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WRITER'S BLOCK GUIDE
5th Edition

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1.0 Foreword

Writer's block is a problem that has a root cause. This cause can evade identification. Often it is a lack of information, a lack of detail or a lack of belief in the character or situation. You can also be left barren to writing motivation through over flexing your writing muscles or being out of discipline.

Unlike a more structured technical document, writing a novel leads the writer to be explorative in their approach. If you don't enjoy plotting and are more of a 'pantser', a person who writes on the fly by the seat of their pants, it is far more likely that you will encounter Writer's block.

In order to combat Writer's Block it pays to know what it is.

1.1 What is Writer's Block?

Writer's block is the common symptom of not being able to commit words to paper, or in our more technological age, words to white screen. Like an illness, writer's block can be cured with the necessary action but it is a situation that can be difficult to overcome.

Wikipedia notes this condition as:

"... primarily associated with writing, in which an author loses the ability to produce new work or experiences a creative slowdown. The condition ranges in difficulty from coming up with original ideas to being unable to produce a work for years."

A common issue in part related to the trouble of Writer's block is Blank Page Syndrome.

"It can happen to a writer at any point in time, irrespective of their career success. This syndrome can be very irksome to authors and often leads to a long span of time where they cannot come up with anything new."

Even if you haven't yet developed symptoms it pays to add some techniques to your arsenal that should prevent the affects later.

1.2 Writer's Block is not...

Writer's block can be misdiagnosed, which in itself can be a problem.

- It is not stuck, it is more liked jammed

You can take a few actions to get started again when you are stuck. When you are jammed it is going to be a hard job. This guide will try to help you. You should not try to diagnose yourself with Writer's Block because what you might consider to be a block someone else may consider a mild imposition that can be corrected with a few steps.

1.3 Why is writing hard?

Writing takes brain power. You need to be in a good mental state. The narrative is rolling in your head and as your world begins to develop you will have ever more detail rattling around in your brain. It can become difficult if you don't have a photographic memory, to remember all of the fine detail. It is easy to forget or misconstrue the correct actions or the correct order in which those actions should take place.

The process of interpreting your thoughts is difficult. There are some people who struggle more than others with putting words down on the paper or screen. Expression of your thoughts is unique, you may leave out details that other people find important. You may know exactly where the story is going but haven't written it correctly.

1.4 A side note on externalities

I was challenged in the 3rd edition on the fact that this guide doesn't make big reference to externalities. An externality is business-speak for an external factor, which for "writing block" context is an environmental force that prevents the writer from getting the job done.

The **Tackling Distraction** section covers externalities in some detail. I don't agree that externalities rest at the core of the problem of Writer's Block.

It is you, the writer, which is the root cause of the block in 99% of all cases. You are either the cause through action you have taken or lack of action. You are an agent of action.

Mood can certainly have an effect on your output. Often to write you need to be in the right mood. Externalities as mentioned in **Tackling Distraction** do play into this mood set. As an agent in your own success you have to be professional about the process of writing. If you plan to succeed you have to forego blaming externalities for your blank page and pull up your breaches.

1.5 Differentiating blocks from a short term inconvenience

You have to be careful in what you classify as a block. Often you might have just hit a slight inconvenience which you can remedy by a simple change. Empowering a “block mentality” may force the block further. You should never get into the habit of rewarding bad behaviour, especially when you perpetuate that bad behaviour.

- Don't empower the block
- Don't reward bad behaviour

1.6 Definitions

There are two important definitions you need to understand before reading on.

- **'Pantser'** – In this context a writer who flies by the seat of their pants
- **'Plotter'** – A writer who plots every element before filling in the meat of the book

As a side note, the dictionary doesn't like the word Pantser. The word was new to me until I came across it in 2015.

You can be both of the terms above as they are not mutually exclusive but most individuals fall into one camp more than the other. The middle of the gauge is termed a 'Plantser'.

1.7 Bad habits that can lead to Writer's Block

There are some bad habits that can lead to a lack of forward momentum.

1.7.1 Lack of discipline

Without discipline, making your writing a habit and taking the time to sit down and think proactively, you are likely to invite blocks. Writing can meet difficult turning points but you need to battle it out.

Discipline is not something that you can magic up on your first gig. It takes time to develop the disciplined approach.

1.7.2 Blowing it out of proportion

Inflating or exacerbating the size and depth of the problem will never get you to your end goal.

Breaking your issue down into smaller steps can help you in the long run.

Sometimes your block's root cause is you being a 'Drama Queen'. If you were to think of it as a temporary setback your positive frame of mind might carry you over the goal post.

1.7.3 Actualising the block

Giving your pause the name Writer's Block will enforce you to feel and think a certain way leading you to plough deeper into the destructive act than if you'd just battled on. Giving any negative thoughts a name or a foothold will eventually derail you. Talking something down will often end in that negative outcome.

