

Writer's Block and the Intellectual Process

By
Lawrence Buentello

Certainly you've read the suggestion that 'writer's block' is a fictitious state; after all, no one is ever heard of 'plumber's block' or 'surgeon's block' or 'delivery driver's block'. Somehow the romantic notion that writing is something more ephemeral than any of these occupations has been accepted as fact, when writing is nothing more than stringing words together in a passably coherent and meaningful fashion. It is this romantic fallacy that has allowed creative people to shirk the process and seek comfort for a self-imposed malady. All that a writer has to do is to deny the excuses, sit down and write—

Well, yes and no.

Writer's block as a definable malady may include a number of causes. But before I ruminate on those causes, I have to take moment to examine the writing process itself.

The difference between the work that a plumber does and the work that a writer does is one of uniformity. A plumber must, because of the standard requirements of the materials with which he works, apply uniform techniques to his efforts. The application of consistent technique is essential in a job well done. Admittedly, he may have to improvise for the requirements of a unique job, but even then he works by known methods and with quantifiable materials. I would say that this is the same for the surgeon (one would certainly hope so) and the delivery driver as well.

But the writer is faced with a different task: if his or her work is to be meaningful and creative, he or she will have to face a unique job *every time* that job is begun.

The reason that hack writing has gotten the reputation for being easy and derivative is not because of the quality of the individual work, but for the sameness of one project to another that exposes the writer's efforts as being more like the plumber's work than the creative artist's. When the formula works, what is the sense in trying to improve on it? A great deal of the time prolific writers are prolific because they are writing the same stories over and over again, with only a change in title and a few new surnames thrown in for verisimilitude. Certainly this is not the rule, but it helps to illustrate the point that I am trying to make—

Writing is not a perfectly quantifiable act.

It is an intellectual act utilizing known linguistic techniques to produce a unique work.

Or, at least, in the best-case scenario that is so. And if the writer wishes to produce good work (as opposed to a piece of writing that has no literary value at all) he or she must apply a tremendous amount of intellectual skill and creative imagination. I believe that writing, at varying degrees of accomplishment, is perhaps the most complex intellectual engagement that human beings can experience, other than, perhaps, the more complicated manipulations of mathematics (where the level of coherency must be almost absolute). Consider this in the hierarchy of human intellectual processes: the surgeon goes to school for years to learn theory and technique, practices with his peers to acquire reliable methods, and executes those methods as completely as possible. But the writer must use what he or she has learned of composition, rhetoric and technique to impose *order, coherency and meaning* on a work that has never before existed. How much more could a person demand of his or her intellect? And is it any wonder that this process becomes stymied from time to time?

Human beings have an innate fear of the unknown—the unknown represents danger, after all, and the unexpected.

As a writer continues with his or her career the degree to which this encounter with the unknown increases is exponential (unless, as previously stated, the writer continues to produce the same story over and over again, content to remain in known territory). To write better, more coherently and uniquely is a difficult credo to live up to on a daily basis. Was there ever a case of a complete novice suffering writer's block? I believe that it is only after the requirements of the job are realized that the process becomes increasingly intimidating, resulting in procrastination, depression and a loss of faith in the process. And, since this process is one of the most intellectually demanding for people, it becomes even more of a threat to the self-concept of those who identify themselves as writers (or, more potently, as artists). The difficulty of the process becomes combined in the writer's mind with the debilitating effects of fear and anxiety to produce the state that we have come to refer to as 'writer's block'.

But I don't believe that it is a 'writing' block at all—I believe that it is actually an 'intellectual' block, and that is why, no matter how many objective techniques people apply to their condition, that what they consider to be writer's block remains a problem. I would never try to diminish the act of writing; it is a complex and conditional process. The intellectual faculty that assists in the fixing of a broken drainpipe is not the same faculty that assists in the creation of a fictional world. We are, after all, talking about the installation of a single elbow joint as compared to the potential application of hundreds of thousands of words. The joint fits together in a predictable manner; the words do not. Still, human beings have been writing for millennia, and have been producing complex works of art in that time, so there must be a path to creation that bypasses the typical emotional reactions that we have to an infinitely complex process.

