trying to create, word by word, the absolutely perfect first draft, never having understood that nobody but an angel or some other supernatural creature could do that and no human being even needs to try.

I call the next kind of block "Listening to Miss Lindenmeyer" because she was my third-grade teacher, the one who became my Internal Editor, to use Flower's term--that still small (nagging) voice quoting the rules of mechanics and usage to me when I compose. She's invaluable when I need to edit, but only then. All writers have their Miss Lindenmeyers, whatever they may call her or it, whether they're aware of it or not. The problem for the blocked writer is that his Miss L. is on duty all the time, citing absolute rules in relative situations or conflicting rules he doesn't have enough experience to reconcile. She really creates a two-part problem: she inhibits the writer with her judgmental chatter during the production phase of writing, and she keeps him from seeing the difference between suggestions and rules. As a result, he may become badly confused or simply quit writing altogether.

Closely related to that created by Miss Lindenmeyer is the problem of the Accelerator and the Brake Pedal, the fourth kind of block. The writer, any writer, is capable of two kinds of thinking: generative thinking when the words and ideas flow forth, like pushing down on the gas pedal of a car, and critical thinking, like stepping on a car's brake, when the writer slows down to take a closer look at what has been generated. Ingenious as the human mind is, it can't do both effectively at the same time.

Blocking can happen when the writer begins evaluating too soon. The result is like pressing on the accelerator and the brake at the same time: a roaring engine going nowhere. The writer tells herself what she has written is "bad" or "wrong," long before such evaluation is useful, and she may even stop writing altogether. Or she engages in premature editing, beginning to correct spell and punctuation, for instance, before reaching the end of the first draft because she is stuck, at the moment, for anything further to say. The cognitive causes for blocking of this kind are the writer's lack of insight into how the mind and the writing process work and her lack of strategies for generating raw material to put in a draft in the first place. She ends up gift-wrapping an empty box.

Lack of strategies also causes the fifth kind of block, the Cast Iron Straitjacket. This poor writer suffers from extreme rigidity of approach. Every piece of writing, beyond a scribbled note to his roommate to call home, requires, he feels, a formal

outline. That's how he was taught, and he's always done it that way: Unfortunately, formal outlines at the pre-writing stage can be tedious, time-consuming, inappropriate in many cases, and sometimes impossible. How can he outline when he doesn't even know yet what there is to say? After making a number of unsuccessful attempts at lining up Roman and Arabic numerals and upper and lower cases letters, he may abandon the writing task altogether for lack of alternative ways of getting started.

The sixth kind of writer's block I call "Process? What Process?" and may be an amalgam of all the others. Sufferers include all those writers who get stuck temporarily, or for long periods of time, simply because they've never been made aware that writing is, first of all, a process. Like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, they've always seen writing as a valued; much-longed-for object they are somehow to find whole at the end of their felt-tip pens. Such a misconception is usually the result of years of model-centered writing instruction. For these writers, producing anything longer than a five-paragraph essay seems a monumental task because they don't recognize that it is possible to take writing one step at a time. And because they're unaware of their own natural psychological processes involved in writing, they're unable to co-operate with them. In fact, they most often fight them and, not surprisingly, end up blocked.

Most blocked writers seem to suffer from a combination of two or more of these maladies, but specific diagnosis usually isn't necessary since all respond positively to the same treatment, information about how the writing process works, the best-kept secret--as far as students are concerned--in the teaching of writing.

I've found it most useful, right from the first day of class, to share with all my students some background on, first, the creative process and, then, the writing process so they can begin to take control of their own writing in order to prevent or to write around any future blocks. The four-stage model of the creative process I use is that of psychologist Graham Wallas, first published in 1926,³ and validated again and again by subsequent researchers. Any successful creative task, including writing, begins not with a lightning flash (or even a little light bulb) of inspiration but with some kind of conscious preparation, followed by a period of incubation during which the mind at some level below consciousness is sorting, dividing, rearranging, and reforming the raw material fed to it at the first stage. Sometime during this short vacation from the task, an illumination--some insight concerning the creative problem the mind has been working on--may surface into consciousness. Or the writer may pull the ideas up by beginning to work on the two steps of verification: first, freely writing the draft and, second and separately, looking critically at what has been produced. As I present this to my students, I also explain about generative and evaluative thinking and point out where each operates in the creative process and, correspondingly, in the writing process.

We then move on to fitting the first process into the second. Pre-writing corresponds to the preparation stage where, through the use of heuristic discovery procedures, raw material from deep

memory--or more recent memory in the case of research--can be brought together and fed to the imagination for processing during the incubation period before the first draft is freely written. I'm careful to emphasize that the writing stage--the first and subsequent drafts--is for production only, for generation not evaluation, and that each draft becomes--after some more incubation--pre-writing for the next.

The writing process isn't as clearly linear as it appears in the diagram I draw on the board, of course, and I let my students know that, but it seems to help them to see the relationships among the stages and the kinds of thinking needed for each. So that they can practice separating generative from evaluative thinking, with no worry about being right or wrong, I next introduce my students to no-fault writing, a variation on Macrorie's free writing. We write together in class for increasingly longer periods of time with no re-reading, no going back and crossing out or changing what's been scribbled quickly, and no requirement to ever share with anyone what has been produced.

We also talk about the various kinds of blocks--and I see small smiles and heads nod in recognition--and consider what writers can do to keep from getting in their own way. Once they've been able to identify and temporarily turn off their Miss Lindenmeyers (until needed at the post-writing stage), most students become comfortable with no-fault writing in class and in their journals. Again, they don't ever need to show anyone this writing. It seems to me that we teachers have no business poking around in our students' journals, checking up on them. To do so is just to invite Miss Lindenmeyer back to where she doesn't belong, to trigger the Gold Star Syndrome, and to defeat the very purpose of having a risk-free place to practice generating without evaluating.

As an aid to flexible planning, I next suggest a variation of no-fault writing, listmaking. And shortly after that, I explain how to use no-fault writing for generating raw material at the pre-writing stage for specific writing tasks by directing it with the questions of Burke's Pentad.

None of my students who have come this far in the class has ever indicated to me that he or she was later seriously blocked, but I don't want to seem to be claiming any miracle cures. I get stuck once in a while myself, in spite of all my familiarity with the writing process which ought to set me permanently free. But I've found that when I'm having trouble, I can step back and see what's happening--I'm a Gold Star sufferer given to periodic relapses--and can no-fault write myself out of it. I encourage my students to do the same.

As teachers of writing, we may not be able to cure every blocked writer who comes into our classrooms, but we can ease the pain of those who suffer from blocks with cognitive bases, and, just as importantly, we can make sure that the way we teach writing in the first place doesn't have potentially block-building effects on our students. At the very least, like medical doctors, we should take the Oath of Hippocrates, to do no harm.

NOTES

1. Arnold Lazarus, In the Mind's Eye: The Power of Imagery for Personal Enrichment (New York: Rawson, 1977) and Joan Minninger, Free Yourself to Write (San Francisco: Workshops for Innovative Teaching, 1980).
2. Mike Rose, Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension (Carbondale: So. Illinois Univ. Press, 1984).
3. Graham Wallas, The Art of Thought (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1926).