1.7.4 Leaving less time to be creative

Trying to squeeze your creativity into the last knockings will not work. If you don't pace yourself and use every day before your rigid deadline, this can spell disaster.

You can't cram on writing a book. It simply takes too long.

1.7.5 Following destructive conventions

Writing something as long as a novel is a construction project but without the support beams, cinder blocks and concrete. In creating your work you need to think about the constructive elements that go into making what you write a great read which means you need to develop your own style of winning conventions. If you are not killing it, you haven't thought enough about the construction.

Construction pieces include hooks and twists.

1.7.6 Forgetting the dynamics of your world and characters

No matter whether you have written fiction, science fiction or fantasy, you have created a world and characters that act in that world. If you forget that they have Newtonian outputs on the world about them, you will be in danger of writing a lifeless bore. It's all about the ripple in the pond.

1.7.7 Concentrating too far into the future of your work

If you've ever been working hard on a high-school or college assignment you'll get the urge to look at the end goal and become fixated on the finish rather than the process to get there. The same is true for writing a novel. You'll be thinking about the promotion, the cover and the virtual money in your bank account long before arriving at finishing the first draft (not even the final draft).

1.8 How can Writer's Block manifest?

I believe these to be the four major triggers to Writer's block:-

1.8.1 Boredom

Being the creative types we are, one story can get boring after time, we get bored of writing for the same characters, but in varying situations, and so can get hung up on the similar patterns we follow daily. This state of mind can lead us to diverge into something completely different, derailing us from the completion train entirely.

Boredom is not the friend of routine.

1.8.2 Complexity

Complex is the inverse of simple. Your story in its infancy will start out simple, as the plot grows thicker, will complicate.

The complex storylines you might try and navigate are taxing to keep up with and might leave you scratching your head when figuring out how to move on. It's all about keeping the thread whilst making progress on the story. In the start the story is an easy one to keep track of but as we start weaving more intricacy into the plot and add weight to the characters, the juggling act becomes harder.

1.8.3 Demotivation

A cousin to Boredom is the act of demotivation. Many writers seek short term reward. In those projects that take months to complete we may be moved to feel unmotivated by our long term goal if we see no fruit. The truth is that harvesting fruit from a novel takes a long period. It is just a process that cannot be shortcut. Of course over time we develop better methods at being efficient in our writing but ultimately we still have to write. Writing is a form of work.

Negative reflection is the most endangering activity when trying to stay on the writing rails. We can be wounded in our goal by the smallest notion. Often by talking to negatively charged individuals we can be swayed from our goal. It leads to the 'slump'.

1.8.4 Distraction

Distraction is the most common form of Writer's block. This is why it is often better to write on a computer with no connection to the internet and basic features than have small interactions. The environment where you write can provide distractions in the form of sounds, lights and smells. Distractions can come from your state of wellbeing, your physical health and other contributory factors. With so many sources of distraction this is likely to be your biggest battle.

The four major negatives are not mutually exclusive. You could suffer a number of these negatives simultaneously or all of them in a varying degree.

2.0 How can I tackle these negatives?

There are some coping mechanisms for all of the major triggers. You may find that some of these triggers merge at points and crossover.

2.1 Tackling Bored

You need a mechanism with boredom to tackle then refocus yourself. It needs to be a reflex action. There are a number of simple games you can play to get yourself back into the driving seat.

2.1.1 Pick a character and take them on a small journey

This can be a great way of refocusing. You aren't obligated to use the result it can just be helpful to get back into focus.

You should already have a list of characters and you may have a main protagonist or antagonist. You simply take them along a trip and experiment with how they react.

2.1.2 Write a little bit of backstory

This could be for a character or an event. It could be something that won't be included in the book you are writing.

Note: It is important that the target is a character from the book because if you start to drift into writing 'anything' you stand the risk of diverging.

2.1.3 Write an idea for the sequel

What happens in the bigger picture? Even if you don't intend to make this a series, think what might happen next. You never know, this part you wrote might be important to include later.

A cursory note on divergence

I have in past been a chronic serial non finisher and if you write a breakaway piece this can happen to you. Divergence is more common for a 'Pantser' style of writer who is not bound by rigid plot points.

The temptation to write another novel can be destructive to finishing your first. I don't recommend you focus on more than one writing project at a time, the only exception is where you are looking ahead at sequels within the same series and are considering prospective placement, even then you have to keep in mind your main goal.

At time of writing this I am working on a series, due to pauses and issues along the way, I've started on elements of the next 3 books in the series. I have also dipped into another non-related novel on rare occasions. I do recommend not diverging into different genres.

2.2 Tackling Complexity

Simplifying is the obvious answer. If you break down your work into more bite-sized elements you can come through it more easily.

There is an old saying that goes "How do you eat an elephant?" The simple answer is one bite at a time.