I believe that the central condition of writer's block (or creative block, as some prefer to call it) is a loss of faith in the process. And even more specifically, not the process itself, but the individual writer's belief that he or she is capable of adequately inducing the production of essential work. And because that failure of belief automatically creates a

reactionary belief in the individual's inability to produce good work, fear and anxiety are the processional effects. Sometimes we see the fear and anxiety as the reason for the block itself—but this is not so (in my estimation). They are merely the emotional reaction to an intellectual state of apprehension. The intellectual condition is to blame, that is to say, the belief in one's inability to adequately acquit the promise of imagined work to be done. In too many cases, anxiety and depression condition the individual writer's psychological response so deeply that the recognition of a simple intellectual impediment to the process cannot be accomplished through superficial self-examination. The belief in one's inability becomes the norm, and the promise of writer's block has been fulfilled.

An indication of the quality of the condition of writer's block can be found in the writing process itself. Writing up a grocery list is simple, and therefore tends not to be included in the range of affected writing. But the composition of a thesis or a short story is not so simple, and so they become included in the condition by virtue of their level of compositional complexity. I have little difficulty in believing in my ability to write out a list of food items; but when I am faced with the creation of an entire imaginary world, or the construction of a coherent explanation of a precarious theme, then I may have a great deal of difficulty believing that I am capable of such a feat. The very nature of the writer's evolution creates the paradox; the more complex and meaningful the proposed work, the less confidence the writer has in his or her ability to create such work; confidence, then, is the belief in one's ability to meet proposed challenges. But these are two identical intellectual functions: the utilization of words to produce a meaningful expression. Where within the mind is one's belief altered?

Again, human beings tend to be wary of the unknown; this primal fear of untested circumstances is an essential part of the survival instinct. But the instinct should not be understood as indisputable. In the wild of nature the instinct to avoid danger may be entirely necessary; in the human intellectual arena it is merely illusory. The human intellect too often fails to make the distinction between physical and intellectual resources. The mind applies the same level of urgency to dissimilar questions: "Will I find enough water to survive my journey?" cannot be fairly compared to "Do I have the rhetorical expertise to effectively write this essay?" The former question could be a matter of life or death; the latter merely a question of how well one will fair in the attempt. The only similarity comes in the willingness of the questioner to take a leap of faith when challenged.

Still, in the writer's mind, the peril is tangible; not only is immediate compositional failure a possibility, but the writer's self-concept as a competent artist is also in jeopardy. Self-concept is as important to the human psyche as fresh water is to the body. The latter represents a physical imperative; the former, a psychological one. But the body has the habit of convincing the writer that they are one in the same, and so both produce similar emotional pain.

Suffering writer's block is comparable to losing your ability to speak, hear or see when nothing is wrong with the physical attributes—they allow you to do these things—the act of hearing, speaking or seeing validates the belief that you are capable of doing so. If we had to first believe in our ability to exercise these faculties before experiencing them,

how many people would be walking around needlessly blind, deaf or dumb? But this is precisely the problem faced by the person with writer's block. The sole belief that you are incapable of writing (at whatever level where the block occurs) keeps you from the attempt; and belief is a powerful intellectual state.

Writing, then, is a co-ordination of language to produce a desired cognitive communication. And that communication can be as simple as a shopping list or as complex as Joyce's *Ulysses*. Do you see, then, how the same process is complicated by degrees? I could certainly write up a shopping list without a single worry, but the prospect of producing another *Ulysses* might leave me dumbfounded. I can't believe that I would find myself plagued with doubts about my ability to write up a list of grocery items, but I might be paralyzed with fear by the thought of accomplishing Great Literature. I believe this dynamic explains the hesitation of the writer attempting to create a great short story, a brilliant thesis, or a magnificent poem; or, for that matter, the creation of an adequate short story, passable thesis or mediocre poem.

Those who believe that writers are born and not made are delusional. Certain individuals may have a facility with words, but had James Joyce not had the benefit of a classical education (complete with classes on rhetoric and composition), and had instead grown up in a cave with only the lichen to talk to, I don't believe for a minute that he would have produced any of his great literary works. The brain must first have adequate literary models to use as cognitive references, a basic instruction in the use of a given language and plenty of practice at replicating and then imaginatively surpassing the literary models that have been learned. Sometimes brain physiology allows certain individuals to accomplish these tasks more fluidly and with greater success than others, but the process is the same for everyone. The Greeks professed a belief in the Muses; but Aristotle provided a written manual for those seeking to create meaningful Grecian literature. I would first seek Aristotle's counsel, and then invoke the names of the Muses in other, more desperate hours.

