Writer’s Block: A Brief History and Potential Practices for Remedy

writer’s block: extreme difficulty or inability in producing writing; usually accompanied by feelings of anxiety, depression, and frustration; may result in ineffective, rushed, and insubstantial writing

The concepts of “writer’s block” and, more specifically, “writer’s anxiety” began with the Neoclassicist writers in the eighteenth century, sandwiched “between the Renaissance and our modern world of acute literary self-consciousness” (Leader 115). Due to growth in mass printing, an explosion in published writing, and an ever-increasing sensitivity to an author’s writing as existing in a context or “tradition,” a majority of writers of the time began to express thoughts of worthlessness and diminished ability and talent. According to one poet’s biographer, the writer is afflicted by “a vacillating bookish capacity to be over-impressed by his literary heroes, a tendency to revise too much, an inability to finish things” (Leader 120). Another potential factor in the growth of writer’s block and anxiety was the appearance of “formal” criticism of literature; instead of simply writing to an indistinct audience (hard enough as it is), authors became increasingly aware of critical voices whose only purpose was to comment upon the poets of the day, mostly in scathing comparison to greater “master” poets of the past.

Out of this eighteenth century, Neoclassicist tradition emerged the Romantics at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Instead of feeling pressured to mirror and perfect classical traditions and styles of writing, Romantic poets and writers professed to be more focused upon human interaction, emotion, and, in the case of Coleridge, the fantastic and surreal. However, in a very general sense, these poets were more deeply pressured by a concern with “natural genius, originality, [and] spontaneity” (Leader 126). Moreover, the writers of the nineteenth century seemed to express the belief that the talent and ability to write was a matter of uncontrollable inspiration and “possession”; as a result, writers believed themselves to be passive vessels for “the muses.” This only exacerbated feelings of worthlessness or talentlessness should inspiration not strike well and often. For poets such as Coleridge, Tennyson, Byron, and many others, images of lessened greatness, fragmentation, and anxiety seem to appear repeatedly in their work, thereby showing that, by the later part of the nineteenth century, writer’s block had become a cultural and social phenomenon.
In the twentieth century, the traditions of modernism and then postmodernism, as well as the prominent position of psychoanalytic practice and theory, have placed the mental convolutions and neuroses of writers at the very forefront of the writing process. For writers such as T.S. Eliot, all of the concerns of the Neoclassicists (tradition) and Romantics (genius and spontaneity) seem to swirl together and, paradoxically, mix with a dread that writing in and of itself may not have intrinsic value, that tradition and emotion had no place amid the horrors of the twentieth century; this particular dread can be seen clearly in the works of writers during and after the World Wars (Leader 143). Toward the end of the twentieth century, postmodernism and theory/culture wars shattered what was left of the “author” so completely that even writers outside of professional or academic composition circles have grown up and developed in a society and time in which the simple act of writing is undermined from the beginning by issues of validity, self-esteem, voice, audience, etc, etc.

Contemporary composition instructors and theorists seem to be conflicted in regards to writer’s block. On the one hand, some view the block as procrastination, laziness, or a fictional problem. On the other, academics are exploring not only the ways in which writers experience block but also the most effective strategies for analyzing individual cases and working through writer’s block and anxiety. For instance, Mike Rose writes in “Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer’s Block” that the source of block may come from the manner in which students cognitively approach writing assignments. Beverly Clark, in “On Blocking and Unblocking Sonja: A Case Study in Two Voices,” approaches the problem from a more emotional, psychological exploration in conjunction with one of her students; through a dialogue of sorts, they consider different factors in the student’s writing successes and frustrations.