2.2.1 Skip Forwards

You might not have something well formed in your head at the time so simply skip it but write a basic placeholder comment of what you want. You can then come back and improve on this area when you perform a later edit.

Certain manuscript writing software often uses fragments to assist writers in spitballing ideas.

Placeholder comments can consist of the following:

<Take Zirdam to the Moon>

<John takes the torturous route>

Note: I use this method a lot because it helps me keep momentum. When you are in the mood for writing but you reach speed bumps, it is often better to carry on. A good example is taking a mathematics exam at school. When you receive the paper the best thing to do is read all of the questions first and strategise those you can answer the quickest. Often you get marks for your working out.

2.2.2 Return to Skips

Returning to skipped sections is rewarding because the solution may reveal the answers that have led you to be blocked in the first place.

Completing the areas you skipped also may give you a small win which can really help boost your motivation. If you still don't have the motivation to tackle a skip, find one you can complete.

2.2.3 Delete

Although it could be a very painful step, deletion could provide solace

Simply remove the situation that is blocking you and step back a distance to see how you can better approach the situation. A plotter would add more sub plot points to organise this better. If you are a 'pantser', you'll have to get creative. Sometimes there are more than just the binary paths to get to a point. Have you thought about path 3, 4 or 5?

2.2.4 Exploring an Alternative

In the current form, your plot may not work. If you peel it back to a step where you are happy then explore an alternative scenario, this might help you move on.

Scenarios can be useful for deciding on a direction. There is often more than one path to a goal.

You are likely to have some critical paths. A critical path is an event that is not up for change, you can't work around it as it has to be integrated. If you work out what the critical path is and whether it has any effect on your scenario, you should be able to make a decision on a way forwards.

2.3 Tackling Demotivation

Demotivation is a crippling problem because it can put you in a malaise about everything you are doing. If you have tendencies to be depressive, been under a fugue or have otherwise been preoccupied by the pitfalls of living, writing may not be your first priority.

Demotivation has effect on everything, you might not even be living right so how can you dedicate time to getting on with your writing project?

[How do I make writing my first priority?](#)

Here are a few ideas to explore.

2.3.1 Time Management and Time Imperatives

When you are at work, time helps shape your day. There is no reason why writing in your spare time or as a full time activity shouldn't be structured the same. Setting aside time blocks can often be more forthcoming but there is a contradiction to this.

Depending on your level of operational motivation, your view will get shorter as you become more bent up in your block. You should start out small, and as you find your feet, adjust for longer.

2.3.1.1 The 10 Minute Teaser

10 minutes is no time in the scheme of things. Adding a time imperative to your writing can be a good kick-start for at the very least you have spent 10 minutes on the activity.

- Prepare yourself.
- Set a timer for 10 minutes.
- If you failed to go anywhere in 10 minutes, rinse and repeat.

Note: obviously if you are suffering Writer's block, this may be harder than normal but often time imperatives stir action. Experiment with the times of day that you write.

2.3.1.2 The 50 Minute Writing Workout

The 50 minute challenge is quite different to the 10 minute teaser. You've got a whole lot longer to play with the dimensions.

There is plenty of scope and you already know the topic.

The aim is to write between 900 – 1200 words. It doesn't matter how cohesive, how grammatically correct or how important the words are in the whole but the aim is to reach the word count target.

Why 50 minutes?

50 minutes under certain scientific studies has been highlighted as the longest time you can have solid concentration on any one topic before drifting off. It might not be your optimum time but it is a good place to start.

What you can do:

Plot for the first 10 minutes, write for the next 40. The time imperative and the goal should drive you to a completion. If you failed the target but still managed to write something you've had a successful recovery.

2.3.1.3 The Week Target

Can't tie yourself down daily? Sometimes it is better not to try but to commit a goal to be completed by the end of the week.

First off you need a target.

Novella Scenario:

Say you had a novella size in mind. Your word goal to make a decent read is around 80,000 words. Your deadline to get this book done; 1 year, 3 months and a third or 69 weeks, 2 days, 8 hours.

*You would have to write **1154.4** words per week on average to reach this goal. There are 7 days a week so if you write **165** words per day you will easily hit this target.*

The workman's load

The minimum you can offer that would meaningfully complete your book by x date if you were to complete this amount on a regular basis.

Factoring for uncontrollable events

No one has 100% uptime. You can't be 100% efficient. You will need to do things that take you away from your goal. When setting a goal you always have to factor for slippage. The more aggressive your goal, the less likely you are to achieve it.

2.3.1.4 Disregarding Time

The inverse and contradictory to my other points is to disregard time altogether. If that has been an element stressing your writing progression, loosening up on time commitments is an option. Go with the flow for a week.

