



# Overcoming Writer's Block

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## Graduate Writing Center

### Overview:

This workshop is designed to introduce you to a number of simple strategies and ways of thinking about writing that can help you to overcome what is commonly called “writer's block”: the inability to produce written work due to fear, anxiety, confusion, or simple procrastination. To that purpose, the workshop will examine what reasons people tend to have for not writing, and discuss the ways in which writing patterns and routines can be established to help writers write. This workshop will also suggest a variety of exercises, activities, and planning methods which you can use to overcome problems and meet deadlines.

### Goals:

1. To better define what writer's block is
2. To help you think clearly and practically about your writing process
3. To give you concrete strategies for producing written work
4. To reassure you that struggling with writing is normal and understandable

### A Note About This Workshop and the Graduate Writing Center

Please note that these workshops are designed to address general writing principles. As a result, you may not find information in this packet or during the workshop that is directly relevant to your field or your current study. The best way to view these workshops is as opportunities to be exposed to general skills that should transfer across disciplines. That means attending these workshops is **not a substitute** for reading extensively in your field and asking questions of advisors and peers.

The Graduate Writing Center, located in 111-H Kern Building, provides free, one-on-one consultations for graduate students working on any kind of writing project—from seminar papers to presentations to articles to dissertations. Scheduling an appointment with the Graduate Writing Center is an excellent way to follow up on the practical information you receive during the workshops.

To learn more about the Graduate Writing Center, or to sign up for an appointment, visit our website at <http://composition.la.psu.edu/resources/graduate-writing-center/GWC>; you can also access the schedule directly at <https://secure.gradsch.psu.edu/wccal/studentview.cfm>. Please note that the appointment schedule is posted one week in advance, on Friday afternoons at 4pm, and that appointment times book quickly.

### Initial Questions

Before anything else, I'd like you to consider two questions. You don't need to spend too long pondering the answers; simply write down the first few things that come to mind in response to each of these two prompts (they're not trick questions, I promise!).

1. How do you write? [By that I mean: Where do you go to write, at what time, in what medium (pen and paper, desktop computer, laptop, etc.), and for how long? What pre-writing activities do you do, what texts do you write with/from, and how do you feel about the whole thing while it's happening?]
2. When do you experience writer's block? For now, use whatever definition of "writer's block" you want.

Keep your answers to these questions in mind as you read through the rest of this packet.

## What is Writer's Block?

Writer's Block is a relatively recent term, the origin of which is generally attributed to Edmund Bergler, an American psychiatrist active between 1946 and 1962, and the concept of writer's block is usually discussed as a psychological issue. For our purposes, it can be defined simply as an inability to write, despite the desire and ability to do so. Alice Flaherty perhaps puts it more eloquently when she notes that, "although writer's block can have many manifestations and many causes, all blocked writer's share two traits: they do not write despite being intellectually capable of doing so, and they suffer because they are not writing" (80).

## What Causes Writer's Block? Who Gets It?

Although the specific causes for writer's block can vary from person to person, there are some main contributing factors that always pop up when people discuss writing problems. They include:

- confusion/uncertainty
- anxiety or fear
- problems with organization
- problems with prioritization (life gets in the way)

The first two causes are emotional states, reactions to the way that writing can make us feel. The last two causes are procedural issues, problems related to habits that we tend to establish through repetition. All four are avoidable, and the strategies proposed in this workshop will provide both short and long term solutions.

Often used in relation to "professional writers," discussions of writer's block often focus on writer's recovering their creativity. While I would argue that academic writing requires a certain amount of creativity and imagination, this workshop will not deal with regaining creativity directly. Still, graduate students and academics are, quite clearly, professional writers and, as Thomas Mann said, "A writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people."

