



Writer's Block: A 12-Step Cure

Writer's
Block
A 12-Step
Cure

by
Hollie Snider

You sit down to write, pens neatly aligned, paper in careful stacks or computer on with its blinking cursor. You wait for words to form, for golden prose to spill from your imagination. Nothing happens. You wait some more. Still nothing. Writer's Block claims another victim.

So, now what? Get up and pace? Play a computer game? Run through the house screaming and pulling your hair out? All very viable choices, but none will conquer the dread disease that will affect every writer at some point. But what is Writer's Block? Simply put, it is a glitch in the creative process. Fortunately, Writer's Block is curable, and, even better, preventable. So what will help you get over it if you have it, or keep it away if you don't? Welcome to the first, last and only meeting of WA, Writer's Anonymous and the Twelve Step Writer's Block Program. It will help you get through it, get over it and avoid suffering from it in the future.

1) Don't panic. Writer's Block happens to everyone. Play music, read what you've already written aloud, do some physical exercise like touching your toes. Get your adrenaline going. Whatever you do, don't walk away. To work through Writer's Block, you have to keep working at it. Leaving this time only makes it easier to leave next time. Don't think you can write like Edgar Allan Poe or Ernest Hemingway, meaning drunk or high on drugs. Chances are you will just have to throw out everything you write while influenced that way. Sure, Poe wrote while high on opiates. He wrote well, but also died at forty, incoherent and incontinent. That's not what you want. If you must follow the lead of a great novelist, look to the award winners, at least initially. There are many good authors out there who have never won an award. The point is, even Harlan Ellison suffers from Writer's Block at times, and if you have it, take solace in the fact that you are in good company.

2) Don't confuse Writer's Block with other emotional states. Anger, grief, laziness, et cetera can interfere with your writing. This does not mean you are suffering from Writer's Block. According to Jim Frey, author of *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* says there are four main causes of Writer's Block: not knowing your characters, trying to write and edit at the same time, fear of failure and, often more important, fear of success.

Rather than fighting with one or more of these normal emotions and actions trying to masquerade as Writer's Block, use them. If you are angry, write the scene that needs you to be in that mood to capture the realism of this emotion. A loved one died? Use that grief to write the emotionally intense scenes. This has an added benefit of helping you work through these difficult times as well. Remember that writing can be therapeutic. However, the words written while under the influence of these emotions may not be the best you've ever done. In fact, you may have to delete whole scenes, but the point is, you won't have let these emotions become Writer's Block.

3) Choose a time and a place. The best way to avoid Writer's Block is to not give it a chance to set in. Choose a time and a place to write, then do it. Write every day in the same place, at the same time. Getting started is probably the one thing that nearly every writer abhors. Staring at the pen and paper, or the computer as if they

are the biggest evils in the world, a vile substance you don't want to touch. The only way to get over these feelings is to sit and write. Unplug the phone, wear earplugs if need be, let everyone know you are not to be disturbed from one to three in the afternoon, for example. Then write. No words coming? Keep sitting there. Do not allow anything else to distract you. If no words come during your two hour allotted time, then you stare at a blank piece of paper or a blank computer screen. On the other hand, don't write passed your allotted time either. If the words are flowing great, but at three o'clock, stop. Make notes of where you were going in your thoughts and quit. By doing this, you are guaranteed of having a starting place tomorrow and you won't suffer the agonies of beginning without any ideas.

4) Take a class or join a writer's group. Both will give you plenty of opportunities to talk about what you are writing. Often, all a writer needs to overcome Writer's Block is an opportunity to brainstorm with other creative souls. Besides, if nothing else, a class will force you to write and participate, or fail the course. Additionally, a class or group will help you to find your faults and virtues as a writer. Not to mention, having other people read your work will help to find mistakes may inadvertently be leading to Writer's Block.

5) Read. Reading another author's work will often stimulate the mind of a writer. However, don't fall into the trap of only reading within the genre you write. If you write science fiction, don't stick with these authors. Plenty of good authors work in all writing fields, including magazines and newspapers. Sure, reading within your genre will help you keep up on the industry norms for that genre, but why not read mysteries to learn how to build tension, suspense and curiosity, for example. Reading newspapers will help you learn how to fit the most information onto a page with the least amount of words. While you may not always want to write as a minimalist, it is a good technique to understand.

6) Eavesdrop on other people. If dialogue is causing your troubles, listen to other people and take mental notes on how they speak, including word choice and pronunciation. Sit on a park bench, pretending to read. Hear how words are used to convey much more than they mean, or listen to teenagers and get a quick lesson in the latest slang. Now, try to recreate it. Figure out how to spell the words based on pronunciation in different areas of the country. For example, in most of the country "washcloth" is pronounced just as it is spelled, but in Texas, you need to add an "R" in dialogue to make it "warshcloth." In Boston, they usually drop "R" at the end of words. For example, "car" becomes "cah." Just make sure you read the dialogue aloud, as it is written, not as you wanted to write it. Reading your conversations aloud will help you determine if your words sound real.