2.3.1.5 Determine Your Best Time to Write

Consistency often helps when you are performing an action for a long period of time. Finding a good time to write may not always mean it is an everyday event. You may have a schedule that doesn't interact well on certain crunch days.

Stephen King used to work a day job and perform a lot of his writing during the night. It worked for him and eventually he was able to incorporate his writing into a healthier routine.

Are you an 'early bird' or a 'night owl'?

Early birds benefit from getting up early to write an hour or two before work. Conversely night owls prefer working into the night.

Note: I tend to find my thoughts settle between 10PM – 1AM so I would fit in the Night Owl bracket. If you feel fresher in the morning then you know you are an Early Bird.

2.3.1.6 Nibbling

Not of one's ear but of a long term writing project. Nibbling is simple just taking a short stab every so often. Mice nibble at food stores in order to conserve their food and ration themselves.

Anecdotally, I used to live near woods when I was younger and we were often invaded by mice getting into our cupboards. One group of mice had systematically eaten half a large Christmas cake. It is amazing what you can achieve over time.

Rather than focusing on your word count, just continue the story.

2.3.1.7 Goal Rewards

Rewards always provide great motivation. Many writers don't have big bank balances to do this but you don't have to reward yourself with material things. A nice experience or a day off can be just as welcome.

2.3.2 Read Back Your Work

Read your own work and see how far you have come. I'm making the assumption that you aren't blocked right at the start so there is a fair amount of content to make you happy. If you are gummed up at the start, you need more research first.

2.3.2.1 Read Your Work Aloud

Not only is this a good editing tip, it also helps you think about the dialogue and how a reader might be reading your words. In my first novel I read the first 3 chapters aloud to my girlfriend (who by the way is not a big fan of Sci-Fi), I got some good feedback which gave me ideas for later chapters as well.

2.3.2.2 Put Yourself in the Slippers of Your Ideal Reader

When writing it is useful to have some idea of what your ideal target reader is. When you read back your work, you should evaluate if that ideal reader is entertained or not.

2.3.3 Share the Load

Caring and sharing your load can be helpful for an alternative perspective. I would note that there are some upsides and downsides to sharing.

Note: I've seen counter arguments that you shouldn't share your work early, that you should protect your work in a bubble and soldier on until the Beta reading stage. I don't hold to that personally. This guide, as an example, was released in a much smaller form, far less explored and fleshed out but when you get good feedback you can develop ideas further. I would say that you have to trust the person you are sharing with.

Warning: *You should ensure that your work will safely be evaluated, stored and respected.*

2.3.3.1 Release a Chapter or Act

Release a portion of your draft to someone to read, get some feedback. You will want to seek out an audience's feedback at some point. Why not share it now?

2.3.3.2 Release an Entire Draft

Normally you would reach a point in your draft process where you would reach the "Beta Reader" stage naturally. In some cases you may need to accelerate this process if you are truly stuck.

2.3.4 Discuss

Join a writer's group and ask for some help. Soundboard what you have tried to do, it should help energise you. Ultimately whilst it is satisfying to write a book that ticks your boxes, this book is for others to read, you want their dough.

You are not just writing for yourself. Self-Indulgence is common in writing, we write about what interests us as the writer. Even Dan Brown has to have some interest in what he is going to research.

2.4 Tackling Distraction

This is perhaps the hardest negative to overcome as distractions are both diverse and constant in your life so I have gone into more detail below.

Controlling your environment is key!

Have a clean writing surface that is distraction free. It works wonders.

2.4.1 Noise

Sound plays a part in distraction as the audible sense is something you don't tend to turn off until night time (unless you have the benefit of being deaf or hard of hearing). Like goldilocks, you can have too little or too much.

MINIMISE

Reduce noise disturbance. Some people do prefer to write to music but be sure that it isn't too loud and doesn't contain too many lyrics. Lyrics may tempt you to sing-a-long which will ultimately distract you from writing. I would recommend something classical or mellow.

PRE-EMPT

Let people know that you are on your writing time. If you have children, they need to be quiet whilst you are writing. If you are lucky enough to have an office, place a do not disturb sign on the door handle or in a place visible to others. Enforce a ground rule that you need some uninterrupted time. An even simpler method to escaping distraction is to remove yourself from the distractors. Find a quiet place nobody will find you.

- **Fun tip.** Don't want to get disturbed but want to stay alert? Put headphones on but don't have music playing. Some noise cancelling headphones work even when no music is playing through them.

LEARN TO WORK WITH IT

Deal with sound head on by getting yourself into the correct mood. If you've ever sat on a production line or behind a desk at a noisy office, you develop ways to zone out of the distraction because eventually those distractions become part of the woodwork.

WHITE NOISE

Sometimes a lack of suitable background noise can be as bad as having no noise at all. Depending on the kind of person you are, you may benefit from a white noise generator, a radio station or a busy coffee shop.

