



Writer's Block

Writer's block is a modern notion. It was little known by the early Romantic writers. In fact the term was coined in 1947 by Dr Edmund Bergler, a famous Austrian psychiatrist living in New York. Strange that it only seems to afflict writers. Imagine if you were a plumber and you called your boss saying, "I can't come in today. I have plumber's block." You'd be laughed off the phone and you'd likely be told never to come in again. No other profession accommodates block as an excuse to stop working, so we writers shouldn't either.

A better way of looking at it might be 'creative inhibition'. But even then that's just a catch-all for all manner of problems that probably have little do with your writing.

The first thing to remember is that writing doesn't just magically happen while you're staring at a blank screen or page, it's a process that starts as Chekhov tells us with, 'a captive thought'. Where that 'captive thought' or 'big idea' comes from is anyone's guess but you can't sit around and wait for it. You can, however plant a seed, divert your attention and wait for your subconscious to do the work. The trick is to be involved in some other activity other than writing. Play golf if you must as long as its mentally diverting.

Having that big idea but not being able to get it out is a different problem. When this happens you're looking for your writing voice and you can find that in any piece of your writing that you were particularly happy with. Read that piece, sometimes even a few lines and you will revive your voice.

Here are some solutions from experienced writers.

1) Find the right place to get through the difficulty

Comedian and writer Hari Kondabalu finds that the city of Seattle breaks him out of writer's block—though he's not at all shy about sharing how hard it is:

“Yes. It’s awful. It’s the worst feeling. It affects you in a couple ways because 1) You’re not turning out work that you’re excited by. 2) And the audience knows you don’t give a shit.

Luckily, I’ve been able to use Seattle to develop a lot of new material very quickly (for me) over the last couple of years. That’s a new phenomenon for me. Seattle tends to jog it out of me. I think it jogs it out of me because I have an audience who knows what I’m doing. They are supportive and let me play. Writer’s block is miserable and part of it can be just being in a really bad place. Sometimes if you’re just in a bad mental place, it doesn’t matter what work you put in. You have to fix bigger things than your writing.”

2) Have a writing commitment that forces it out of you

John Avlon not only serves as the Editor-in-Chief of The Daily Beast, but he also writes a column—a habit he says helps him get out of writing funks:

“I’m superstitious about writer’s block to the extent I don’t particularly feel like devoting a great deal of time to dwelling on it. It seems like getting stuck in a desert, a nightmare. But there are definitely times when the inspiration flows more freely than not. It seems to me that writing is a muscle: it gets stronger the more you use it. If you let yourself fall out of the habit, it can be hard to get back in form. Writing a regular column keeps you limber and sharp and guarantees that any fear of writer’s block is kept at bay.”

3) Go out and get physical

For author and marketing expert Ryan Holiday, writer's block is akin to "runner's block"—and the only way to beat both is to, well, attack. So how does he deal with writer's block when it happens?

“Beat it into submission. That’s the only way. How would you get rid of runner’s block? You go for a fucking run.”

4) Realise the problem may not be the writing, but the research

For Pulitzer-Prize and MacArthur Genius grant-winning historian Annette Gordon-Reed, when the writing gets too tough, it might mean that the research isn't fully baked. Her own reaction to writer's block isn't to muscle through it, but to ask if she's done all the pre-work she needs before pen can meet paper:

“When I have writer’s block it is because I have not done enough research or I have not thought hard enough about the subject about which I’m writing. That’s a

signal for me to go back to the archives or to go back into my thoughts and think through what it is I am supposed to be doing.”

5) Find the ending and work backwards

Ace interviewer and Esquire writer Cal Fussman had a ten-year war with writer's block for a single piece. When it finally broke, it was because he needed an ending—and because he was wrestling with demons bigger than the piece:

“One of the pieces I'm deeply proud to have written started with a paragraph that read: “This story needed an ending before it could find its first sentence. So please forgive me for delivering it ten years overdue.”

That ten years was a war with writer's block. I'd spent a couple of years learning about wine in order to become a sommelier for a night at Windows on the World atop the World Trade Center. It should have been a joyous piece. But soon after my night as sommelier, the hijacked planes smashed into the towers on 9/11. For years, I couldn't write about the experience. I could write other stories and books—but not a paragraph about Windows. On the sunniest day of summer the fact that I couldn't write that piece hung over me like a dark cloud.

I remember asking the chef Mario Batali if it were possible to write a story that balanced the fun I had discovering wine with the horror of 9/11. He slowly shook his head and said: “No. You'll never be able to do it.” Then he paused and added, “but you've got to.”

Took me ten years before it all came into focus and I could get it down right, and the story won a James Beard award. I've never been motivated by awards. But that one is special to me.”

6) Write through the block

Jeff Goins has made a living out of exploring the habits and lives of other writers, as well as writing several best-selling books of his own. He's seen it all when it comes to writer's block, and he boils it down to one word: fear. But the way to get around that fear isn't to avoid it, he says. It's to write through it—to treat the block as the path to finishing the piece itself:

“I think writer's block is a bad name for a number of real problems facing writers, most notably of which is fear. Typically when I feel blocked, I'm really afraid. And almost always, that's because my next step feels like a leap instead of just doing the next thing. If I feel stuck, I have to ask myself what am I really afraid of and is that really my next step? For example, if I'm working on a book and start to feel stuck, it's usually because I'm doubting myself, wondering what right I have to talk about this topic. Who am I? But that fear is misplaced. It's not the right time to worry about that. My job right now is to write the next 500 words, not worry what the critics will be saying a year from now.