7) Do your research. Every piece you write must be based on factual information, including fiction works, and a lack of information can lead to frozen fingers. What about Fantasy? Isn't it a completely made up genre? Nope. Even in fantasy writing you have to base some information on fact if you want your reader to accept it. But what kind of fact? Let's take dragons as an example. Granted they don't exist, but mythologies have said they did at once. So let's assume, for the sake of argument, that they did. Dragons were big, reptilian creatures that usually immolated their enemies by breathing fire. They were not cute little fuzzy creatures with doe eyes according to any description out there. Does this mean you shouldn't make them cute and fuzzy? Yes, because your reader will not accept a rabbit as a dragon. Facts, loose as they are, have already been established about dragons. Now, this is not to say that you can't have a fire-breathing bunny. It just means you can't call it a dragon.

Here are some suggestions for gathering the facts you need.

A) Go out and make observations. If you need to know how many miles it is to the local grocery store, get in your car and drive there, noting the mileage. Are dogs allowed at the local park? Go there and read the signs. While you are there, note how many people actually observe the posted rules. If you don't have time to go out

and make these observations yourself, ask somebody who may know. If your mother is going to the store, have her note the mileage for you. A friend is taking his dog to the park? Have him make observations for you and report them upon his return.

B) Ask somebody. Find out who has the information you need and go pick their brain. What is the response time for a fire truck to a house fire ten miles away? Call the fire department, tell them what you are writing and find out if you can ask a few questions. What is the main crop export of Taiwan? Call the Reference Librarian at your local library and ask, especially if you don't know where to find information. Just don't call to find out how Taiwan is spelled; this will only serve to annoy. Ask yourself, "Who is most likely to have that information?" Then go directly to them, but if anyone begins the answer with, "Well, I think now that you ask, maybe. . ." go ask someone else. Chances are this person doesn't have all the information, if he has any.

C) Look it up. Dust off that encyclopedia and find out. The answers aren't on your own bookshelves? Get on the Internet or go to the library. Through both sources you have access to just about every piece of information in the world.

8) Keep a journal. There is no right or wrong way to keep one, but having some sort of notebook to return to with thoughts, ideas, opinions, even observations will give you a place to further exercise your writing muscles. Additionally, you will lose fewer ideas if they're written down. Keeping a journal also helps you learn which details are and are not needed to create a sense of place, rather than just including everything. Journaling also shows just how much of your personal life is included in everything you write. The real world is never very far from an author's fictional one. Take your journal with you everywhere, or use a mini-tape recorder (if you can stand listening to yourself speak) and keep notes of conversations you overhear, or story ideas that come to you in a restaurant, or even at a high school track meet. Make notes while you are reading another book, or while watching television. Carry your journal and make notes while walking through an open house. You will be surprised how much more real your architectural descriptions are.

9) Do some writing exercises. Sometimes your mind needs a little warm up before it can fully perform. This is where simple writing exercises come in. If you are a poet, make a list of rhyming words. (This can work for prose writers as well). Describe a tennis ball, inside and out. Describe the sound it makes when dropped. One I like is, think of something society normally views as ugly, a bombed building, a burned corpse, a slug et cetera, make it pretty, make it acceptable to society. If these suggestions are too much, or don't work, try automatic writing. No, I don't mean contacting ghosts or spirits, though that might bust the walls of Writer's Block as well. I mean listing random subjects as they come to you. When you finish your list, pick one and write about it, anything that comes to mind. What do you like about it? Dislike? What do you have to say about the subject? If your writing slows, rewrite the last sentence repeatedly until something new appears. You may be amazed at how quickly this little exercise turns into a whole scene. However, no matter what you do as a writing exercise, make sure it is noncritical. Turn off the little editor in your head. This is an exercise to get your imagination warmed up, not to turn out polished prose.

10) Write in your head. Think about what you are writing. Need a transition between one scene and another? Try to figure it out while eating breakfast. Organize your thoughts and ideas while driving to work. Try to come up with your opening while doing other chores. That way, when your allotted writing time does come around, you'll have a head start and writing will come faster and easier. You won't feel like you're starting with nothing if you begin writing in your head before putting pen to paper.

11) Rewrite what you've already written. Now, I don't mean rewrite an entire scene or chapter, just the last page. This will not only improve the page you've already written, but will stoke the fires of imagination again.

You will be back where you left off yesterday and it may help you remember where you wanted to go today. Just don't fall into the trap of going back and rewriting every page prior to this one. That will only serve to increase the severity of Writer's Block. Author Louis Lamour once said on writing, "Puke it out and clean it up later." It works.

12) Finally, if nothing else works to get rid of Writer's Block, if a scene won't budge no matter what you do, introduce something new. Bring in a new character, or have a letter arrive. The rest of the characters in the scene have to react to this new introduction. Even if only one character reads the letter, the others have to react to him. The minute one of your characters does something, writing the story becomes easy again, especially if the new introduction brings conflict with it.

There you have it, the Writers Anonymous Twelve-Step Program. Of course there are other ways to get over Writer's Block. Anything that stimulates your creativity will help. Just keep in mind, everyone suffers from Writer's Block. The only surefire way not to suffer, is to not write. Somehow, I don't think that's an option.

Sources:

How to Write a Damn Good Novel by James Frey

100 Ways to Improve Your Writing by Gary Provost

The Complete Guide to Writing Fiction by the Writer's Digest Staff



Hollie Snider is the author of "For the Rank of Master," and a founding member of the Colorado Springs Fiction Writer's Group. Visit her website at www.holliesnider.com.