

Overcoming Writer's Block

What is writer's block? Well, I just can't think of a single darn thing to say. Oh well, I'm outta here!

Sound familiar? No! Oh, get real! We've all experienced this phenomenon when we absolutely have to write something, particularly on deadline. I'm talking about. . . .uh, I can't think of what the word is . . . oh, yes, it's on the tip of my tongue . . . it's: WRITER'S BLOCK!!!!

Whew! I feel better just getting that out of my head and onto the page! Writer's block is the patron demon of the blank page. You may think you know EXACTLY what you're going to write, but as soon as that evil white screen appears before you, your mind suddenly goes completely blank. I'm not talking about Zen meditation stare-at-the-wall-until-enlightenment-hits kind of blank.

I'm talking about sweat trickling down the back of your neck, anguish and panic and suffering kind of blank. The tighter the deadline, the worse the anguish of writer's block gets. Having said that, let me say it again. "The tighter the deadline, the worse the anguish of writer's block gets." Now, can you figure out what might possibly be causing this horrible plunge into speechlessness?

The answer is obvious: FEAR! You are terrified of that blank page. You are terrified you have absolutely nothing of value to say. You are afraid of the fear of writer's block itself! It doesn't necessarily matter if you've done a decade of research and all you have to do is string sentences you can repeat in your sleep together into coherent paragraphs. Writer's block can strike anyone at any time. Based in fear, it raises our doubts about our own self-worth, but it's sneaky. It's writer's block, after all, so it doesn't just come and let you know that. No, it makes you feel like an idiot who just had your frontal lobes removed through your sinuses. If you dared to put forth words into the greater world, they would surely come out as gibberish!

Let's try and be rational with this irrational demon. Let's make a list of what might possibly be beneath this terrible and terrifying condition.

1. Perfectionism. You must absolutely produce a masterpiece of literature straight off in the first draft. Otherwise, you qualify as a complete failure.
2. Editing instead of composing. There's your monkey-mind sitting on your shoulder, yelling as soon as you type "I was born?," no, not that, that's wrong! That's stupid! Correct, correct, correct, correct?
3. Self-consciousness. How can you think, let alone write, when all you can manage to do is pry the fingers of writer's block away from your throat enough so you can gasp in a few shallow breaths? You're not focusing on what you're trying to write, your focusing on those gnarly fingers around your windpipe.
4. Can't get started. It's always the first sentence that's the hardest. As writers, we all know how EXTREMELY important the first sentence is. It must be brilliant! It must be unique! It must hook your reader's from the start! There's no way we can get into writing the piece until we get past this impossible first sentence.
5. Shattered concentration. Your cat is sick. You suspect your mate is cheating on you. Your electricity might be turned off any second. You have a crush on the local UPS deliveryman. You have a dinner party planned for your in-laws. You . . . Need I say more. How can you possibly concentrate with all this mental clutter?
6. Procrastination. It's your favorite hobby. It's your soul mate. It's the reason you've knitted 60 argyle sweaters or made 300 bookcases in your garage workshop. It's the reason you never run out of Brie. FACE IT ? IT'S ONE OF THE REASONS YOU HAVE WRITER'S BLOCK!

How to Overcome Writer's Block

Okay. I can hear that herd of you running away from this article as fast as you can. Absurd! you huff.

Never in a million years, you fume. Writer's block is absolutely, undeniably, scientifically proven to be impossible to overcome.

Oh, just get over it! Well, I guess it's not that easy. So try to sit down for just a few minutes and listen. All you have to do is listen ? you don't have to actually write a single word. Ah, there you all are again. I am beginning to make you out now that the cloud of dust is settling. I am here to tell you that WRITER'S BLOCK CAN BE OVERCOME. Please, remain seated. There are ways to trick this nasty demon. Pick one, pick several, and give them a try. Soon, before you even have a chance for your heartbeat to accelerate, guess what? You're writing.

Here are some tried and true methods of overcoming writer's block:

1. Be prepared. The only thing to fear is fear itself. (I know, that's a cliché' but as soon as you start writing, feel free to improve on it.) If you spend some time mulling over your project before you actually sit down to write, you may be able to circumvent the worst of the crippling panic.
2. Forget perfectionism. No one ever writes a masterpiece in the first draft. Don't put any expectations on your writing at all! In fact, tell yourself you're going to write absolute garbage, and then give yourself permission to happily stink up your writing room.
3. Compose instead of editing. Never, never write our first draft with your monkey-mind sitting on your shoulder making snide editorial comments. Composing is a magical process. It surpasses the conscious mind by galaxies. It's even incomprehensible to the conscious, editorial, monkey-mind. So prepare an ambush. Sit down at your computer or your desk. Take a deep breath and

blow out all your thoughts. Let your finger hover over your keyboard or pick up your pen. And then pull a fake: appear to be about to begin to write, but instead, using your thumb and index finger of your dominant hand, flick that little annoying ugly monkey back into the barrel of laughs it came from. Then jump in ? quickly! Write, scribble, scream, howl, let everything loose, as long as you do it with a pen or your computer keyboard.

4. Forget the first sentence. You can sweat over that all-important one-liner when you've finished your piece. Skip it! Go for the middle or even the end. Start wherever you can. Chances are, when you read it over, the first line will be blinking its little neon lights right at you from the depths of your composition.
5. Concentration. This is a hard one. Life throws us so many curve balls. How about thinking about your writing time as a little vacation from all those annoying worries? Banish them! Create a space, perhaps even a physical one, where nothing exists except the single present moment. If one of those irritating worries gets by you, stomp on it like you would an ugly bug!
6. Stop procrastinating. Write an outline. Keep your research notes within sight. Use someone else's writing to get going. Babble incoherently on paper or on the computer if you have to. Just do it! (I know, I stole that line from somewhere?). Tack up anything that could possibly help you to get going: notes, outlines, pictures of your grandmother. Put the cookie you will be allowed to eat when you finish your first draft within sight but out of reach. Then pick up the same type of writing that you need to write, and read it. Then read it again. Soon, trust me, the fear will slowly fade away. As soon as it does, grab your keyboard and get writing!