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Writer's block: A crisis in business writing

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WRITER'S BLOCK: A CRISIS IN BUSINESS WRITING

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Patricia Reed
May 1986
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Date
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ABSTRACT

In our information-conscious business climate, effective writing is becoming increasingly important. More jobs than ever before require employees to write memos, letters, justifications, proposals and documentation. But managers who review the writing are concerned about its poor quality. And they are starting to ask questions: What is causing the problem, and what can be done to remedy it?

I believe that writer's block is a contributing factor to the problem and is, in fact, a crisis in business writing today. Writer's block, which has plagued authors and students for years, also affects the quantity and quality of business writing. Its effects are costly because the blocking itself wastes time and can produce incomprehensible, misleading information.

To fully appreciate this crisis, we must study the definition, causes, and effects of writer's block. The research of Mike Rose, John Daly, Lynn Bloom, Donald Murray, and others is a crucial part of this discussion because it spotlights the behavior of blocked writers and offers solutions applicable even to business. Some blocking is caused by fear of exposure, and some by the
so-called "correctness" complex. Unfortunately, when writers block they can produce writing which is vague, passive, and full of gibberish.

Treatments for the condition known as writer's block must be carefully prescribed and fit the specific causes at work. Sometimes problem-solving techniques work, sometimes imaging or relaxation therapy helps, and sometimes ingenuity is required. The best solution, however, is education about both good and bad aspects of blocking. This education can be provided in college classrooms, at workshops, or at on-the-job locations. It is reassuring, after all, to learn that writer's block is not a terminal illness. Writer's block has been a crisis in business writing, but it doesn't have to be.
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--You are the wind beneath my wings.--
Words about Writer's Block

You don't know what it is to stay a whole day with your head in your hands trying to squeeze your very unfortunate brain so as to find a word. Let's face it, writing is hell. --William Styron

In business communications, planning, organizing writing, and editing are intimately associated—hesitancy and blocking can occur in any or all of the stages. --Norman Sigband

How do I know what I think until I see what I say? --E. M. Forster

Too often I wait for the sentence to finish taking shape in my mind before setting it on paper. It is better to seize it by the end that first offers itself, head or foot, though not knowing it all, then pull: The rest will follow along. --Andre Gide

I make lots of notes. There's something less frightening about rough notes. Notes are a useful device because you are under no tension when you write. --Irving Wallace

Writing, like life itself, is a voyage of discovery. --Henry Miller

Something horrible happens to ordinary plain speaking business people when they take pen in hand. Fear makes them resort to all forms of gobbledygook. --John Keenan
A picture is worth. . . .

(Mack 1976)
Barbara Monahan
I. DEFINITIONS, RESEARCH, AND SYMPTOMS OF CRISIS

In recent years, writer's block has been studied primarily as a problem which affects the quality and quantity of students' and authors' finished products. But writer's block should be a cause for concern in the business world as well because it can affect the quality of written communication in the form of letters, memos, reports and proposals and can, in turn, cause personnel and even financial problems. This first chapter will address the definitions of both writer's block and business writing, the research that has been done in the field, and the symptoms of writer's block that make it a potential crisis in business writing.

The definitions and the research about the condition called "writer's block" come from professors and teachers of English who have witnessed first hand the "frustrating, self-defeating inability to generate the next line, the right phrase, or the sentence that will release the flow of words again" (Oliver 165). Mina Shaughnessy suggests that getting started is one of the most difficult of the many writing problems (72). Indeed, getting started can be a crisis matched in intensity only by the pressure to keep working until the written project is completed. Michael
Rose, Director of the Freshman Writing Program at UCLA, incorporates both requirements in his definition: "Writer's block is an inability to begin or continue writing for reasons other than a lack of skill or commitment...marked by a passage of time with limited functional and or productive involvement in the writing task" (1984, 12).

For the purpose of this paper, Lynn Bloom's definition is the most satisfactory of all. Dr. Bloom, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, has been conducting workshops to help graduate students and business people cope with writing problems. She says, "Writing anxiety—also called writer's block—is a label for one or a combination of feelings, beliefs, or behaviors that interfere with a person's ability to start, work on, or finish a given writing task that he or she is intellectually capable of doing" (121).

Business writing which can be adversely affected by writer's block might include letters, reports, memos, recommendations, documentation for filing, training or policy manuals, product analysis or advertisement, employee evaluations, contracts, resumes, job descriptions, specifications, justifications, and professional articles. The only possible type of business written communication
not subject to attacks of writer's block could be the simple completion of forms which require only check marks and a signature. All other examples, listed above, involve planning, organizing, composition, revising, and proofreading. It is of utmost importance that written business communication be effective. In more precise words, it must achieve the desired results with no negative side effects (Sitzmann 160).

