Breaking Writer’s Block

Writer’s Block or Procrastination?

Writer’s Block is most commonly thought of as a mental obstacle—caused by any number of issues—that prevents people from producing writing. Too often writers blame writer’s block when they are actually guilty of procrastinating—putting a writing task off for later. Before blaming writer’s block, be honest with yourself about whether you are really stuck or just avoiding writing.

Causes: Actual writer’s block comes from pressure we put on ourselves and/or pressure that either comes from readers or that we think comes from readers. Dr. Donald Murray, famous for studying writing instruction and the composing process, identifies some concerns that can cause writer’s block: information, insight, order, and need.¹

Information: when we don’t feel we have enough information, we can face writer’s block. You don’t need to have read everything on a subject in order to write; you need enough information that you feel you can write about it, or from it, or just write that information down.

Insight: we face writer’s block when we don’t feel we have something important enough to say. Writers need to write even when all that’s in their head to write about is “a figure seen in a fog, a fragile relationship between facts, a sketch, a hint, a feeling, a guess, a question” (Murray 222).

Order: we get stuck when we don’t know how to organize ideas. You need some sense of organization early on, but you don’t need to know every twist and turn.

Need: writers often delay starting a project until they feel an internal need to write and an external need for readers to listen. The danger in waiting to feel both of these is that one or both never seem to arrive simultaneously.

General Strategies

• Step Away: take an hour or a day away from your project, get some sleep and come back fresh

• Allow yourself to write badly: writing productivity increases when we write without worrying about the quality of that writing.²

• Talk to Someone: talk through what you are stuck on with a colleague, Miller Writing Center consultant, friend, or family member.

• Write Something Else: work on another section of your project or some other writing entirely.

• Create a visual: draw a picture or some other visual representation of the issue you are struggling with; if it is organization, try creating an outline or idea map.

• Write about the block: start writing directly about your difficulty, “what is getting me stuck is…” and eventually you’ll figure a way past it or come back to productive writing you can use.

• Exercise: this combines taking time away with giving your body something else it needs. You’ll likely feel better and return to your work with more energy.
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2 For more on this see Anne Lamott’s Bird by Bird chapter entitled “Shitty First Drafts” and Bruce Ballenger’s “The Importance of Writing Badly” which can be found in The Curious Writer.