

Writer's Block: It's Not What You Think

Wisdom and Inspiration · By Simon Townsend · 6 min read

You have mentioned not getting on with your intended article. Well, like you I have no magic answer. Not finishing a piece of writing you have already started is often because of fear - fear of being judged. When finished you will be judged first by me, your Tutor, and then when you submit to a publication, you'll be judged by the editor. And then there's "writer's block". How can you write, when you just can't get going . . . can't even get started? I have seen so much written about "writer's block" and sorry, but I think it's baloney. Do people talk about "laundry block" or "shopping block"? There are just times when all of us don't want to do the laundry or go to the supermarket. Or do exercise, or pay urgent bills or make that phone call or cut our toenails. We don't want to do it because . . . who cares? NO ONE CARES. You can analyse this baloney until you're 99, and you get no nearer the answer. In the end you just MUST do it. You do the washing, shopping, exercising and bill paying and so on simply because you must. Life is too short to figure out WHY you don't feel like doing it. Be like me. Refuse to recognise writer's block. I get writer's block, work block, unpleasant task block and every other block. Sometimes I'm tired, bored, afraid? No one wants to hear about why I DON'T want to do something. In the end, I must have clean clothes and short toenails. I just MUST do all these things. I must write, so I do. If it's not good, if it's not my best work, at least it's better than no work. "Just do it" is still life's most important phrase.

[If you feel you would like to read some motivational material, please ask me for the six pages on writer's block by Lisa Cohen. She believes writer's block is real but that it can be defeated fairly simply.

Meanwhile, here's something I found recently.]

The Myths of Writer's Block

by Bruce Holland Rogers

(Adapted from Word Work: Surviving and Thriving as a Writer (see below))

Claude Lvi-Strauss, the social anthropologist, believed that all myths are true and all versions of a myth are the 'true' version.

There's a reason that people tell conflicting stories about the volcano god -- did he marry the sea goddess, or did he marry the rain goddess? Both versions were told and re-told because the listeners sensed a truth in each.

Conflicting myths about "writer's block" both have zealous adherents.

One group of true believers insists that writer's block does not exist. If you feel stymied, they say, you can just put your head down and do the work anyway, and the block will go away. The other true believers are sure that writer's block does exist and that determination and hard work only make the block worse.

They are both right.

Here's some great news: the former camp is right more often. For most of us, most of the time, feeling stymied in our writing has a simple cause. It may be plain and simple inertia -- starting ANYTHING can be hard, whether it's an exercise plan or a short story. It may be a matter of appropriate awe -- a novel is so enormous when viewed from the first blank page. It may be a matter of conflicting priorities -- you can't start writing because of the long list of OTHER things you have to do today, or because you think your spouse is feeling neglected. Maybe the voices of the naysayers (the small- press editor who wrote that insulting rejection) or your own internal voices of doubt are louder than usual today.

Alternatively, you may have sold yourself on the romantic side of Writer's Block. It's so noble to suffer. When you suffer in a very public way, you get some of the glamour of art without all the risk.

So some writers dress in black, hang out at the cafe with their blocked friends, supporting one another's writing identity without writing word one.

In many of these cases, you can successfully work your way through the problem. Discipline will get you going again, and a jumpstart is all you need. Altering your emotional state can even make the discipline come easily.

But there are some versions of writer's block that are a bit more serious and don't respond as well to discipline. One is the result of "will power" coming smack against "won't power". This is what happens for some writers (some -- certainly not all) when they try to force their way across a blank page without much idea of where they are going or how they should proceed. They push themselves to come up with something then and there, and they are miserable the whole while.

Soon, such writers become habituated to misery. That is, every time they sit down at the writing desk, they remember what a miserable time they had during their last writing session, and a part of them quite reasonably refuses to go on.

The solution for such writers is to know what they are going to write about before they sit down to write. This doesn't mean that you abandon your regular writing sessions. It just means that instead of sitting at the desk in agony, you stand up, face away from the desk, and think about what to write until you come up with a direction.

The most serious writer's blocks, the ones that most defy discipline as a cure, are the blocks that arise from real and important conflicts.

Are suitcases piled beside the door, and are the Yellow Pages opened to the section listing ATTORNEYS -- MARITAL AND FAMILY LAW? If so, then putting your shoulder to the wheel and getting your four pages written anyway is hardly a wise move. If you try to do just that, is it surprising that you encounter more and more internal resistance?

Some writers are able to put their writing first no matter what else is going on in their lives. No compassion, concern or responsibility ever touches them -- the work is all that matters. They may believe that they have to live this way in order to be successful artists.

(Be careful what myths you choose.)

So, on occasion, a block points to serious problems. Something in the writer's life is not working. Perhaps the career path that offers the most external rewards no longer has anything to do with the writer's deepest desires. If you're paying the mortgage with TV scripts, but really want to be writing novels, the block may be an expression of the war you're waging against yourself.

That is, you really don't want to write scripts anymore, but it seems crazy to stop when you're paid so well. So you keep writing scripts ... only you don't. Some aspect of your creative self goes on strike.

These internal battles are serious stuff, whether the struggle is about career versus marriage, material success versus artistic satisfaction, or even one project you love versus another one. You can sometimes break the block temporarily by resolving to face the issue. "I'll finish writing for the current season, but, in the meantime, I'm going to figure out how I could adjust my life to allow for writing a novel next year."

Ultimately, creative blocks generated by a Big Issue need to be resolved, or the resistance will only grow.

In general, it's a good practice to initially treat all blocks as emotional noise, something you can work your way through. You can work under the assumption that writer's block is an imaginary beast, a beast you can banish by writing. At the same time, the rare work stoppages that you can't defeat with enthusiasm and discipline are almost certainly signals that something's amiss in your life, your work habits or your goals. In that case, you'd be wise to work under the assumption that writer's block is a real live monster that you ignore at your peril.

The Myths of Writer's Block is adapted from *Word Work: Surviving and Thriving as a Writer*, a book about meeting the psychological and practical challenges of a committed writing life. Stories by Bruce Holland Rogers have won Nebula Awards for science fiction and fantasy and a Pushcart Prize for literary fiction.

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