

Coping with Writer's Block



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Introduction

We all fear the blank page (or screen). Focusing on that looming deadline won't help, and, counterintuitively, neither does knowing what you want to say—every writer knows that knowing what you want to say and how you want to say it are two entirely different things.



Writer's block, unpleasant as it is, happens to all of us. I've created this ebooklet to give you practical ways of dealing with it when it happens to you.

Perfect Drafting

In my experience as a writer and a lecturer, perfect drafting is the primary cause of most writer's block. I wish it were as simple as saying, 'Don't perfect draft!'



What do I mean by *perfect drafting*? I'm referring to writers' tendency to confuse (consciously or not) the first and final drafts of their work. When you forget that the draft you're working on is just that, a *draft*, you put too much pressure on every word you type or write to be perfect.

Create a Visual Reminder

Something as simple as a sticky note on the edge of your monitor that reads, ‘It’s just a DRAFT!!’, can be a powerful writer’s block deterrent.



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We all know that the first step of creating a piece of writing is putting our ideas into words and putting those words on paper (or the screen). Too often, though, we forget just how messy that first stage usually is. You’ll be happier, and more productive, if you embrace the creative process, mess and all.

When a Note Isn't Enough

Still struggling despite your reminder? Try one (or more) of the following:

- Change your location. If you usually work at the desk in your office, try the sofa, a café, or a nice bench in the park. If you usually work in one of these more casual places, try your desk or a desk at the library.



- Change your method—i.e., if you usually type, try using pen and paper.
- If you can't drag yourself away from your computer, change the way the screen looks—use a font and colour you would never send to your publisher or lecturer.

- If you can touch type, open a blank document and turn your screen off while you type for a while. Try setting a timer and typing this way for 10 minutes. You'll be surprised by how freeing this is (you can't self-edit what you can't see). When you turn the screen back on, you'll likely find not only a few typos, but also some usable material.
- If you're really stuck and your anxiety is building, take more 'drastic' measures: revert to childhood. What does this mean? You need to find some unlined paper (preferably in a bright colour) and some crayons or coloured pens/pencils, take these materials to a comfortable spot (sitting room floor with a fluffy pillow, outside under a tree, etc.), and approach your task like a child approaches colouring.



- If you're struggling to concentrate because you've been working for *hours* (even if by *hours* you mean one hour), you need a short break (5-10 minutes). If you really have been working for several hours, take a longer break (30 minutes or so). Make a cup of tea, stretch, meditate, go for a walk, do the dishes, or take a shower—do something that doesn't require a lot of concentration, but does need some focus. This will take your mind off your work and you might find that whatever problem was keeping you from writing before your break becomes clear.

The methods I've listed above work by distracting you and making you think about your task in a different way. Changing where or how you're writing makes it easier to see your work as the work-in-progress it is, rather than as the polished copy you need it to be at the end of the process. Taking a walk or doing the dishes allows you to have a break while your brain keeps working on your problem in the background.

But It's Due Tomorrow!!!

If you've left your work until the last minute and have only days (or hours) before your deadline, these tips will be of limited use. Try to remember to start earlier next time and you'll have a more pleasant writing experience.

If you're working to a tight deadline, resist the urge to drink too much coffee. Stay hydrated and don't forget to eat reasonably balanced meals. You'd be surprised how much a glass of water and some fresh produce will help your concentration.

Happy Writing!



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