

ONE WOMAN'S WAR WITH "THE WALL"

Tips for Tackling Writer's Block

By Tammy McGuire

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We've all hit it. It's "the wall" known as writer's block. Like other afflictions, writer's block has many causes and symptoms:¹

- not being able to get started writing
- not being able to find a "voice" and coming across as stilted or phony
- not being able to finish, or hitting "the wall" partway through the draft
- writing in painful fits and jerks²

- losing confidence in a piece
- being able to write only occasionally.

Sound familiar? Unfortunately, no magic vaccine or cure will prevent or wipe out this dreaded affliction, but here are some strategies that I have used to help my high school seniors cope with it. They can be adapted for any grade level.

First, it's important to understand the causes of writer's block. Sometimes the environment is the problem: It's too hot, too cold, too noisy, or too quiet. Students may be sleep deprived, caffeine

overloaded, or allergy tortured. These conditions can be observed and sometimes corrected on the spot—a window opened, a loud conversation “shushed.” However, it is the inner demons that cause the most serious cases of writer’s block, and these are much harder to banish. Psychological trauma, ranging from an impending parental divorce to an upcoming banquet date, can make the task of writing seem irrelevant or well-nigh impossible.

Yet the nature of the writing process itself can prove to be the root cause of writer’s block. Consider this fact: Writing inherently involves two tasks—creating and editing. Both are important and must occur in preparing a successful piece of writing. Linder and Means in their book, *Everything You Needed to Learn About Writing in High School—But . . .*, describe the split personalities of the writer as “the artist” and “the craftsman.”³ The artist is in charge of

- ideas
- rhythm
- mood
- voice
- whimsy
- word flow
- metaphors
- individual style
- unity of thought

The craftsman, on the other hand, takes care of organization and editing. The craftsman’s tasks include:

- putting together plans and outlines,
- analyzing and judging the drafts,
- finding the proper word or detail,
- giving suggestions for revisions,
- polishing the final piece, and
- making sure the spelling, grammar, and mechanics are acceptable.

The artist and the craftsman have equally important tasks, but may have difficulty functioning at the same time! The artist needs to provide a flow of words or ideas, while the craftsman needs to slow down and think carefully about individual sentences and particular words. The artist is more concerned with the whole, the craftsman with the parts. This is why it’s highly inefficient to try to do both jobs at once.

Think of your own experience. Have you ever been writing along, ideas flowing faster than you can write or type, and heard a voice in the back of your mind saying—“Excuse me, but I

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think you may have misspelled a word back there!” or “Don’t you need a comma here?” or “Wait a minute. That’s not the right word!” or “You’re getting way too wordy here!” or “I’m not sure this sentence meshes with the previous one.” This is the voice of the craftsman intruding upon the artist’s work. If the artist stops to listen, to fix, to edit, the flow of ideas may be lost.

Sometimes it’s hard to get started because the craftsman’s logical approach interferes. As the student stares at the blank paper or computer screen, the artist will suggest a topic. The craftsman will whisper or shout, “That doesn’t make any sense!” “That’s not what the teacher wants!” “You won’t get a good grade!” “That will sound too formal/informal,” “What can you say about *that*?” The craftsman’s drive to edit and fix interferes with the creative process.

The artist, too, can intrude by suggesting all sorts of crazy ideas or new approaches just as the craftsman is getting ready to add transitions, check spelling,

or consult the thesaurus. If the artist wins the argument, and all these new ideas are added, the writer may find that the impending deadline leaves no time for the craftsman to work, or the writer may have no energy or enthusiasm left for the craftsman’s time-consuming work. Peter Elbow puts it this way: “Avoid doing all writing [*artist*] or all sitting-back-thinking [*craftsman*]. And above all avoid being caught in the middle where you write only a couple of sentences and stop and wonder and worry.”⁴

I’d like to share some of the activi-

ties and strategies I’ve used with my students to mediate the great struggle between the artist and the craftsman, the tug-of-war that leads to writer’s block. First, some general suggestions I give my students about the composition process:⁵

Suggestions for Students

- Good writing seems to come and go—some days off, some days on. Expect this, and don’t fear that writer’s block is permanent—it’s not.
- As you’re writing, if you think of an idea to add to another part of your piece, *Don’t wait*. Write it in the margins or on another piece of paper. Put INSERT #1, or just “****” to indicate the insertion(s). Whatever you do, don’t stop the flow of ideas.
- Don’t slow down to think about spelling, punctuation, or the “right word” when you’re drafting. Just put notations such as (SP) for spelling, (RW?) for right word, (P) for punctuation, or (ADD) for places that need an example, a transition, further development. Type in a bunch of question marks (??????), when you’re not sure of a fact or how to say something. But don’t stop writing to take care of these things. The craftsman can come along later and “repair” things, using the notations and question marks as prompts.
- If you hit “the wall,” *don’t stop*. Plod along one sentence or word at a time. Keep writing until the end of the period, or for five minutes, or some other set time. This is important. Sometimes when you hit “the wall,” you just need to move in another direction.
- When your frustration level peaks, take a break. Get a drink, talk to another writer’s block victim, stand up, stretch, or jog around the building, but then *get back to work*.
- *Don’t try* to write the introduction first—you may be stuck there forever. Begin in the middle if you have to. I require body paragraphs for essays long before I collect introductions.
- Set time limits and make yourself write that long even if you get off the subject.
- If you can’t think of something to say in one part of your piece, *skip it* and move on to another section.

