

The Writer's Block Project

by Dr. Jane K. Dominik

When writing papers for their college courses across disciplines, students often get stuck at various stages in the writing process: as they struggle to begin a paper, run out of ideas quickly, work to organize several ideas, run out of time, become overwhelmed when they think about revising, editing, or proofreading, and, at times resort to plagiarism inadvertently or intentionally. Except for occasional meetings or with tutors in the writing lab, as instructors, we are not there with them most of the time as they attempt to write their papers. Their writer's blocks can cause further frustration, resistance to more writing, decreased confidence and enthusiasm for education, and resorting to cutting and pasting papers, and plagiarizing. However, providing a mechanism for them to identify their personal writing blocks, and access and utilize strategies to address them can reverse these negative effects and open the gates to their writing and educational success.

In my English courses, I found myself asking students to articulate when and how they would get writer's block when writing their papers at home. I spent an increasing amount of time discussing those blocks, their causes, and possible strategies to address them, many of which I designed for individual students and classes. From this, two goals emerged for me: to conduct primary and secondary research on writer's block for college students and to increase accessibility to these strategies to more students at Delta College.

One of my three sabbatical projects in 2006-07 was on writer's block. I surveyed more than 850 Delta College students; interviewed and/or collected assignments from twenty Delta College instructors and two Los Angeles City College instructors; and interviewed five students each at CSU at Los Angeles, UCLA, and two community colleges—Los Angeles Valley College and Los Angeles City College. I also read several books on writer's block for creative writing since there is none for college writing.

After analyzing the research, I prepared a booklet that includes a 100-question questionnaire of the most common writing blocks students face, and specific strategies to address each. Following a Matriculation grant that allowed us to offer students access to this information through orientation courses, I have continued the project by offering workshops on writer's block to my colleagues and their classes, and making copies of the booklet available to students.

In the workshops, eight fundamental precepts about writing are presented:

1. Writing takes time. Although our world continues to increase its speed and the subsequent demands upon us, our brains have changed relatively little over the course of thousands of years. Simply allowing enough time to write can make an enormous initial difference in approaching the task of writing. We accept that athletes and musicians spend hours every day learning to play their sport or instrument and developing their skills; however, we often fail to apply the same expectation to writing.

2. Everyone has writer's block—even those who love to write and make their living doing it. My favorite example is Tennessee Williams, one of the three greatest American playwrights of the twentieth century. After yet another of his successful plays had opened on Broadway, he would return to his hotel room, put a blank piece of paper into his typewriter and wonder how one writes a play. That that happened to such a successful writer highlights one of the issues inherent in writing itself.

3. As Peter Elbow writes, "Writing is thinking"; the converse also bears consideration: thinking is writing. Often students wait to pick up their pen or sit at the computer until they know what they will write—and they never do. However, we know that writing itself can lead us to uncover and understand what we are thinking. Carrying a small notebook around and jotting ideas as they occur can begin this writing process more easily.

4. This is perhaps the most important for students who sit down to write and cannot get started: As I remind them repeatedly, "Writing does not happen from the top of the paper down; it happens from the inside out." An introductory paragraph and thesis cannot be created until all the "stuff" is identified, reviewed, and sorted. Then, the writer can take a step back to ask "What is going on here? What is this all about?" And, the introductory paragraph and tentative thesis—which will change as the paper is written—can be drafted.

5. Adapting French poet Paul Valéry's belief, "A [paper] is never finished, only abandoned." If due dates for assignments and publications did not exist, little would be submitted in either domain. Perfectionism does not exist and is a major writer's block. However, aiming for excellence rather than perfection, and realizing that the desire to correct or add something even the very next day after completing a project is a sign of continued growth of one's ideas and writing skills.

6. You will never know it all. There is much to learn and develop in writing. Those who spend their lives doing so know that even after they have become proficient, there is always more to develop in terms of approach, topic, and style. Thus, students should not expect that there will be a time when they will just get it right—and that is all right.

7. As many have said, the definition of writing is "rewriting." Many students write a single draft and then copy or type it. However, that is just the beginning. Often, it is not until the end of the first draft that we know what we want to write; the conclusion, then, can become the introduction, and we can develop and refine our thoughts in the subsequent draft. Good writing takes several drafts—again, that is what writing is.