Most important, though, is the recent trend in which contemporary theorists and educators in composition have been investigating different ways to effectively approach and combat writer’s block and anxiety issues; the most prominent of these include Peter Elbow’s ideas of talking through the paper, imagining a change in audience, and playing a role (“Overcoming Writer’s Block” 1). Freewriting, brainstorming, diagramming, physical exercise, and a change of setting or scenery have all been recommended as potential ways one can try to beat the block. Author Lisa Cohen suggests, among other things, that blocked or anxious writers should construct a “shitty draft,” a draft that pays no attention to grammar, mechanics, quality, structure, etc. She claims that this helps to relax the writing process by removing the overwhelming pressure of producing “good” writing every time one writes (Cohen 1).
Conversation, Listening and Validity for Beating the Block
Classroom Exercise

This exercise would be performed by students in preparation for their first drafts (academic or creative) of the semester. If successful, the exercise could then be repeated for each subsequent first draft of the semester. Students would have already met with the professor to finalize a topic. Each student would be paired with another chosen at random by the professor and each pair would sit apart, thereby intentionally breaking up any traditional sense of classroom structure. Students would then follow these instructions:

- **In turns,** state for your partner your paper topic and any ideas you may have thus far. The partner who is listening should take notes about the other’s topic, brainstorming, tangents, and any frustrations or successes that have occurred thus far in preparing to write.

- **Do not worry about rules, criticism, or structure.** Simply relate as much as possible about your topic and ideas in a “freespeaking” manner.

- **Once one partner has taken a turn speaking,** switch roles and repeat the process.

- **After twenty minutes,** the class will come back together and each partner will be required to tell the whole group a few of the details about the other partner’s topic, current ideas, frustrations and/or successes.

As students relate the information and ideas they received from their partners, the professor would write the comments on an overhead or on the blackboard. Either way, this step is crucial; based upon the sources I consulted on writer’s block and composition anxiety, universal recognition of one’s ideas (particularly on the part of the instructor) is an excellent way in which students can gain confidence in their thoughts and relating those thoughts in writing. Likewise, the act of having an uncritical sounding board in the form of another student and of the class as a whole at least once during the writing process can help to beat the block and anxiety by reaffirming the validity of individual student thought and struggle. Though not all the ideas related will be pertinent or of substance, the ability to freely think and talk (“freespeak” instead of “freewrite”) in conjunction with a peer group can be of great benefit, especially for students who already silently struggle with a lack of self-esteem or a sense of inability in regards to their writing and ideas.

**Potential Problems with this Exercise:** Students may not react productively to this manner of “unstructured” group work. Encourage them to focus primarily upon their paper topics and not stray too far into unconnected subjects. Remind them that, though no criticism is to be given, each partner must tell the class something about the other student’s ideas; this may prompt students to remain more focused upon the discussion at hand.
Annotated Bibliography


Through a sometimes disorienting dialogue, Clark and Wiedenhaupt consider in hindsight many of the latter’s problems while tackling undergraduate and graduate-level writing assignments. They explore the student’s relationships with her family, friends, her cultural background, and the manner in which deals with educators, critics, and tutors. This article may be less exact and scientific than the Mike Rose piece, but it presents a very human face to the problem of writer’s block and anxiety that one does not often see in composition studies.


A fun and functional website dedicated to providing advice concerning writer’s block: what it is, how one can tell if one is being affected, exercises for solving the problem, and useful anecdotes. This is not a professional or academic resource by any stretch of the imagination, but it does provide insight from an experience author. (And the homepage image is wonderful.)


The author thoroughly explores the historical, social, and psychological factors concerning writer’s block. His discussion of Freudian and Jungian theories concerning creativity and the writing process are particularly fascinating and unique; not many sources on this subject delved into the psychoanalytic heritage that comes along with writer’s block and anxiety and Leader’s discussion of Freud and Jung help to inform his later chapters. His historical overview of the cultural growth of the writer’s block phenomenon is essential when considering contemporary trends and contexts for block and he masterfully uses the cases of Wordsworth and Coleridge to illustrate his points.


This website is a resource guide based in an established academic university. It provides a variety of suggestions and exercises for coping with writer’s block and anxiety.
Though his discussion of algorithms and heuristics in regards to writing processes needs to be reviewed a few times before it can be comprehended, Rose showcases a very thorough study that explores a group of ten students and their writing. In short, five students exhibit flexible “rules” for writing and adapt on a regular basis, while the other five students exhibit inhibiting, set-in-stone systems for approaching writing. He effectively and considerately sums up his arguments and findings at the end of the article. As with the Clark article perhaps not utilizing enough scientific inquiry, Rose may disregard psychological and emotional factors to the articles disadvantage.