The need for powerful, clear, and goal-achieving written communication--free from the negative effects of writer's block--is not limited to the business world. As mentioned earlier, English teachers were the the first to identify the problem and begin a search for solutions. Their research is fundamental to understanding the problem of writer's block. John Daly, for example, was one of the pioneers in this area. In 1975, he coined the term "writing apprehension," and he was the first to use questionnaires as an aid in identifying blocked writers (11). He also devised a writing assessment tool and plotted relationships between blocking and unsuccessful writing. Finally, Daly predicted and verified, through extensive interviews, ways in which writing apprehension correlated with "attitudes, expectations, and choices about school and writing" (13). His research has clear implications for this paper because he traced many students
with blocking problems who "dropped out" of English classes and entered other disciplines expecting to find less demand for writing. These students of Administration or Business Education must have been surprised to discover the amount of important writing required of them before and after graduation.

Reed Larson, another professor interested in the problem of writer's block, researches the question of emotional blocks and their impact on writing (21). He works with control groups and high achieving students who are involved in major, important research projects. Their "overarousal" (anxiety) and "underarousal" (boredom), measured by physiological indicators—heartbeat, respiration, and adrenalin levels—affect the length and quality of their final papers. Again, business writing is especially subject to these same influences of stress or boredom. How, for example, does the writer feel about the assigned project? And how does he or she feel about the boss, peers, or subordinates who may be a part of the research and writing phase of the report?

Additional research, directed by Donald Graves, focuses on the importance of outside stimuli which can help or hinder the job of writing. His work parallels that of human relations experts in business and education who
stress the importance of positive reinforcement. Graves is able to demonstrate and document reductions in writing anxiety when a parent or teacher adopts a more supportive, less judgmental attitude toward the writer (17). Personal experience with an understanding, appreciative supervisor or editor verifies his hypothesis; that is, a writer is less likely to block if he or she is encouraged in a supportive way.

Lynn Bloom is interested primarily in the writing stressors and blocking problems of business writers and graduate students. She studies individuals within these categories and measures the impact of role conflicts, family pressures, and professional deadlines on their writing abilities. Several of the clients, who have sought her help at Writer's Block Seminars, have reported success after implementing her suggestions about behavior modification and principles of prioritizing (131). Other teachers and researchers, whose work has application even outside of the classroom, are Cynthia Selfe who compares different methods of planning and composing (93), Muriel Harris who studies revising processes and speaking out loud strategies among blocked writers (164), Robert Boice who supports psychoanalysis for severely blocked writers (187), and Linda Flower who suggests strategies to meet most types
of blocking dilemmas. Flower's research and findings about causes and cures for writing blocks will be discussed during later chapters.

ESL (English as a Second Language) students have special blocking problems, and Stan Jones' study centers on their unique needs. He compares and contrasts behavior and results from those who suffer from the devastating "correctness phenomenon" (99). Writers, he concludes, suffer more blocking and produce less effective products if they are overly concerned with English grammar and rules. Those, on the other hand, who compose spontaneously, then correct their writing to Standard English during a revising session are more successful. As a teacher of business communications over the past ten years, I have noticed an increase in the number of ESL students, and I have become sensitive to their special problems with writing and blocking. Clearly, the paralyzing effect of a need for first draft perfection becomes more acute for a writer who is less than proficient in English.

A survey of research is like a history of sorts, and this history would be incomplete without further mention of Mike Rose. His research methods include a pre- and post-writing assignment questionnaire, post hoc questioning, stimulated recall (aided by video tapes), and speaking out
loud protocols (1984). Rose's ongoing research identifies and explores two different levels of blocked writers which he calls "high-blockers" and "low-blockers." These levels are determined by statistical weighting of answers to twenty-four statements about writing attitudes and behavior. Each question is answered on a graded scale: almost always (90-100% of the time), often (75% of the time), sometimes (50% of the time), occasionally (25% of the time), and almost never (0-10% of the time). Five of the sample statements from Mike Rose's questionnaire are listed below:

1) I run over deadlines because I get stuck while trying to write my paper.

2) There are times when I'm not sure how to organize all the information I've gathered for a report.

3) Each sentence I write has to be just right before I'll go on to the next sentence.

4) While writing a paper, I'll hit places that keep me stuck for an hour or more.

5) I like having the opportunity to express myself in writing (1984, 109).

Most of the subjects in Mike Rose's research have been freshman at UCLA and have come from different majors, not just English. Additionally, he has conducted comparative
research on professional writers who still fall into one of the two categories of blocking and share characteristics with others in the same grouping. Low-blockers share common attributes with other low-blockers, and high-blockers share traits with other high-blockers. These commonalities are consistent over time and apply to pauses in writing, revising and proofreading; time spent planning and prewriting; words deleted in each draft; and, most importantly, overall quality (clarity, organization, and correctness) of the final written products (42). Even writers with low-blocking scores have writing problems in each of the four areas, but as the level of blocking increases so does the severity of the problems found.