I have refrained from using any inflammatory metaphors in this essay and have instead opted for the use of comparisons so that I would not mistake 'writer's block' for something that it is not; writer's block is not the result of a sick spirit, or the hand of God striking down the faculty, or the Shadow Self wrestling with the imperatives of the Moral Self in a Jungian arena of players found only in the Twilight Zone. Writer's block is an intellectual impasse at the point where the decision to write and the act of writing meet: the agent causing the impasse is the belief in one's inability to adequately follow through. And that is all that it is. Though the human mind is a veritable factory for the production of metaphors, the writer is much better served trying to understand his or her unproductive state in practical terms. The perpetuating of colorful myths only confuses what is predominantly an emotional conundrum; it is the writer's emotional reaction to an intellectual impasse that creates grief.

But since so-called writer's block is a psychological reaction to an intellectual assessment, it becomes necessary to alter the intellectual assessment before the psychological reaction can be muted. Since a writer may experience writer's block repeatedly in his or her career, he or she may have to do this over and over again as the assessment recurs. In simpler terms, as the writer's belief in his inability to write (at a given

level) solidifies itself in his subconscious, he will have to effectively alter that belief as many times as necessary in his career in order to be able to write freely.

If you are in the midst of writer's block, incapable of writing at a given level because of an ingrained belief (subconscious or otherwise), then the only thing that will allow you to resume writing at a given level is to change that belief. No amount of forcing the issue will help a seriously blocked writer; no amount of psychological analysis will remove the syndrome. The only thing that will remove the basis of the block—the belief in your ability to carry through—is a retraining of your subconscious to believe that you do possess the ability to succeed at a given level of writing (and to surpass that level as well).

And how do you do this?

By retracing the steps of the intellectual process of composition.

This is not a simple remedy, but it is an effective one. The brain (and its components, the conscious, subconscious, unconscious et al, however you believe human thought is structured) must be retrained to find immediate references for the belief that you are fully capable of rendering your proposed literary project into a tangible and coherent work. This is accomplished, not by thumbing through *Ulysses* for inspiration, but by carefully writing your way through the most basic pieces toward the most complex. In other words, first engage yourself in writing sentences; then coherent sentences; then paragraphs; then pages; then whole works. The mind accepts the evidence that you provide; if you work to produce the simplest composition (say, a grocery list), and then work your way by degrees toward your objective (say, a meaningful short story), your brain will retain the evidence of your ability, and will counter the belief that had previously affected your desire to write. This technique takes patience, above all else; patience to seemingly waste your time writing simple and obvious pieces in order to build up your belief in your abilities. Impatience springs from fear; the fear that the desired result will not be forthcoming, and so the affected writer tries too hard to recover the full effect of his or her actual abilities.

What is writing, after all? Isn't writing merely the artifact of an impulse to communicate? Writing itself is not what is being communicated; it is the thought that one desires to communicate. If I think of these words and then set them down in writing, I can logically assume that thought is the seat of intellectual creation and not writing. Writing merely conveys thought. And that is why writing should be regarded as craft rather than creation. Barring a neurophysiologic condition, writing cannot be blocked (for that matter, when was the last time, barring the same conditions, that your thinking was blocked?). Only the desire to convert thoughts into words is to blame; and the thing that keeps a person from converting thoughts into words the most is his or her belief that he or she won't be able to adequately do so—

Proof is required for a person to acquire or change a belief—and the best proof of one's ability to write is writing itself. First, and always, 'unimportant' writing; then writing made more complex and significant by degree. At fifteen, James Joyce was unprepared to write *Ulysses*; but at age 35 he was much better prepared for the challenge, having refined his abilities through study and practice. And so we can conclude that quantity is a less important indicator of our abilities as writers than quality. Too often essayists and well-meaning professionals suggest that the cure for

genuine writer's block is a slow return to the production of a respectable word-rate. I believe just the opposite: the only true cure for writer's block is to regain belief in your ability as a writer, and the only way to do that is to validate that belief by proving it to yourself. If you wish to recover your abilities, do not keep a word count—instead, begin with brief attempts at simple compositions. Don't worry about beginning that important 5,000 word short story; your 'block' may not even let you begin such a (seemingly) formidable task; instead, try writing a one-paragraph short story. This may seem absurd, and without commercial potential, but commercial potential is the last thing you need to be thinking about. Write a one-paragraph short story; write several, and then write a two-paragraph story, and then, perhaps, a three paragraph story.