IN THE MOOD

Certain play lists or certain styles of music may prepare you better for what you are writing about. If you've reached a romantic element of your story then maybe Barry White's dulcet tones might suit?

2.4.2 Light and visual stimuli

LIGHT LEVELS

Make sure that your light levels are as natural as possible and don't shine directly on the medium you are writing on. Avoid or switch off pulsing or flashing lights, minimise strip lights and fluorescents.

DARK ROOMS

If writing in a dark room like a basement or interior room with no windows, ensure that you take 'light' breaks every 50 minutes otherwise you can screw with your internal chemical clock and feel unwell.

EYE STRAIN

Make sure that your screen isn't being bombarded with too much sunlight as eye strain is a writer's foe.

COLOURS

You could experiment with different colours of light, does green, amber or red light change how you work?

ENVIRONMENTAL DECOR

Sometimes the surrounding décor can be off-putting, if you work in a very pink room or a bright sunshine yellow room, this might not have the right effect on your writing. Try to go neutral if you can or if you find neutral doesn't work well for you, go coloured.

MONOCHROME vs COLOUR

White and black aren't always the most conducive writing colours. Sometimes it is more enabling to change the background colour and font colour that you are writing with. There are a number of more effective colour swaps that can help such as blue backgrounds with white text. This configuration was commonly used with very early programming because white text on black became distracting.

I find that a light blue or light purple background can be soothing for the writing process but you might find other colours produce different stimuli in different ways.

FONT

Font styles can vary your ability as well. If you prefer Serif to Sans Serif, change it up. If you prefer writing with bigger sized or smaller fonts, change it up. You can always leave it to the edit stage to clean up.

CLUTTER

An untidy working environment can be a problem for writers for two reasons;

1. You are tempted to clean the mess and less likely to tackle the problem.
2. You are not invited to begin writing because your surroundings are messy.

Tidying up your working area and finding ways to organise the area you work in to be cleaner can help.

Conversely clutter can be a tool for a writer. You have to decide which one works better for you.

2.4.3 Smell

REMOVE

Make sure the room you are working in is clean and sanitary. That mouldy gym bag, banana skin, or putrefying pizza from last fortnight in the corner may not help your concentration. Have a shower, make sure you are fresh under the arms.

ADD

Sometimes some burning incense or a nice lemon scent in the air can help. Try experimenting. The idea of aromas in novels adds to the dimension of the world you have built. These scents can be pungent or pleasant.

2.4.4 Electrical Impulse

SWITCH OFF

Park your mobile phone or tablet out of hand's reach. You need to be disciplined in order to focus so these distraction aids certainly won't help you in the long run. There is some research that electrical interference from switched on devices can also disrupt your cognitive abilities so you may want to think about powering down. Mobile phones generate **carrier waves** which some particularly sensitive Humans can pick up on (the way you can tell a phone will ring before it starts).

3.0 Basic tips to get you kick-started into writing

Ditch your electronics and head back to paper

Pre computer age people were using paper and pen or paper and pencil to accomplish their drafts. Many then began to opt for type writers and word processors. Because manual writing requires concentration you are more likely to think it through on a piece of paper because there is an annoyance involved in rewriting. This is why many exams still involve a written element where you sit at a desk and pour out your brain. Sitting at a blank computer screen may not be conducive to initial thoughts so have a pad and pen handy.

I'm not suggesting you have to go purist and return to a type writer. Some authors do this to aid them in a cognitive kickstart. If you have to think about how you are going to lay down something on paper, and want to avoid the correction fluid, you are more inclined to get it right.

Brain storm

A brain storm can be your friend because you are not trying to write complex sentences, just a word or two at most per thought. The storm can be as big or as small as you want.

Use post it notes to plan

Many authors may storyboard using post it notes. All you need is a clean surface, a few different coloured post it notes and a pen. You then start placing info down as quickly or as slowly as you can until you've been able to organise it into an effective strategy. This is okay for most types of written work but you may find for some more creative pieces being too strategic doesn't allow you to be as creative in the end.

Image Map

Creating an image map is something akin to what a stalker might do. This is your story shrine, a place where you gather images to spark thoughts and emotions. Humans respond better to visual clues in stories. As you are building a rich picture for your audience in your writing it makes sense to use images to help shape ideas for you.

Character Cards

Creating character cards can be useful, not only for planning, but for playing a game. All you need to do is mark an index card with the name of the character and some minor details. You can then arrange them to create interesting stories.

Read through your current work

Obviously you passively read your work at small chunks but you may not often read it all the way through before you've reached the end of a first draft. If you are suffering from Writer's block, reading instead may activate your creative centre but you are bound to find little problems along the way which you can adjust or embellish. You may not advance the story but you might help the word count swell. There might be a loose end or a poorly envisaged plot change that you didn't consider thoroughly and through amending it you allow the story to motor again.

