How to overcome writer’s block

Remember that you have an ongoing relationship with your writing, and as with any relationship, it’s not always going to be the same. Part of dealing with writer’s block, whatever has sparked it, is accepting that it is inevitable to have periods of downtime, periods when it’s just not happening.

It does help to think of writing as a regular job, and less of an art, dependent on certain magical conditions. Trollope, for example, urged writers to regard their work as “common work to the common labourer.” Steven King, another famously prolific author, uses the metaphor of a toolbox to talk about writing, intentionally linking it to physical work. If we think of ourselves as labourers, as craftsmen, it’s easier to sit down and write. We’re just putting words on the page, after all, one beside another, as a bricklayer puts down bricks. At the end of the day, we’re just creating things – assignments, reports, critiques -- only we use vocabulary and grammar instead of bricks and mortar.

Just as the reasons for writer’s block vary, there is also more than one way to deal with it. The list below is far from complete: take it as a list of suggestions, things that have worked for some people, at some point in their writing careers. Trying new things will at least shake things up, which is the first step toward breaking out of your block.

1. Have a schedule, and stick to it.
If your body shows up to the page at the same time and place every day, eventually your mind will know to do the same. Graham Greene famously wrote 500 words, and only 500 words, every morning. Five hundred words is only about a page, but with those mere 500 words per day, Greene wrote and published over 30 books.

2. Don’t be too hard on yourself.
In fact, don’t be hard on yourself at all while writing. Anna Quindlin wrote, “People have writer’s block not because they can’t write, but because they despair of writing eloquently.” Turn the critical brain off. There is a time and place for criticism: it’s called editing.

3. Don’t panic.
If fear is the basis for your writer’s block, panicking will only make matters worse. Again, having some kind of schedule can help eliminate anxiety. The less you have to think about what you’re doing, the better. I know a writer who goes to her desk immediately upon waking up. She says that this way, by the time she really wakes up and remembers that she’s afraid, she’s already writing. Sometimes you have to play games with yourself to circumvent your fear. Try different approaches and see what works for you.

4. Take time off
If you’ve been writing steadily for a long time, or have just finished a project, it could be your mind needs time to gestate. Idleness can be a key part of the creative process. Give yourself time to gather new experiences and new ideas, from life, reading, or other forms of art, before you start again.

5. Set deadlines and keep them.
Many writers, understandably, have trouble doing this on their own. You might find a writing partner and agree to hold each other to deadlines in an encouraging, non-critical way. Knowing that someone else is expecting results helps many writers produce material. Writing groups or classes are another good way to jump-start a writing routine.

6. Examine any deep-seated issues
That may be keeping you from writing. Write about your anxieties regarding writing or creativity. Talk to a friend, preferably one who is also a student. A number of books, such as "The Artist’s Way," are...
designed to help creative people explore the root causes of their blocks. If the block continues, you might seek counselling.

Other strategies for getting over writer's block

If you have tried the other strategies and are still having problems, try some of these general techniques for getting over writer's block. These strategies will prove more helpful when you're drafting your writing.

1. Begin in the middle
Start writing at whatever point you like. If you want to begin in the middle, fine. Leave the introduction or first section until later. The reader will never know that you wrote the paper 'backwards.' Besides, some writers routinely save the introduction until later when they have a clearer idea of what the main idea and purpose of the piece will be.

2. Talk out the paper
Talking feels less artificial than writing to some people. Talk about what you want to write to someone—your teacher, a friend, a roommate, or a tutor. Just pick someone who's willing to give you fifteen to thirty minutes to talk about the topic and whose main aim is to help you start writing. Have the person take notes while you talk or tape your conversation. Talking will be helpful because you'll probably be more natural and spontaneous in speech than in writing. Your listener can ask questions and guide you as you speak, and you'll be more likely to relax and say something unpredictable than if that you were sitting and forcing yourself to write.

3. Tape the Paper
Talk into a tape recorder, imagining your audience sitting in front of you. Then, transcribe the tape-recorded material. You'll at least have some ideas written down to work with and move around.

4. Change the Audience
Pretend that you're writing to a child, to a close friend, to a parent, to a person who sharply disagrees with you, or to someone who's new to the subject and needs to have you explain your paper's topic slowly and clearly. Changing the audience can clarify your purpose and can also make you feel more comfortable and help you write more easily.

5. Play a Role
Pretend you are someone else writing the paper. For instance, if you have been asked to write about sexist advertising, assume you are the president of the National Organization of Women. Or, pretend you are the president of a major oil company asked to defend the high price of oil. Consider being someone in another time period, or someone with a wildly different perspective from your own. Pulling yourself out of your usual perspective can help you see things that are otherwise invisible or difficult to articulate, and your writing will be stronger for it.

(Many of these ideas are from Peter Elbow's Writing with Power, [Ch. 8; 59-77] and Mack Skjei's Overcoming Writing Blocks.)