If you're a poet and have been blocked from composing meaningful work, write a one-line poem; of course, no one will publish it, but again, publication is the last thing that you should be thinking about. Keep writing one-line poems and then move on to two-line poems. This may seem absurd, but it is the first step in altering the unconscious belief in yourself that you are incapable of writing well and at a higher level of complexity. Then increase the level of complexity until you are once again writing at the level of complexity that meets your expectations.

You must go back to the fundamentals of composition to retrain your intellectual references and change your beliefs. If it takes a little psychoanalysis in order to get to this place then, by all means, do whatever it takes to regain your certain belief in your abilities. And don't ever let anyone distract you with inaccurate metaphors and cute comparisons to inappropriate problems. There is really no such a thing as 'writer's block', but there is such a thing as belief in one's abilities. That is where the problem lies and that is where the cure can be found.

Examples

A One-Paragraph Story

Thomson's house burned down. Though he and his family were unhurt, they lost everything they owned. They had no insurance. Justine, Thomson's wife, blamed the absence of insurance on Thomson's recklessness. Eventually she decided that she didn't want to be married to a reckless man, and left him. Devastated by the loss, Thomson went to live with his brother, who was sympathetic, but who was also alcoholic. One night Thomson's brother, drunk, berated Thomson's ex-wife and precipitated a fight that resulted in the two brothers being arrested by the police. After being released, Thomson confided in his brother that the reason why they had no insurance was that he'd been gambling with the money that would have paid for it. Thomson's brother, aware of his own alcoholism, forgave his brother, and together they decided that they would both help each other to overcome their destructive addictions.

This sounds very much like an outline for a longer short story. Perhaps the similarities can help you realize that writing this kind of outline and expanding it into a dramatic story are not separated by that many degrees of

ability. Work on making your one or two-paragraph stories more detailed and soon you will feel as if you never lost the ability to convey a longer, more complex dramatic story.

The key to these exercises is to diminish the importance of the writing and therefore by-pass the belief that you are incapable of producing any writing at all. By all means get creative with the way that you practice these one-paragraph works, adding dialogue and other attributes to the effort. Here are more examples of one-paragraph and multi-paragraph stories meant to chip away at the erroneous belief that you are blocked from more complex work:

I knocked on the door; an old woman opened the door and asked me what I wanted.

“You’re my mother,” I said expectantly.

“No,” she said, and quickly closed the door.

I knocked on the door again, and would continue knocking until she opened the door again or called the police.

Or:

One day the Thorm descended upon the earth in an enormous flying disk. The Thorm leader stepped from the craft and declared, in perfect English, that the Earth was being claimed in the name of the Thorm Empire. Maps were produced; star charts were consulted; and finally the Thorm leader was convinced that he had landed on the wrong planet. So we sent the Thorm disk to Mars. And then we blanketed the planet with untold thousands of nuclear missiles. The Thorm, it would appear, are not the most intelligent species in the galaxy.

Here is an example of a one-paragraph essay:

Herman Melville wrote the novel *Moby Dick*. He actually dedicated the book to his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne. On the surface, the novel is about a sailor’s experiences sailing on the whaling vessel *The Pequod* with the obsessed Captain Ahab. But the subtext of the work examines the concepts of good and evil, and the relationships that men may have with each other. *Moby Dick* is Melville’s metaphysical odyssey into the dark motivations of human beings.

Please remember that the purpose of writing these works in miniature is to make certain that they only partially relate to more complex works. And they must not be thought of as publishable; they must remain personal exercises. And the goal of these exercises is the continued strengthening of the belief in yourself as a capable writer. If you follow these instructions I am positive that you will see tangible results in the way that you approach your writing. Remember to address the types of writing that are pertinent to your particular variety of ‘block’.

Here are some examples of one-line poems:

The season turned with the rains.

Or:

I heard the voices of the dead;

Or

The light shone on the window glass—

Just remember to begin simply, and to have the patience to follow through with this technique. Soon your confidence will return, and your beliefs about your abilities will change toward the better. You will begin to believe in your ability to write at greater degrees of complexity, and soon you will be absolutely certain that writing is actually a simple and natural process.