If you have writer's block at the start of a project then you need to plan more effectively. If you come to a halt part way through the first draft then try re-reading.

As I mentioned in the foreword, it isn't always the area you are stuck on that is the root cause of your block. It might be that a character or situation hasn't been thought through in enough detail or simply doesn't work.

3.1 Advanced ways of overcoming your block

If the small things didn't work there is plenty more you can do to avoid the dreaded WB.

Writing Backwards from the Ending

Writing backwards from the ending can be a way to overcome a road bump in the path to success.

Step 1: Write the ending

There are a number of reasons you may choose to write from the end backwards.

- 1) When you reach about half way on your novel and then start to wonder about ending your book, start writing the ending, or as close an approximation to the ending as you can make. It gives you a goal and knowing how to conclude may leave you a good path to lead to. You don't have to steer to this ending but having one in mind gives you a goal.
- 2) Some authors write an ending first before committing to the writing of a book or series of books. If you know the goal it is simpler to work up to it rather than end abruptly in 'nowhereville'. Clichés are the worst, so by thinking on a less obvious ending, you might reward your reader in a better way.
- 3) It may seem more logical to approach the topic laterally. A lot of the fun of getting to the destination is the journey.

Write the ending. It doesn't have to be fleshed out but it must conclude the main aim. End of a war, end of the journey, that sloppy kiss. You will be coming back to this ending later to improve upon it as you move to tie off some loose ends. The ending can have a whole draft cycle dedicated to it because at the end of the day you are the boss.

Step 2: Start backwards at logical jumps

You want a big focus point to target in the form of a noteworthy event. You write forwards up to the event and start filling in the story from the back.

I have used this technique in my first WIP novel. Phasing backwards from the end can be useful if you've lost a little of the motivation mojo because sometimes it is more interesting to present something without knowing quite how you reached that position. The element of mystery is preserved and as a writer you have to enjoy what you are writing.

Step 3: Don't go too heavy on the detail

You might decide on reflection that you need to tweak major points to make them all fit so it's best not to commit to any element so deeply that you can't change it later. Getting sentimental can lead to your writer's block so be warned!

Some major events can happen such as the decision at the last moment to change your main character's name, sex, age and so on. You might decide that your Hollywood ending just isn't realistic.

If you are in the first draft you shouldn't really get too hung up on the details.

Step 4: Purposely making placeholders to return to

Another tactic to break up the dreaded Writer's block is to purposely make placeholders with easy wins at points throughout your draft. You can then return to these parts and have a sense of achievement when you've filled one out.

Two examples are as below:

<Deidre receives a confirmation phone call after she has successfully been selected for that new job>

<Markus returns from an epic all-nighter with a pounding headache>

They don't have to be major plot points as long as they are necessary for the story progression. A paragraph to explain this placeholder is normally a good idea because when you go back to review the gap it may not always be apparent what direction you wanted to take or what element you have left out. Think of it like a sticky note that you intend to replace with quality when you return.

Make the writing fun by writing about what you are interested about at the time. The second draft is about coming back through everything with a fine tooth comb.

Step 5: Take a portion of the already complete section of the book and start the second draft

You may have declared defeat on your current sticking point but you can get underway in shoring up some of the early part of your novel. Hopefully by rekindling your passion for the start, this should spur you on to move past your sticking point but at the least, you've secured an important component of the book.

The second draft often is where you start repairing the shortfalls of your first look and requires the editor's cap. You look with a more critical glaze and become a writing surgeon. Changing the direction of the sticking point may be the best way to get you back on track.

Commonly you want the first section of your book be so exciting that it draws the reader in, so by re-reading and updating the start more frequently it is common that your first 4-5 chapters are going to be more polished and more detailed than the middle section. Don't be surprised if the first third of your book is a few revision levels higher than the middle third.

Step 6: Segment your writing

Often just the thought of joining an already massive trunk of writing can be a daunting thought. Therefore you might be better off writing your new entry in a separate document. You may need to refer back to character definitions; names and places from your core writing but you write all of the additional in a new space. Breaking up your writing this way helps you cast off the pressure of progress and helps you by seeing how much you have succeeded that day or that week. Target fixation can become a problem so resetting from the true blank slate may work out better.

***Warning:** You need to make sure that you add this new text to the core. In my own experience I have had some truly awesome after thoughts that never made it to the core of writing. Every so often you will have to gather up the new and stitch it to the old so as not to lose the thread. Losing the thread is often a big component of Writer's block. The problem comes from trying to think about the whole rather than just the area you got up to.*

Step 7: Write to chapter

If your style favours 'plan' over 'freeform', which is actually determining the whole plot as opposed to making it up as you go along, then writing to chapters will help with Writer's block. Each writing assignment will equate to writing a smaller booklet each time so there is more reward in what you accomplish. If you think of each chapter as a story in its own right this may remove hurdles.

