In Paul Theroux’s *Blinding Light* (2005) a blocked novelist forays into the Ecuadorian jungle in search of a hallucinogenic drug reputed to restore creativity. This it does, but with the unforeseen (and ironic) side effect of afflicting the user with temporary bouts of blindness. The novelist is now faced with a gambit, and must choose: writer’s block or sightlessness? Student writers also see themselves in a similar (but less punishing) double bind: One is either able to write and does so neurotically (writing as agony) or one has peace of mind and does not write. Clearly, creating conditions for easeful and effective student writing means using the classroom to overturn and reject this either-or conundrum.

Writer’s block presents interesting challenges for the process movement. Writing as a process (versus the product oriented model) implies that writing has to be viewed within the continuum of the writer, her dynamic growth and maturation over an extended period of time and in multiple contexts. Writer’s block represents the hampering and hindering of that process. Whereas a traditionalist perspective may mystify and reify the process of invention (i.e., writers having fickle Muses) and consequently offer very little by way of practical solutions to such deadlock, process writing adopts a more functional, fluid, and constructive approach.

Composition theory employs a number of frameworks to account for writer’s block. But many classroom strategies (freewriting, clustering, journaling, role-play) have a pedagogical value and flexibility of design regardless of their theoretical origin. In fact, writer’s block cannot be “cured” in every instance by a single universally applicable classroom practice. Different cases of blocked writing necessitate different, but adaptable, interventions.

Much significant work on writer’s block has occurred in cognitive theory. Mike Rose proposes a link between cognitive functioning and composition behaviors. He views writing as a type of problem solving and writer’s block as a dysfunctional attempt at going about a solution. Problem solving is framed by rules, algorithmic (absolute) and heuristic (adaptable). Rose identifies as the primary cause of blockage, the misassumption that writing involves algorithms. Blocked students studied by Rose tended to rely too heavily on unbending rules. Such over reliance ends up constraining or thwarting the smooth writing process—even though the rule may have inherent validity.

What if writer’s block goes deeper than cognition? Jensen and DiTeberio invoke Jungian personality types as determining composition behavior. John A. Daly sees a correlation between introspectiveness and writing anxiety. Peter Elbow does not share such deterministic views. But Elbow, in various writings, articulates a view of writing as a means of self-actualization. Writer’s block, therefore, is rooted in insecurity and negative feelings (and not necessarily or primarily on the level of cognition). In this respect, Elbow’s thought resembles psychoanalytic theory in that the role of unconscious processes is emphasized (though Elbow seems more concerned with anxiety than internal conflict).

A third conceptual framework is the social. Blockage could thus be an aspect of motivation. Students lack proper motivation because, according to Patricia Bizzell, “Students often complain that they have nothing to say, whereas “real-world” writers almost never do, precisely because real-world writers are writing for discourse communities in which they know their work can
matter, whereas students can see little purpose for their own attempts (“essais”) other than to get a grade” (Clark & Wiedenhaupt 71).

Although not within the domain of composition theory proper, I was impressed with Joan Acocella’s ideas on the cultural and historical sources of writer’s block. A critic for the New Yorker, Acocella posits two historical factors for the current pervasiveness of writer’s block in modern America, both located in the aftermath of the Second World War. One is the rise of psychoanalysis and the other is what she dubs American overreaching. As the artistic stakes grew more ambitious (i.e. the Great American Novel), stress levels increased. Anxiety (and even neurosis) over creativity was identified by critics such as Edmund Wilson as essential to the profile of the genius (witness Wilson’s 1945 collection of F. Scott Fitzgerald stories, Crack-Up). Acocella then invokes the philosopher Ian Hacking’s notion of “dynamic nominalism, meaning that once you invent a category... people will sort themselves into it, behave according to the description, and thus contrive new ways of being” (Acocella). Through dynamic nominalism and a trickle-down effect, the composition process has morphed into both an American cultural phenomenon and a painful and knotted ordeal. Acocella remarks that the French and the German have no term for writer’s block.

How do we as teachers repair the damage or at least ensure that students are better equipped with heuristic procedures? First, it seems that most everyone agrees that writing may not be by nature agonistic, but that doesn’t mean it must always be easy. Recognition that some degree of accommodation and struggle is part of the composing process is important. Rose recommends that teachers conduct interviews with their students about their personal writing history. Such an approach could be fruitfully partnered with a discussion of how writer’s block may be culturally constructed. Relating to writer’s block as a relatively modern cultural artifact could prove a source of comfort to students. Drawbacks of this procedure are its laboriousness and the fact that it does not occur in the classroom.