8. The writing process—generating ideas, organizing them, writing the drafts, editing (for content and order), and proofreading (for grammar, mechanics, and spelling)—works because it separates various thought processes. When we attempt to address these simultaneously, we can become overwhelmed, confused, and frustrated, and begin to resent and avoid writing. A paper is actually written mostly in the second stage—organizing. It is here that students can flesh out their ideas, identify the relationships

among those ideas, and determine the best order to lead readers through their argument. If students prepare a thorough outline, they have much less chance of falling into the chasm that often exists between an outline and the first draft.

Causes of writer's block can be divided into six categories:

Conceptual: Understanding what writing is and how it works

Educational background and writing training:

Students should ask themselves:

- How many papers have I written?
- What do I know and understand about grammar, mechanics, and spelling?
- Have I written mostly personal responses, journal entries, and personal experience essays?
- Have I only summarized what happens in books? While understanding the reading is crucial, it is only the beginning of writing.
- Have I looked up a lot of information and glued it together, calling it a paper? This is not the same as research, which, literally means to "look again." Students should begin with their own ideas, and then look to see how they can be informed by, or how they differ from the ideas of others. If students have no background on a topic, they can begin with their own questions, stimulating and focusing their research, and giving it purpose.
- Do I know how to analyze, synthesize, and organize complex thoughts and ideas? These three skills, along with expressing these ideas in oral and written forms, are essential for all personal, professional, and academic pursuits, and are fundamental elements of writing.

Physical: Identifying and eliminating physical discomfort can decrease resistance to approaching the writing task. For example, does the student have a nice, welcoming, and comfortable place to write? If not, how can s/he create one? Is the desk the correct height? Is the chair comfortable? Is there sufficient light?

Environmental: Identifying and eliminating distractions can make the writing process more enjoyable and fruitful. These include noise, interruptions, and temperature.

Emotional: Students often are consumed by emotional issues in their lives, making it difficult for them to focus when they sit down to write. Identifying, listing, and writing about these issues can be cathartic and allow them to set the issues aside for a period of time so they can address their college assignments. They can return to addressing their personal issues at a later time.

Psychological: Some students have psychological blocks concerning writing. Perhaps a teacher or parent told them that they could not write. Perhaps other, more serious issues exist. Identifying and addressing these issues can eliminate many blocks to writing. Students can be encouraged to release any shame or embarrassment they might have about their writing skills. Everyone begins somewhere.

To overcome writer's block, students can

- recognize they have writer's block;
- identify their specific blocks and the reasons for them;
- articulate their blocks — write them down;
- find and develop specific strategies to address each cause of their writer's block;
- apply these strategies—a few at a time—to see which can work for them and to gain more comfort in, and enthusiasm for writing.

Instructors across all disciplines can help their students with writer's block in several ways:

- When assigning a paper, inform them of the resources available to help them through writer's block. The Delta College Library has put copies of the booklet on writer's block, titled "Yes, I Can—Write!!: Strategies for Overcoming Writer's Block and Writing Quality College Papers," in their collection.
- Encourage them to take their English courses early in their collegiate experience.
- Encourage them to read constantly.
- Encourage them to allow sufficient time for their courses and writing assignments by assessing their workloads on the job, in their courses, and regarding their other responsibilities.
- Encourage them to avoid academic shortcuts, including reading summaries only instead of the reading assigned, misusing the internet, and seeing courses as hoops merely to jump through.
- When assigning the paper, ask right then what they have concerns about as they begin their papers.
- When they hand in their papers, ask them what they struggled with and why.
- Use a portion of the class to discuss writer's block, including some of the most common causes and some suggested strategies.
- Remind them to come to your office for assistance when they get stuck.
- Share your own current writer's blocks or ones you have had in the past and how you have addressed them.
- Remind them that many of the challenges they face with their writing are part of the process.
- Remind them that improving and developing our writing is a lifelong process.
- Encourage them to try just one or two new strategies and see what happens to both the process and product of their writing.
- Encourage them to attend Writer's Block workshops.
- Keep the conversation about writer's block ongoing through the course.

The Writer's Block Project intersects with Students' Academic Experience to address their lack of confidence in, and resistance to writing; their poor academic performance; their heavy reliance on the ideas of others, including any propensity to mis-use the internet and plagiarize; and their attitudes toward, and experience in college. These are concerns, not only in English courses, but across the curriculum at all levels of instruction. And, as students improve their writing, their discussion skills also can improve, having had the time to identify and organize their thoughts and ideas.

However, if students understand that writing is a complex process that is best divided into stages, identify and address their personal writer's blocks, and apply strategies to their writing in all of their courses, their attitude toward writing, as well as their academic success will improve. In turn, instructors can move forward with greater ease in assigning substantive coursework focused on their individual disciplines.