All of the research done to date supports the conclusion that writer's block wastes time and causes ineffective writing. If this is true, writer's block has the potential for being a genuine crisis in business. The phrase, "Time is Money," echoes through business offices everywhere, and habitual disregard for time—or frequent missed deadlines—can be grounds for discipline or dismissal (Forrester 121).

Even ineffective writing can cost money. Consider, for example, the danger of unclear training instructions, written by a low-blocked writer. If the information
confuses or misleads the trainee, time can be lost. If the information causes inappropriate action, a product might be assembled in an unsafe manner--later, a malfunction might add overhead costs; or worse yet, an accident might result in lost time, a lawsuit, or an injury. Certainly, writer's block is not the only cause of faulty business writing; but as a contributing factor, it is important to examine the symptoms that may hint at its presence.

The effects of writer's block are varied: "They are as individualistic and idiosyncratic as the writers themselves; but a common thread exists, and that is that blocks lead to the production of jumbled and unclear writing" (Ashton 1). At the most extreme level of blocking, no writing is produced at all—even after an extended period of time. Information about this crisis condition, and related block-busting suggestions, is scant and offers a challenge for future research (Fox 88). Writers who simply can't perform are probably among the school dropouts and possibly among the unemployed. If these individuals were to hold jobs that require writing, the noticeable effects could be missed deadlines, lost contracts, and a lack of any written documentation. Some totally blocked business writers may survive by delegating all their writing tasks (Broadwell 212). But eventually,
when pressures for effective writing increase in volume and urgency, even these sheltered people will "top out" or perish in the competitive push for results.

At mid-range and low-blocking levels, writer's block can still be a crisis. The result of blocked writing can be assessed by an inadequate amount of writing to satisfy the assignment or by the unsatisfactory quality of that writing. Mike Rose, for example, says that blocking can cause an inability to come to grips with the rhetorical problem of a project (1984, 25). In business terms, the writer might not grasp the situation and, as a consequence, gather unnecessary data or reach conclusions not supported by the evidence. A mystified supervisor would read the finished product and grumble, "This is not what I needed; why can't these people write a simple report?" Sadly, this same boss might misdiagnose the failure as an "attitude" problem or as proof of incompetency. If, however, the possibility of writer's block were considered, explored, and treated appropriately, the employee might "recover" and become an excellent business writer.

Procrastination is frequently labeled a symptom of writer's block, but it can serve a purpose when the "waiting time" is used as a period for planning and preparation. The positive effects of delay will be
discussed in chapter three; the negative effects deserve attention in this section. Procrastination, borne of writer's block, can cause: 1) added pressure to the writer and members of the staff (Bovee 82); 2) delayed implementation of time and money-saving procedures (Sorrels vii); and 3) missed deadlines or opportunities (viii).

Procrastination aside, a final draft of any business report can whisper "block" by the very choice of the words it contains. Studies of work produced by low-blocked writers show an abundance of qualifiers such as "it seems likely," "perhaps," "possibly," and "maybe." Because the writer was partially blocked, he or she felt safer by keeping distant from the subject; therefore the "heart of the message was lost....and all that was left was hesitancy and doubt" (Mack 204). John Keenan, chairman of the English Department and professor at La Salle College, says it very well in _Feel Free to Write: A Guide for Business and Professional People_: "Hedging is another symptom for blocked business writing. Hedging—also called overqualifying—slows down the message and causes the reader to ask, 'What's the point?'" (67).

Closely related to the "overqualifying" symptom is the absence of the active voice. Mike Rose finds a marked increased in passive voice occurrences as blocking
increases from low to high levels (1985, 195). Writing in
the passive voice could be a symptom of writer's block or
it could be a defense mechanism to avoid taking a stand and
being exposed (Penrose 37, Fulmer 12). Phyllis Hemphill
blames writer's block for problems of passivity,
redundancy, and wordiness. She is also concerned about
gobbledygook (wordy and generally unintelligible jargon) in
written business communications (40).

She is joined in her concern by John Keenan and others
who believe writer's block perpetuates this kind of
ineffective writing. Inexperienced and blocked writers—in
business, politics and the military—seem to feel safer
when they copy the style of those who have gone before.
They thumb through files of dead letters, memos, and
reports for some clue as to how to begin a required piece
of writing. Unfortunately, many of these people lack a
sound background in English composition (or believe that
Business English is somewhat different from what they were
taught), and they do not use a critical eye for scanning
the work they find. Indeed, they mistrust their ability
and judge other writing as good because "it got published
or just because someone else wrote it" (Keenan 13).