## Indicators of Writer's Block/Work Flow Problems

How do you know if you have writer's block? The "condition" itself is rather ill-defined, although in general the term refers to problems that are recurring (i.e. you have trouble writing on more than one occasion). Here are some basic indicators of writer's block and problems with your workflow more generally:

- Time designated as "writing time" is filled with other activities (both productive and non-productive: cleaning, organizing, reading for fun, watching tv, surfing the Web, etc.)
- Time designated as "writing time" yields no (or little) actual writing
- Deadlines are not met, are met at the last minute, or are the only way writing happens

### **The Emotional Component of Writing: The Problem with Fear**

Graduate student writers are, as a rule, good students. We have to be, to get into grad school. As such, we have internalized a certain level of anxiety about our work. That anxiety is good, up to a certain point: when we worry about something, we tend to give it more attention and effort. That same anxiety can have the opposite effect, though: if we worry too much, we stop ourselves from being able to do the very thing we are worrying about. The more we worry, the less we write, and as the deadline looms, panic can begin to set in. Jack Rawlins says that "Writer's block is another name for stage fright" (The Writer's Way 78). If that is the case, the best ways to overcome it are **practice** and **making mistakes**.

- Fear of writing, whether of the difficulty of writing itself, of failing at writing well, or of the anxieties that writing stirs up, is counter-productive.
- Telling yourself that is a start, but you may find that it's not enough.
- Overcoming this fear is a gradual process, like writing itself. Incremental steps toward becoming a productive writer are the best possible solution.

### **Writing as (Your) Process**

Before discussing some of the specific, concrete strategies for overcoming writer's block, we need to address the larger issue of writing process. By writing process, I mean the ways in which you tend to write: the places, times, and habits you have that surround, and color, your writing. If you can change your habits, you can change your mind itself. Changing your habits, though, is often one of the hardest things to do.

- The first, and perhaps only, rule: **DO WHAT WORKS**
- How do you know what works? Observe yourself; be a work-habits detective
- Find what leads to pages being produced, not necessarily comfort or convenience

#### **WHERE: What is your typical work space like?**

- Surfaces: What are you sitting on? What are you writing on/putting your computer on?
- Noise: How loud or quiet is it around you?
- Temperature: Hot or cold?
- People: Are you alone, or in a crowd?

- Light: How well-lit is the space?
- Fuel: Do you have access to food, water?

**General rules for Where you work:**

- Be comfortable, but not too comfortable
- Be willing and able to visit your writing space regularly.
- Don't use your writing space for recreation (don't give yourself an excuse to play when you should work).
- If you're having trouble, try changing something up.

**WHEN: What is your writing time like?**

- What time of day do you tend to write?
- For how long do you write?
- How many "writing sessions" do you have in a day?
- How long does it take you to get started?
- What happens in your day before you write?
- What happens after?

**General Rules for When you work**

- Establish a routine. Write at the same time each day, or the same schedule each week.
- Don't try to write straight through all day. Discreet, manageable writing periods are best (~2-3 hours, probably, per session).
- Find the time of day when you are most productive/active, and reserve it for writing.
- Writing is a marathon; gradual progress is your goal. Even if you only write for 15 min. on a given day, it will help. Do it.

**HOW: What methods do you use to begin?**

- Do you outline?
- Do you create a separate document for data/quotes/referenced material?
- Where (in your argument) do you start?

**General Rules for How you work:**

- You can't write forever. Break your working hours into manageable sections.
- Set reasonable goals. Trying to write 10 pages and failing is worse for you than trying to write 2 and succeeding.
- Think of writing as a 9-5 job, not as an art. You have to show up for work; there's a job to be done.

## Practical Tips and Strategies

### Where to begin: Brainstorming

- Outlining (or, “the only time roman numerals come in handy in everyday life”): use numbered lists to create a writing plan. Fill out the outline as much as you can, creating numerous levels if needed.
- Free writing (see exercise in back of the packet): forcing yourself to write, and to shut off any critical voices in your head, is a good way to get

### Organizing

- Break your project into parts: dissertations become chapters, which become sections, which become sub-sections, which become paragraphs, which become sentences.
- If you are hung up on one of those parts, pick a different one to work on.
- If the parts don't seem to fit together, try moving them around or adding transition sections.
- Start with a quote, a piece of data, something concrete. Build from there.

### Focusing

- Your inner critic is one of your biggest enemies. Try some strategies for shutting that critic off:
- Turn off your computer monitor, and force yourself to write “blind.” No monitor = no editing the same sentence for two hours.
- Imagine you are talking to one of your grandparents. They know nothing about your field. Explain EVERYTHING; only go back later to see what is worth salvaging.

