“Challenges in Writing”—The Writer’s Block?

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Published online: 3 April 2014
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“The easiest thing to do on earth is not write.” (William Goldman)

Publishing is an essential part of one’s training and evolution as a surgeon. The scientific progress made in the last century can easily be attributed to the landmark paradigm shifts in thinking that got published from time to time. “Publish or perish,” the dictum holds true even today. What is not “documented” is considered “not done.” Writer’s block has more often been observed amongst very well-known and established authors but may also happen to those that have not yet started [1–3].

What is Writer’s Block?

“Writer’s block” or misery block is a depressive feeling where writing feels like a painful thought and one questions why one is even bothering. This thought is often borne out of fear of failure leading to emptiness that surrounds the mind, and one even fails to begin. Thus, starts a downward spiral and writing looks like a task taken up that would never be completed [1–5].

Quoting Roy Blount, Jr., “I think writer’s block is simply the dread that you are going to write something horrible. But as a writer, I believe that if you sit down at the keys long enough; sooner or later something will come out.”

Blank Screen Syndrome or Writer’s Block—A Myth or Reality?

Surely the block exists in the mind, and one may conquer it by training and hard work. Quoting Stephen King, “Scariest moment is always just before you start. After that, things can only get better.” Most potential writers find it difficult to take the first step; once initiated, the rest often follows without much effort [3–6].

The Etiology of Writer’s Block

There are various causative factors for this phenomenon, but it is most often initiated by conflicted feelings and an attempt to have a perfect draft (*perfect draft syndrome*) at the very outset.

Quoting Jeffery Deaver, “I’ve often said that there’s no such thing as writer’s block; the problem is idea block. When I find myself frozen—whether I’m working on a brief passage in a novel or brainstorming about an entire book—it’s usually because I’m trying to shoehorn an idea into the passage or story where it has no place.”

The Sequence of Events

The very sight of an empty page or a blank screen can induce panic in any mind that often leads to fast, furious, and misdirected writing. Although one tells himself that he’ll go back and polish up the paper, in the excitement of having filled up the necessary space, this editing doesn’t happen [4–7].

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Symptoms of Writer's Block!

The victim suffers from blocked ideas, feels as if stuck somewhere, or may simply run out of motivation and desire to write. One looks for inspiration and awaits a mentor, peer, or a friend for some guidance. The major problem is to battle one's own "inner editor" which is a challenge as this editor makes one delete almost everything as soon as it is written.

Effective Strategies to Manage Writer's Block [4–8]

- Writing one's way out of the block is the best solution, although it is easier said than done.
- Quoting Mary Garden, "My block was due to two overlapping factors i.e. laziness and lack of discipline. If you really want to write, then shut yourself in a room, close the door, and write. If you don't want to write, do something else. It's as simple as that."
- Anxiety about rejection of the manuscript is another issue that needs to be addressed. Rejection should be accepted as the sales tax for writing rather than a deterrent. Rituals like yoga, meditation, chewing gum, listening to jazz, a long walk, etc. can also be very effective.
- Taking notes or free writing/brain storming and importantly establishing a routine are effective strategies against writer's block. Quoting William Faulkner, "I only write when I am inspired. Fortunately I am inspired at 9 o'clock every morning."
- Beginning in the middle or starting at whatever point one likes is also a very effective strategy as the reader will never know that the paper was written "backwards." It is always good to start with the easiest section of the draft instead of getting stuck in the beginning.
- Taping the paper, i.e., talking into a tape recorder and later transcribing the tape-recorded material. Often it may be easier to speak than to write.
- Piecework, like doing the favorite piece first, is another effective strategy, or approaching the draft sideways as starting at the beginning may induce perfect draft syndrome. After some writing has happened, working further and sorting out the transitions later is quite an effective strategy.

- It is worthwhile working with the first reasonable solution instead of continuously searching for just the right word or sentence; the concerned word/sentence maybe left highlighted to be fixed later.
- It is necessary to avoid the "laundry list phenomenon," i.e., one paragraph after the next without any real transition. Transitions may be the major holding blocks, and one really needs to work at developing skills to overcome these blocks. One's evolution as an author depends on how well one handles these transitions.
- Setting an achievable target and bribing oneself with small incentives at the end of the task can make this journey more relaxed and joyful.

Writer's block is a state of mind, and one has to learn to write to get out of it. This indeed would require motivation and a pressing desire to do it as we all love to see our writing on the wall or somewhere.

To quote Paul Rudnick, "Writing is 90 percent procrastination: reading magazines, eating cereal out of the box watching infomercials. It's a matter of doing everything you can to avoid writing, until it is about four in the morning and you reach the point where you have to write."

Suggested reading: The author would like to recommend a book by Holly Lisley on "How To Beat Writer's Block (And Have Fun Writing From Now on)."

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