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“Telling a writer to relax is like telling a man to relax while being prodded for a possible hernia, and, as for confidence, he is a bundle of anxieties. See how stiffly he sits at his typewriter, glaring at the paper that awaits his words, chewing the eraser on the pencil that is so sharp because he has sharpened it so many times. A writer will do anything to avoid the act of writing.”—William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, p. 21.

- Try to relax.
- Just chit-chat with the reader. I don't know how many times I've asked students who are blocked, "What are you trying to say?" They'll explain it to me wonderfully! "Well," I'll say (to their consternation), "write *that* down." "But it doesn't sound right!" "That's OK. Just get it written down. You can fix it later." In some serious cases, I've actually

recorded students' ideas and had them transcribe their thoughts onto paper. Of course, the craftsman will have to come along and fix all those fragments and transition lapses so common to spoken language, but at least the craftsman has something to work with! Here are some "behind-the-scenes" strategies to help students deal with writer's block:

Suggestions for Teachers

- In the evaluation process, give credit for *both* the artist's and the craftsman's jobs. Some students have great ideas but do not polish—while others have impeccably polished essays that are as dull as mud. I want *both* sides of the coin—polished and perky! Knowing these expectations often gives students the external motivation to fight through writer's block.
- Require partial drafts at set times in the process. For example, on days when you allow class time to write, collect a draft of a certain length at the end of the period (i.e., at least one page). It doesn't matter if it's nonsense, as long as it's writing (it shouldn't be copied, however). This forces the latent artist to get up and *do* something and the crafts-

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man to be *quiet* lest he or she interfere with the grade!

- Be sure to deal with the craftsman's job only *after* the first draft is completed. This is *not* the time for a mini-lesson on punctuating independent clauses.

Here are some activities for combating writer's block:

Writing Aerobics

Just as the body has to exercise to keep in shape, so do the mental faculties. Poorly conditioned minds hit "the wall" sooner and more often. Writing

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for five, seven, or 10 minutes a day keeps both hand and brain muscles in shape. I usually do Writing Aerobics at the beginning of the period by giving three or more choices like the ones below:

Agree/Disagree: Men are better drivers than women.

Mrs. McMurphey's Purse
A Sea Gull's Feet
Silence

(a topic of your choice)

These daily aerobics go into students' portfolios. Some will be completed later, and others will be better left unread!

Mood Music

Play a piece of interesting background music while students write *continuously*. If possible, allow them to choose a genre (poetry, essay, letter, etc.). Allow two minutes after the music stops for them to finish their thoughts and title the piece. Assign several of these over a period of days and then have students polish one of them (this separates the artist and the craftsman). For some reason, music tends to soothe those writer's block demons.

Stupid Writing Topics

Have students make a list of the world's stupidest writing topics, or think of your own. Write for five, seven, or 10 minutes. Students must write continually about the topic, but their draft does not have to be good (this takes away the pressure that a craftsman might bring to bear upon the creative process). There is something strangely comforting about being *required* to produce a stupid piece—just try it! Sample topics might include:

red Jell-O pantyhose
sand green grass
broccoli baldness
black teeth toenails
dating

The simple fact of the matter is this—sometimes we can do nothing to prevent or cure writer's block; sometimes we can't even head it off. But we can take comfort in the fact that (in all likelihood) *this, too, shall pass.* ☞

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Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. London: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Means, Beth, and Lindy Lindner. *Everything You Needed to Learn About Writing in High School—But...* Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1989.

Olson, Gene. *Sweet Agony*. Grants Pass, Ore.: Windyridge Press, 1972.

Zinsser, William K. *On Writing Well*. New York: Harper and Row, 1980.

“What can be done to put the writer out of these miseries? Unfortunately, no cure has yet been found. I can only offer the consoling thought that you are not alone. Some days will go better than others’; some will go so badly that you will despair of ever writing again. We have all had many of these days and will have many more.”—William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, p. 24.

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Writer's Block on the Internet Sites to Investigate in Your “Spare Time”

Purdue University Writing Lab:
<http://204.234.22.1/Purdue/06>
Guilford College Writing Lab:
<http://www.guilford.edu/asc/wblock.html>

LEO: Literacy Education Online: <http://leo.stcloud.msus.edu/acadwrite/blocj/html>

Writer's block home page: <http://www.niva.com/writblok/fall96>

The Write Place Web Site: <http://www.writeplace.com/chapter.html>
About “Dissolving Writer's Block”: <http://www.transaction.net/web/tutor/test/dissolve.html>

A silly poem about writer's block: <http://www.silly.com/~signs/writer.html>

Blocking writer's block: <http://www.one.net/~banks/block.htm>

REFERENCES

1. Beth Means and Lindy Lindner, *Everything You Needed to Learn About Writing in High School—But...* (Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1989), p. 69.

2. Gene Olson in his book *Sweet Agony* (Grants Pass, Ore.: Windyridge Press, 1972) calls this type of writer a “bleeder . . . grimly squeezing each word from a reluctant brain” (p. 18).

3. Means and Lindner, p. 70.

4. *Writing Without Teachers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 73 (bracketed words supplied).

5. Many of these ideas are gleaned from *Everything You Needed to Learn About Writing*. . . , p. 77.