### Other people

Writing seems like a solitary activity, and is to a certain extent: we need time and space away from other people in order to collect our thoughts and get them onto paper. But writing is essentially a communicative act. Getting feedback, using other people as a sounding board, and even just being around others can sometimes help dissolve your “block.” Also, the loneliness and isolation of solitary writing can exacerbate writer's block. Here are some ways in which you can use other people to help you be productive with your writing:

- Ask your advisor for help with any of the following: creating a plan/schedule of work, seeing that deadlines are met, brainstorming new directions/approaches,
- Join or form a writing group: ask your peers to share their writing with you, and yours with them. Meet regularly, and hold each other accountable.
- Talk to anyone who will listen. The more you talk about (and through) your topic, the more you will understand. Avoiding it gets you nothing.
- Read *aloud* through other writing that you have done, especially if you have sections of the same project already drafted.
- Talk through your ideas for the next section, either to a tape recorder or to a friend or family member. If you are talking to a friend, ask them to repeat back to you what you said, or point out places where they want you to say more.

### General Tips

- Have a piece of paper next to you as you work. Write down the time each time you start writing, and each time that you stop. See the “Time Management Inventory” in the back of the packet.
- Make deals with yourself: if you write, really write, for an hour, you can surf the Web for 15 minutes. Use positive reinforcement, not negative.
- Think about working on more than one project at a time, so that if you're stuck you can switch back and forth between the two.
- Stretch, pace, or somehow let your body know that you haven't forgotten about it.
- Try to take breaks when things are going well, not (if at all possible) when you feel like you can't write or are getting distracted.
- Similarly, only stop for the day when you know what you're going to say next. That way, you can start the next day with a fresh, new idea (take notes on the idea, if necessary, to remember it, but save drafting for later.
- Remember what you love about your subject. Get excited about something, and it is that much easier to write about it.

### Overcoming Writer's Block: In Summary

- DO WHAT WORKS
- Establish a routine
- Write regularly, even if that writing is not the “polished” material that you ultimately want
- Recognize distractions for what they are, and do your best to ignore them
- PROTECT your writing time
- Remain positive; you're not alone.

## Free Writing Exercise

"Free writing" is a very popular method of loosening up your brain and your hands, and getting yourself ready to write. Free writing is also an exercise in combating one of the most common causes of writer's block: an over-active internal censor. This type of exercise can easily function as part of a writing "routine" (you start each session by free writing for five minutes), or it can serve as an emergency measure, a way of shaking you loose from a momentary feeling of "stuckness."

### Steps:

1. Get yourself set up in your writing space. Be comfortable (but alert), and capable of sitting still for a long period of time.
2. Take out a blank piece of paper and a writing utensil, or open a new word processing document on your computer. Also take out some type of time-keeping device (watch, alarm clock, stopwatch, or even just your computer's built-in clock).
3. Clear your mind (if you know breathing exercises or meditation activities, this is a good time to try them). Be particularly careful to remind yourself that what you are about to write is for your eyes only; it does not have to be coherent, grammatically correct, or even intelligible as language to anyone other than you.
4. Start writing, and don't stop for ten minutes (the amount of time is up to you, but at least five minutes is recommended). If you are hand writing: your pen or pencil cannot leave the paper. If you are typing: your hands cannot stop moving, you should hear a constant flow of sound from the keyboard.

The idea behind free writing is to get you going, even if your brain doesn't want to comply. If you have to write "I don't know what to write" over and over for the first minute or two, that's fine. Ideally, though, you should try to focus on some aspect of your current writing project that has been puzzling, intriguing, or annoying you. Even though the writing you produce during this time will not be ready to just insert into your project, you will be surprised at the number of usable phrases and concepts that come out of this exercise.

## “Explain it to me” Exercise

Writing is a communicative act. One of the best ways to figure out how to say something is to actually try saying it to someone in front of whom you aren't afraid to make a few mistakes.

**Step 1: Write to a novice.** Begin by taking some aspect of your project and attempting to explain it (either in writing or out loud) to a (real or imagined) “general reader” who doesn't know anything about the topic: someone you just met on the street, or a grandparent, or an old high-school friend. If you are imagining your reader: this person is intelligent and interested, but does not know a lot about your topic; you will need to summarize the main dilemmas you are facing in language that is not too technical. The point of the exercise is not to re-produce the textbook for an introductory course, however: the person you are talking to wouldn't want to wait around for you to provide all of the background anyway. Your job is to briefly and clearly explain what you think the main problem or issue is in the section you are currently working on.