The components of any successful story are a defined start, middle and end. Writing mini stories is much easier than thinking about the whole story.

Step 8: Keep a progress journal or spreadsheet

There is nothing like having to fill in a journal or spreadsheet to guilt you into action. Setting a deadline can really help you with this process because you will become more aware of your downtime and thus become more likely to remedy the situation. The likelihood of your overrunning is possible but at least if you make sure you have an action per day, you are going to complete this goal. Becoming systematic in your writing will help you achieve your goals.

I am not altogether convinced that setting a word count goal is sensible but maybe you should consider a minimum. 'I will write at least 450 words today' might be your goal and as long as that is a feasible amount you can complete easily then you should aim towards not falling below that minimum. Some days you might only be in the mood for a solitary paragraph or one stirring dialogue. Other days you might be locked into the writing for 15 hours.

Guilt is an incredibly strong emotion that you can use to get yourself back on the horse!

Certain writers don't hold much stock by word count but I feel that many readers can feel cheated if they don't have depth to the novel they've paid X amount for.

Step 9: Use a dictation/transcription service

You remember I told you to ditch the white screen? How about going a step further and ditch physical writing altogether? Why not just record your thoughts on a digital voice recorder (you can even record on your mobile phone).

Then all you have to do is type up these thoughts.

If you are being super lazy, you can use a service to turn those dictated words into typed words via various providers in transcription. It is surprising how much more you can cover just by speaking and how more fluid your dialogue might sound.

4.0 Prevention of Writer's Block

There are steps you can take to avoid Writer's Block in the writing that you are undergoing before you start feeling symptoms.

4.1 *Modifying your behaviour*

If you look back to the **Definitions** section of this guide you may fall in one of the two camps or you might favour one side more than the other. You are either a fastidious plotter or a die-hard 'pantser'.

Plotter

As a plotter you are likely to nail down every element of the plot and characters which leaves you to fill in the gaps creatively.

Pantser

As a pantser you let everything fall out naturally and may start writing the novel from a point to get into the flow of the story.

For both types of writing, In order to safeguard yourself from Writer's block, you will have to embrace the other side of your writing ability.

For a Plotter

After an initial plot try and see how the characters fit and how the novel flows before committing more time to plot deeper. Plotters can often milk creativity out of a written work by being too smart.

For a Pantser

After 5,000 – 10,000 words try and develop more elements of plot such an introduction, body and conclusion. It is useful for a Pantser to know where to head because running on an aimless steer might not lead back to land.

4.2 *Modifying your review methods*

Just having a raw plan of review is useful to avoid writer's block. If, as an example, you write for 3 chapter's worth of content then review the sum of its parts this should provide you the necessary impetus to carry on.

Reviewing can often stave off head scratching which will lead to blocks. Often knowing the direction of where to add words, where to remove them and where to leave alone is important.

Point 1: Leaving more to the edit stage

Bashing out the first draft is a key milestone, it is an emotional barrier that will spur you on, to finish and get the book published. Few people choose to fully write out their novel to a near perfection on the first draft. It is insane to do so, especially before you have had readers and editors check over your work.

Any *micro editing* you do before later corrective drafts will be a waste of time and effort. If you chose to rewrite a series of chapters or a character, you could save time through a lack of *micro level editing*. Whilst every aspect is still relatively loose, you can sneak elements in and out of your work far more easily.

Setting elements in stone comes later in the development of your book. Don't place anything in concrete because any element could move.

Point 2: Non-Linear Progression

There is no rule that you have to start at the start and end at the end before completing your first draft. Some writers find establishing a start and an end more helpful in order to frame the body. The choice in your progression is yours.

Point 3: Keep up a Character/Names Log

This doesn't have to be introduced straight away especially as for a pantsier style writer as it can be restrictive. However, keeping a log of your characters and how they progress through the chapters can be useful in helping you keep track. Often reaching for character names can slow you down especially if you have a period of time between writing.

If you plan to write a series of novels, a character log is even more valuable as it will allow you to return to characters instead of relying on new ones.

Names of places and objects is also useful to record, once again, if you have a list to hand it will stop you reaching for the answer.

Point 4: Emotional weight of perfection

Perfection always carries expectation in anyone undertaking a highly crafted skill. You might be used to such terms as “the devil is in the detail”. Therein lays the problem. Sometimes in life you have to do a “work man like job” to get things done on time.

No scientist ever discovers everything about their Eureka on the first hit of the bat. It takes a while to develop and deepen knowledge on all of the nuances. Your writing is the same. You can't be expected to hit every element dead on with your first commit to writing. It just doesn't happen that way.

You learn better from mistakes. Therefore, making mistakes further exposes you to learning sooner.

