

TONIC FOR WRITER'S BLOCK (THEY WOULDN'T LET ME BRING THE GIN)

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If you often find yourself stuck when you sit down to write, if you tend to write the first few paragraphs over and over again, here are a few suggestions that might help you find your way to the end.

1. Consider where you think best and spend more time there

Few of us do our best thinking staring at a computer screen. But most of us know where we do solve problems best. So why then do we always sit and stare at computer screens when we write?

Clear thinking precedes and produces clear writing. So when you need to think – about an essay, a speech, a column, a story, whatever – start where you think best. One caution: If you think best in motion, as I do, carry a tape recorder. Driving and scribbling notes at the same time is a really bad idea.

2. Start early and think small

I can't speak for you, but I used to procrastinate so that I could blame the deadline instead of myself for my work's mediocrity. Don't play that game. Think, report and write early. And when you're thinking, focus on how you can narrow the scope of your subject. Many writing problems can be traced to intellectual sprawl. "Think small," William Zinsser advises in *On Writing Well*. "Decide what corner of your subject you're going to bite off, and be content to cover it well."

3. Model

No, you don't have to run out and buy new clothes. I'm not urging you to change careers or goals. But do seek out writers whose stories you like. Read them frequently. Then analyze what you like about them. And listen to storytellers on radio and elsewhere. Ask yourself why some friends tell stories that draw a crowd and others put that crowd to sleep.

4. Free write

Years ago, when I was a blocked, untenured college professor, my brother introduced me to the books of Peter Elbow. He's an advocate of free writing. It's simple: Put pen or cursor to the page and write like the wind. The goal is simply to write, not to write well or coherently. Free-writing loosens writing muscles. An analogy might be stretching exercises at the gym. They don't make you stronger. But they do loosen your muscles -- prepare you for when

the heavy lifting begins. Free-writing makes it easier to take on tougher writing tasks that call for more discipline.

5. Start a blog

Make yourself post at least once a week. As Carl Sessions Stepp puts it in his book, *Writing as Craft and Magic*, “confidence breeds competence.” We gain that confidence through practice and repetition. Blogging allows you to develop voice and grow as a writer without the added pressure of queries and rejections. It gives you a forum to experiment. And it gives you experience writing for an audience, no matter how small.

6. Gather string

Writing involves more than words and clarity of thought. It demands content. Carry a small notebook, digital or the pen-to-paper kind. Jot down things that interest you – dialogue, data, things you see, half-formed ideas. This is string. Much of it will never leave your notebook. But some snippets will emerge as examples or thoughts in a piece you haven’t yet discovered. Years ago, a reporter named Julie Sullivan told me: “If it’s not in my notebook, it’s not in my story.” She’s right. If something interests you, get it in your notebook.

7. Build your skills as an observer

Passive observation can help you grow as a reporter and writer. Find a perch to observe in a place where something is happening. That is pretty much any place where people are interacting – a train station, a playground, a street festival, a trivia night at the local bar. Use your senses to capture what you see, hear, smell. Don’t ask any questions; they’re forbidden. Don’t make yourself part of the scene; you’re here to capture what you observe. Take some sliver of what you’ve witnessed to draw the kind of scene – a tight vignette or interaction – that’s woven through much good writing. Limit yourself to no more than a few hundred words. As Strunk and White write: “Make every word tell.”

8. Read everything you write aloud

Writers revere the concept of “voice.” Then why do so few ever hear their own? Voice is meant to be heard. Writing has cadence, pace, rhythm. Readers “hear” what their eyes see. You, the writer, should, too.

9. Consider these steps when you set out to research an idea:

- a) After an initial round of backgrounding or information gathering, stop to think and synthesize (this is a great time to go to that space or place

where you think best). Then draft a one or two-sentence **focus statement**, driven by an active verb in the active voice. It should tell you (1) the point of the essay, speech, column or story you are approaching and (2) the takeaway for those reading or listening to it. If you can't identify both, you haven't yet figured out your focus. Keep in mind that focus statements can change. But just as we don't build houses without blueprints, we should not write stories without a focus.

- b) Write a six-word headline that captures your idea. Make sure it is driven by a verb.
- c) Think about where you want to “stand” in writing your story. Let's say you are writing about the gaps and weaknesses of the MCAS (the Massachusetts State Assessment System). Do you want to tell the story from the perspective of the teacher forced to teach to the test or the student forced to learn that way? These would be different stories. And they're just two possible approaches.
- d) Always push for example. Generality is the enemy of approachable, cohesive writing.

10. Consider these approaches when you are ready to write

If you get stuck writing your opening or lead, try these:

- a) Review your focus statement and headline. Do you need to recast them? Has the story changed?
- b) Draft fast, as writing coach Don Fry puts it “to block your internal censor.” Read through your notes once and then write through without referring to them at all.
- c) Start somewhere else. Sometimes it helps to draft internal scenes. Or craft an ending. If you know where you are ultimately going, it's much easier to figure out how to get there.

11. Always leave time to revise

Remember: No one gets it right the first time. E.B. White was the co-author of *The Elements of Style*. He was a master of the English language. He also revised time and time again. Revision works best when you can let a piece marinate a bit. But even if you have time only to walk to the water fountain and back, revising helps. It helps psychologically as well, erasing the fear that the first draft must be perfect.

12. When all else fails, lower your standards