**Step 2: Write to your advisor.** The problem with step 1 is that we are often writing to rather specialized audiences, or trying to write to a wide variety of audiences at once. The general explanation may not end up being related to what you actually have to say. If that's the case, try swinging the audience pendulum in the exact opposite direction: imagine you are writing for an expert, possibly your advisor, but not in a formal setting. This person is an expert on your topic, is familiar with your work, and is there to help you solve problems. Instead of writing out paragraphs and sentences, arguments and charts for your advisor to critique, imagine you are writing an email describing your current stage in writing: what problems do you foresee, how do you understand this section as part of the larger project, as part of the discipline more generally, in the context of other people's work. If your advisor is helpful and available, you might consider giving her/him this writing, or using it as notes for a conversation the two of you have about your project.

**Step 3: Write to yourself.** Ultimately, the only person keeping you from writing is yourself. Your “inner-critic,” the voice in your head that serves as “quality control” on your writing, can also often inhibit you from producing anything at all. For this part of the exercise, then, DON'T focus on producing intelligible, syntactically viable sentences; instead, write in shorthand to yourself, and explain to yourself what you like about the topic you've picked, what problems you are concerned with, etc.

None of these steps will necessarily produce writing that can be dropped directly into the project you are working on. They should serve two functions, though: 1) they will get you writing *something*, so that you are more comfortable with the simple act of writing, and 2) they will help you to brainstorm where to go next, to visualize the rest of the writing process. This exercise can be helpful when completed alone (to an imaginary audience), but more importantly: the benefits of talking with someone else about your writing cannot be overstated. Talking with other people makes writing easier, and if you have the opportunity to do so, take it.

# Writing Session Time Management Inventory

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## I. Planning

How long do you plan to spend during this writing session?

What writing task do you plan to accomplish?

## II. Time Record

Start Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Stop Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Total: \_\_\_\_\_

Interruptions

Type

Duration

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Total:

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### **III. Post Session Analysis**

**What writing task(s) did you accomplish during this session?**

**If you did not accomplish what you planned to, why? Could you have foreseen the obstacle? If so, could you have done anything to prevent it before you began your writing session?**

**If you experienced interruptions, did they affect your productivity? If so, could you have foreseen them? What might you have done to prevent them?**

**Projected goals for next writing session:**

## 20 Questions Exercise

These questions can serve as invention “jump starters,” providing a variety of approaches, ways of thinking about a given topic. If you are not sure what else to say on a given subject, run through this list and see if any of them apply. You can apply the list not only to the main topic of a given section, but also to the key terms/vocabulary.

1. What does X mean? (Definition)
2. What are the various features of X? (Description)
3. What are the component parts of X? (Simple Analysis)
4. How is X made or done? (Process Analysis)
5. How should X be made or done? (Directional Analysis)
6. What is the essential function of X? (Functional Analysis)
7. What are the causes of X? (Causal Analysis)
8. What are the consequences of X? (Causal Analysis)
9. What are the types of X? (Classification)
10. How is X like or unlike Y? (Comparison)
11. What is the present status of X? (Comparison)
12. What is the significance of X? (Interpretation)
13. What are the facts about X? (Reportage)
14. How did X happen? (Narration)
15. What kind of person is X? (Characterization/Profile)
16. What is my personal response to X? (Reflection)
17. What is my memory of X? (Reminiscence)
18. What is the value of X? (Evaluation)
19. What are the essential major points or features of X? (Summary)
20. What case can be made for or against X? (Persuasion)

(Adapted from Jacqueline Berke's Twenty Questions for the Writer)

## Resources for Further Information

Acocella, Joan. "Blocked: Why Do Writers Stop Writing?" *The New Yorker*. 14 June 2004.

Bolker, Joan. *Writing Your Dissertation in 15 Minutes A Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis*. New York: H. Holt,

Flaherty, Alice Weaver. *The Midnight Disease: The Drive to Write, Writer's Block, and the Creative Brain*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.

Leader, Zachary. *Writer's Block*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

Pack, Robert, and Jay Parini. *Writers on Writing*. A Breadloaf Anthology/ Middlebury College Press. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1991

Straw, Jane Anne, PhD, *Unstuck: A Supportive and Practical Guide to Working Through Writer's Block*. Boston: St Martin's Press, 2003.