Most writing, admittedly, is done alone and outside the classroom; therefore, classroom practices should have ramifications outside the class. On the other hand, the classroom can be used to help students get “unglued.” A classroom can be a site of insecurity for many students, but it need not be that way. Social activities can be used to defuse individual student anxieties and consequently free up creative channels of imagination. A way to help students get past their anxiety is to have them temporarily detach themselves from their identity. This can be accomplished through performance exercises such as role-playing. Of course, some students find dramatic impersonation stressful. In that case, students can be paired together for peer-criticism. A student anxious about her writing could find the experience of being a listener therapeutic to both herself and her peer. She may even unconsciously unblock herself. These strategies to some degree are outcomes of Robert Zoellner’s foundational idea of “intermodal transfer” or students overcoming writing obstacles through speaking (Clark 87). Zoellner’s underlying contention is that students will have an easier time overcoming a communication block through the communicative mode they know best – namely, speaking. One drawback is that a classroom of extemporizing students can present communication challenges for the teacher.

Individual classroom practices such as freewriting, journaling, and idea clustering are helpful in encouraging spontaneous and improvised communication (a sense of victory over the feeling of inertia), building discipline, and clarifying tangled thoughts. Additionally, these strategies can serve the student outside the classroom. In sum, the effect of all these practices is to develop student self-confidence. We could then infer that writer’s block’s most distinguishing characteristic (aside from the inability to write) is a lack of students’ confidence in their own writing.
Annotated Bibliography: Writer’s Block


Acocella’s extended meditation on writer’s block is mostly literary, although she does refer to cognitive-behavior and biological frameworks. Her essay is fascinating for locating writer’s block as a cultural phenomenon. This has ultimate classroom relevance; many students operate under the assumption that writer’s block is universal.


A collaborative article daringly written in two voices, that of Sonja the struggling student writer and Clark, her academic mentor. Sonja would ultimately write her Honors Thesis on writer’s block, the very condition that had once vexed her. Clark, while not blocked, admits she was procrastinating on a book project – her essay with Sonja being one such diversion. Sonja’s predicament is that she fears the composing process. It is arduous for her and she has a hard time making choices. For her part, Clark is experiencing difficulty narrowing her book focus. One case concerns mental paralysis, the other frenetic intellectual agitation. The multi-vocality of the article shifts back and forth, Sonja’s personal reflections alternating with Clark’s academic writing.


Elbow’s seminal book on the writing process was iconoclastic when first published. The traditional framework of an orderly, systematic, and hierarchical composition map was overturned. Elbow claimed most writers, when they start writing, are unclear as to their ultimate intentions. It is not so simple as expressing onto paper a finished product that exists in the mind. In fact, the pressure-build of having to write like this causes writer’s block. Writer’s block consists of a cluster of negative associations such as anxiety and helplessness. Freewriting is a means of starting out on the wandering and twisting path of writing without a fixed plan. Writing is a tool for developing the self. Growth occurs through writing drafts and throughout the entire revision process. A group of peers subjecting each other’s multiple drafts to constructive criticism is what Elbow refers to as the “Teacherless Classroom.”


Rose tracks two populations of students: those who suffer from writer’s block and those who write relatively unblocked. In the former, he identifies a reluctance to abandon fixed rules of composition, even when they are proving detrimental to the writing process. Students may also interrupt the flow of writing with constant editing. Or they may misinterpret assignments, writing too narrowly than what’s prescribed. Unblocked students, on the other hand, have an intuitive sense that writing rules are meant to be rules of thumb. The ultimate criterion is what works for the writer under any given situation to preserve flow.

*On writer centered websites one occasionally encounters the putative medical term for writer’s block, “Muse Apnea.” I have been unable to locate this term in any medical dictionary.
Example Assignments
From 43 Folders

*Seeing as most everyone agrees writer’s block cannot be treated monolithically, what follows is a series of exercises to be utilized depending on need. Random use is also suggested.

- **Try freewriting** - Sit down and write *anything* for an arbitrary period of time—say, 10 minutes to start. Don’t stop, no matter what. Cover the monitor with a manila folder if you have to. Keep writing, even if you know what you’re typing is gibberish, full of misspellings, and grammatically psychopathic. Get your hand moving and your brain will think it’s writing.

- **Write the middle** - Stop whining over a perfect lead, and write the next part or the part after that. Write your *favorite* part. Write the cover letter or email you’ll send when it’s done.

**** Take A Break****

- **Make a pointless rule** - You can’t end sentences with words that begin with a vowel. Or you can’t have more than one word over eight letters in any paragraph. Limits create focus and change your perspective.

- **Work on the title** - Quickly make up five distinctly different titles. Meditate on them. What bugs you about the one you like *least*?

- **Write five words** - Literally. Put five completely random words on a piece of paper. Write five more words. Try a sentence. Could be about anything. A block ends when you start making words on a page.