A friend of mine who used to do long-distance running gave me some advice on dealing with pain as a writer. “What do you do about the cramps?” I asked. I was noticing they hit me in the gut usually at the three or four mile mark. I thought he'd have some great advice on how to avoid them altogether. In fact, I assumed

this was the case. His answer surprised me, though. “Cramps? What do I do? I keep running, and eventually they go away. I run through the cramps.”

What do I do when I feel blocked? I write through the block. That may sound ridiculous, but even when you’re blocked you can still write. Maybe it’s not the thing you wanted to write or what you you’re capable of writing. But you can type. So that’s what I do. Anything and everything. Sometimes, it makes sense. Sometimes, it’s total nonsense. But I push through the discomfort, so that I can keep going. Momentum is a writer’s friend.”

7) Remember, tomorrow is a new writing day.

Yes, all of us get stuck, but according to speechwriter and author Rob Goodman, the key is to go easy on yourself:

“Usually it looks like procrastination getting out of hand, when I spend way too much time reading useless things online rather than getting down to work. I imagine I’m especially prone to do this when I’m particularly anxious about whatever I’m working on that day—but it’s a recurring problem. The most important thing is not to unduly beat myself up about it, and to remember that I get to start each day with a clean slate.”

Graeme Greene’s Dream Journal

For anyone familiar with Greene’s prolific output, it’s hard to believe that he could ever suffer from writer’s block. But, in his fifties, that’s precisely what happened—he faced a creative “blockage,” as he called it, that prevented him from seeing the development of a story or even, at times, its start. The dream journal proved to be his saviour. Dream journaling was a very special type of writing, Greene believed. No one but you sees your dreams. No one can sue you for libel for writing them down. No one can fact-check you or object to a fanciful turn of events.

In the foreword to “A World of My Own,” a selection of dream-journal entries that Greene selected, Yvonne Cloetta, Greene’s mistress of many years, quotes Greene telling a friend, “If one can remember an entire dream, the result is a sense of entertainment sufficiently marked to give one the illusion of being catapulted into a different world. One finds oneself remote from one’s conscious preoccupations.” In that freedom from conscious anxiety, Greene found the freedom to do what he otherwise couldn’t: write.

In the last years of his life, Greene prepared the best of this curious document for publication, organising a quarter century of dreams into several overarching themes. Shortly after his death, it was released as ***A World of My Own: A Dream Diary*** a strange and wonderful book, which Greene considered a sort of “autobiography, beginning with Happiness and ending with Death, of a rather bizarre life.”

Greene recounts one particularly poignant dream:

On May 5, 1973, I had an awful experience I am thankful never occurred in the Common World. I had sent a love scene in a new novel to my secretary to make a draft, but her draft was full of gaps — that was only tiresome. What was awful was that as I read aloud to the woman I loved, I realised how false it was, how sentimental, how permissive in the wrong way. She too knew how bad it was and that made me angry. I threw it away. “How can I read it to you,” I demanded, “If you interrupt and criticize? It’s only a draft, after all.”

But I knew that the whole book was hopeless. I said, “If only I could die before the book is published. It’s got to be published to earn money for the family.” The thought of Russian roulette came to me. Had I recently bought a revolver or was that a dream? My mistress tried to comfort me but it only made things worse.

Greene tussles with the subject of love — which is “only a draft, after all” — in another dream: *I spent a sad summer evening in July 1965. I was engaged to be married to a girl whose mother detested me and longed to see the affair at the end. Harassed nerves caused a quarrel between me and the girl and her pride added its quota, while I pushed the quarrel to its extreme so that the girl broke with me and I accepted the break. The mother listened with satisfaction and then took the girl upstairs.*

I felt sad and guilty and I knew that my relief at this final solution would not last. A party was going on at the house and the mother reappeared with her daughter in her arms, small and shrunken and ready to vomit. The mother appealed to me to find something and I brought a vase into which the girl vomited. I felt pity and guilt and love too, and I realized for the first time how much she loved me and what I was losing.

Among the guests was the sculptor Henry Moore, and as I left the room I apologised to him for not having recognised him earlier, as I had been so preoccupied with my quarrel. I left the house and went for a walk with the girl’s brother. He was very sympathetic to both of us. We met her father, whom I had always liked, and appealed to him. “I am not such a rotten beast, am I?” He smiled to reassure me. When I got back to the house the girl was there, and everything was all right again between us.

In the final dream in the book, Greene revisits the subject of redemption in its ultimate extreme: *In this World of My Own I found myself writing a bit of verse for a competition in a magazine called Time and Tide, but, needless to say, the paper never received it. It was about my own death.*

From the room next door

The TV talks to me

Of sickness, nettlerash, and herbal tea.

My breath is folded up

Like sheets in lavender.

The end for me

Arrives like nursery tea.

Greene on his writing process:

Over twenty years I have probably averaged five hundred words a day for five days a week. I can produce a novel in a year, and that allows time for revision and the correction of the typescript. I have always been very methodical, and when my quota of work is done I break off, **even in the middle of a scene**. Every now and then during the morning's work I count what I have done and mark off the hundreds on my manuscript. No printer need make a careful cast-off of my work, for there on the front page is marked the figure — 83,764. When I was young not even a love affair would alter my schedule. A love affair had to begin after lunch, and however late I might be in getting to bed — as long as I slept in my own bed — I would read the morning's work over and sleep on it. ... So much of a novelist's writing, as I have said, takes place in the unconscious; in those depths the last word is written before the first word appears on paper. **We remember the details of our story, we do not invent them.**

