

# 6 Ways to Beat Writer's Block



iStock

Source: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/6-Ways-to-Beat-Writer-s/243587>

By Rachel Toor | JUNE 07, 2018

I've been at this word business long enough to know there's nothing magical or mysterious about it. The formula for getting work done is simple: Show up and sit there. Think. Stare out the window. Write. There's no muse, no need for a perfect storm of artistic conditions to come together before you can rack up the pages. You just do the work. The work gets done.

But simple formulas don't always produce good results. There are periods when I show up, sit there, go through the motions, and ... nothing. I type. Reread what I've got. Delete it all. It is possible, I'm here to tell you, to end the day with a negative word count.

This is commonly known as writer's block, although I (and every writer I know) hate that term. I prefer to think of it as getting stuck. There are times when trying to write feels like a failure of the body, like

squinting to distinguish a Z, E, and S on the lower lines of the eyesight chart. Effort and intention have zero effect.

So it is with writing slumps. I'm fortunate to be in a privileged position as a full professor. I would be fine if I never published another word — just another log of deadwood with tenure. But I well remember what it's like to write with a metaphorical gun to my head and a real ticking clock — to feel the panic that sets in when the time frame is short and much depends on getting something done. Even now, when I reach an intellectual or artistic low, that same old jingle of despair starts playing in my head.

Often, in those moments, I think about a physicist friend who, not long before he was due to turn in his thesis, decided that everything he'd done on his dissertation was terrible and he needed to drop out of grad school. We drove to the beach, and he talked about how bad his work was, how the years he'd spent trying to get a Ph.D. were a waste. I listened to him as we watched the tide come in and go back out. By the time we returned to the car, he felt calmer.

A few weeks later he submitted the diss, which won a prize, and he landed a fantastic job. To see someone so clearly excellent suffer from a debilitating — if fortunately brief — bout of self-doubt proved an important reminder, one that sticks with me.

It could have gone differently for him. Plenty of other writers come to believe the lies they tell themselves — that their work is not good enough and never will be. The closer they get to a deadline, the more frantic their anxiety and sense of doom. All hope is abandoned. And they can't write another sentence.

That paralyzing feeling can send anyone into a self-defeating funk. No amount of reassurance — from an adviser, an editor, a mother — will erase it.

When I talk with new graduate students about writing, I tell them to expect a thesis meltdown and can usually provide a time frame for its arrival. The overachievers tend to have theirs early, while procrastinators wait until the last minute. I like explaining this incipient panic in general terms at the beginning of their grad careers, when everything, including finishing a thesis, is still notional. That way when the meltdown comes, it looks like a normal part of the process, not a personal and specific failing (although, of course, that is how it always feels).

What I know is that most writers experience these inevitable and awful periods, to differing degrees. So

it's not a question of whether you will get stuck but of what to do when it happens. Here are some things that might help.

- Work up a sweat. That inveterate walker, old Hank Thoreau, was just one among many who believed that physical activity leads to intellectual productivity: "Methinks that the moment my legs begin to move, my thoughts begin to flow." Today there's scientific work to back that idea up. My own periods of writing blahs often seem to coincide with times when I'm running less. Your sport of choice might involve bouncing a ball, riding a bike, or sticking an oar in the water. Getting out of your chair, especially when the weather is dreary, might be the last thing you want to do, but it does help.
- Take a quick trip. A change of venue often shakes things loose. Just a weekend away — camping or visiting friends and not thinking about work — can act as a restart. If you force yourself to take time off, you might be surprised how eager you are to get back to work.
- Just keep at it. It takes time, energy, and money to get out of Dodge. You might not have any of those. In that case, try sticking to your writing routine. Go to your desk and sit there. Type. Even just typing "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" might get you going again. Typing, not writing, can eventually lead to something. Stare at a blank page until you can't bear it for another minute, and then continue to sit there — it might force you to write a paragraph you can use.
- Heed Anne Lamott's clarion call. In her [1994 book on writing](#), *Bird by Bird*, Lamott offered her famous advice to write a "shitty first draft." This is always a good idea. It frees you up to know that what you're writing can and will be terrible. Out of that load of muck you can usually pull out a golden kernel. There are, it should be said, drafts too shitty to be saved. But most can be mined for at least a couple of useful bits.
- Try the "compost" method. An environmental-historian friend gets unstuck using a similar process, which he calls "composting." He writes down a bunch of admittedly crappy ideas and then lets them mold. He mulls things over as he walks, and in the great pile of waste usually finds something worth cultivating. (He also recently told me about a new fad called "earthing," where you walk barefoot on the ground to draw electrons into your body to neutralize — and, well, that's where I stopped listening.)
- Remind yourself that even the best writers get stuck. Graham Greene, for example, described getting unstuck without resorting to tropes about waste. While you're going about your everyday business, he wrote, "the stream of the unconscious continues to flow undisturbed, solving problems, planning

ahead." And then, "One sits down sterile and dispirited at the desk, and suddenly the words come as though from the air: the situations that seemed blocked in a hopeless impasse move forward: the work has been done while one slept or shopped or talked with friends."

Remember: Even when you're not writing, your brain is still churning like a background app. It always feels like a gift when the ideas and the words start flowing again. It's easy to forget how stuck you were. Life has returned to normal. We tend to take normal for granted and forget to count ourselves fortunate during good times.

---

#### RELATED CONTENT

[The Habits of Highly Productive Writers](#)

[On Not Writing a Book Right Now](#)

[Surviving an Academic Slump](#)

[How Blogging Helped Me Write My Dissertation](#)

[Writer's Block on the Dark Side](#)

---

I know this advice can be hard to trust for those early in their careers, who haven't yet gone through this cycle a zillion times, and who are feeling the pressures of the job market or the tenure track. We all know writers who seem to have it all, to whom everything comes, and comes easily. They never struggle to meet deadlines, and their sentences can make you wince with jealousy. They post on social media about their

publications and prizes, their fellowships and rave reviews.


Here's the secret: Even they get stuck.


Not everyone talks about it, but everyone experiences it. Once you recognize that temporary blockages are part of the process, you're on your way to finishing.

*Rachel Toor is a professor of creative writing at Eastern Washington University's writing program in Spokane. Her [latest book](#), *Write Your Way In: Crafting an Unforgettable College Admissions Essay*, was published by the University of Chicago Press. Her website is [Racheltoor.com](http://Racheltoor.com).*

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

**Subscribe Today**

 [Twitter](#)

 [Facebook](#)

[Log In](#)

[Get Newsletters](#)

[Events](#)

[About The Chronicle](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[User Agreement](#)

Copyright © 2017 The Chronicle of Higher Education