As a writer you will find that even writing anything gives you a basis to correct. Rather than focusing on all the negatives that you could generate, why not focus on where the start brings you to look.

Many writers often have a difficulty with where the beginning of their work starts. The fact that you make a start is more important than where you initially pick the story up from. The beauty of the drafting process is that you can identify a better start later. The fact that you stepped in beyond the doorway doesn't matter. The same is true for the ending. An ending composed of later drafts is a different beast to the one you first shake hands with.

Your expectation should be around change rather than perfection. When the changes are no longer sizeable and meaningful, you are nearing the end, my friend.

Point 5: Being too sentimental

Sentimentality is a terrible affliction for a number of key situations in life but even more so if you expect to hit a deadline.

When you hit drafting and aren't brutal enough you will realise that what you have decided to hold onto is tripe. It can happen. Writing can be a transformational process where writers can become dissatisfied with their own constructs. If this occurs and you really need to change something, just change it. Don't revel for days in what you need to do. This is not a good time for being indecisive.

But say you are on the fence about keeping something.

Don't delete it entirely, just tuck it to the side in another document, make sure you determine where it tied in originally and hold it back for comparison later on if you are still on the fence.

Point 6: Variations

Writing a number of obvious variations can provide scope for how to tackle a difficult choice. The variation might not be useful straight away but when combined with difficult decisions later on, can be used to unpick the difficult decisions. Variations and scenarios can be helpful to identify direction, you can instantly tell by writing a few, which way you want to turn. The most exciting or the most well balanced variations might be just the ticket.

Point 7: Nothing is fixed in stone

It is a good idea to set plot boundaries however. Remaining in the blinker zone will keep you on track. The method of restriction can be a great way to keep you focused, consider it a form of exclusion zone you are not permitted to cross. The moment you start writing about it you have to rethink and rewrite to remove it. Even plotters can succumb to writing about topics that they know to be destructive to the end game.

Point 8: Don't be a Jack of all Trades

Don't spread yourself over too many different genres because you won't remain focused. Writing needs time and many authors have a habit of spreading their work too thin between competing projects. It is important to allocate time to writing.

Point 9: Avoid *too many starts*

It can be common to have a myriad of starts to novels that have been abandoned. Consider it like the waste paper basket that is overflowing. At some point you will have to sit down to decide on one path and stick with it. With every fresh start you've attempted you are going to be taking yourself further away from getting into the depths of where you need to be treading.

It is exciting starting but you have to temper that with finishing. The reward from finishing is far greater than the small win you feel from starting. When considering what is worse, having very few works but having finished many of them is preferable to many starts but very few finishes.

I have experience of this so I can tell you for certain that too many starts are a bad thing. It is not through being lazy by any means. I'm a pantser rather than a plotter. I like to feel a certain connection with the writing before I commit to it. Before I sat down and got to work on my first commercial book, I had written 70+ starts over a period of 6 years. Some of that work has been helpful in that some of the ideas I have explored are featuring again in the writing I've been working on. The only bad thing is that a lot of time has been wasted. I've reached many dead ends. There are some starts that have merit but I've lost the momentum to finish them.

Momentum is an important concept to consider when writing. If you are kept in the moment, your writing will be more cohesive because you are focused. If you get away from being in the moment, the memory you use to retain information about characters and plot will fade. Even though you might have kept logs and other information, relighting the fire may be difficult later.

Point 10: Don't try to characterise every agent/actor within your novel

It is a bit like the message you give to a child about not naming the farm animals you may end up later devouring. You always may have that sinking feeling when the child asks "what happened to ducky?"

Characterising extras is unnecessary because they don't have a definite weight towards the important outcomes in your story. You will of course have hundreds of characters that are links in a chain but it is not important for the reader to know how they feel, or why to care about them. These superfluous characters are cannon fodder, the expendable infantry of your novel, their overall form is not important beyond the information or acts that they convey.

Movies that do well tend to focus on a smaller core of main actors. You don't have to follow that template but it is worth endowing the busier actors in your piece with the key notable attributes and leaving the less busy with fewer details. There can be too many in a party.

Point 11: Don't forget to write down great ideas

Even if written in short form, great ideas don't always come when you call them. That is why it is useful to have a method to write down those ideas given the chance. Ideas suggested are keeping a notepad by your bed.

Rest and settling your thoughts at the end of a long day can bring you just the ideas you need. The morning can also be a good time for ideas. Had a weird dream? Still remember it? Write that dynamite vision down before it fades.

Visions often kick start designs so sometimes images might be more powerful than words alone. You don't have to be a great artist to capture some basic emotions but it helps to keep a visual cue to your work sometimes.

Suggestions? Queries? Contact me at @blogprefect on Twitter or via Jackson@jackowrites.com

CREATED BY:

Jackson Noel Davies, BA (Hons)

<http://www.jackowrites.com>

JACKOWRITES.COM

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