The following example of business gibberish appeared
in a March 1986 issue of The Business Writer. It was an
actual memo written in pure bureaucratese; perhaps it was copied from another similar memo by some hapless, blocked hospital employee:

Current chart management procedures have been totally ineffective in utilizing proposed reference materials and guidelines. Contrary to specifically stated expectations, too many employees continue procedures best left forgotten. This lamentable lapse was specifically referred to in memo 121.4. All employees are kindly required to reconsult the aforementioned written communication to implement improvements that have already been mandated.

This memo could be effectively pared down from fifty-eight words to nine: "Hospital employees: Keep better tabs of your patients' charts" (Perney 5).

This example also shows that blocked writers don't necessarily write less, just worse. Fulmer and Broadwell agree that writer's block can cause evasive, weak, and sometimes verbose communications (17, 132). Mike Rose echoes their concern in this way: "Inner conflicts manifest themselves in jumbled syntax and unclear diction" (1985 ix). John Keenan is also concerned about the consequences of writer's block. He says, "Hackneyed
expressions and wordy sentences are effects of writer's block because they become security blankets to ward off the fear of making a mistake" (14). Yes, the symptoms persist, and the patient--business writing--is seriously ill. But it is important to restate: writer's block is not the only cause of hesitancy, passivity, redundancy, and wordiness. If it is even partially at fault, however, and if we can identify the cause and take corrective action, business writing may recover.
Chapter one spotlighted the symptoms and the negative effects writer's block can have on business writing. Clearly, ineffective writing is costly on several levels, and today's shift from an industrial-based system to an information-based system makes better business writing even more crucial (Bowman 3). To paraphrase an old saying, it's not what you know that counts; it's how well you communicate what you know. As with other crises in business which require decisive action, writer's block responds best to a logical problem solving approach. The best attack is to 1) define and identify the problem, 2) gather facts by determining the effects of the problem, 3) generate possible solutions, 4) select and implement an appropriate action, and 5) be sensitive to the feedback which will let you know if your corrective action was successful. We have already defined and identified the crisis of writer's block, gathered some facts based on research, and determined a need for taking action. The question at this point in the discussion is what causes writer's block?

For one thing, writing is hard work. The process of putting words to paper is difficult and exhausting.
Writing involves thinking (planning, organizing, and controlling); it also calls on verbal expertise, hand-eye coordination, and a degree of self-confidence which we all lack at times. Mike Rose says it very well: "Writing involves the shaping, structuring, refining, and evaluating of thought. To affirm this complex and deliberate series of processes is not to deny the fact that some composing also involves flashes of insight, seemingly unconscious connections, and the feeling of rightness or wrongness" (1985, 235).

When writing is important to a person's economic well-being, as it is in a situation of a business or professional nature, the work may be made even more difficult. "Extra pressures are exerted on writing performance when the stake is greater," theorizes Lynn Bloom (121). And she provides evidence by using specific examples of blocked writers who find a dissertation or proposal to a Board of Directors even more of a crisis than more casual written communications. Part of her research involved a writer who was faced with the "publish or perish dilemma." Unfortunately, because of his severe case of writer's block; he did not respond to treatment, and he perished (126).
Others agree that we block in direct correlation to what is most important in our lives at a given point. When as a child, we realize the importance of a perfect spelling paper, we start to block each time we sense a misspelling. When we recognize the existence of an "audience," we also catch a form of writer's stage fright, and we are blocked again (Graves 85). This process continues. We block more seriously as the importance of our work grows. For example, students in graduate English composition classes, who feel that their writing should be above average, catch severe cases of writer's block. Teachers, after grading reams of creative writing attempts, block when trying to put their own thoughts on the word processor, and business people who are expected to produce concise, perfect reports or letters block and panic at the thought of taking pen in hand.

Dr. Lynn Bloom pinpoints other external distractions which can cause writing blocks in business. A noisy, uncongenial atmosphere, for example, can be a hindrance. A stuffed in-basket, time constraints, and priorities imposed by reporting to more than one supervisor at a time can easily undermine the best of intentions (123). Even the practicality of required formats and the need for simplicity can cause blocking in the business atmosphere.
This is an important issue. Do the clearly defined purposes and the well-established format of most business communications serve to aid or hinder writers? The answer is ambiguous because these constraints can both help and hinder writers. Recent emphasis on the value of simplicity is a case in point and reflects Winston Churchill's words: "Short words are best, and the old words when short are the best of all." Some business writers embrace this new (and, perhaps, necessary trend) because it frees them from the expectations of using longer words than may be a part of their working vocabularies. However, these very constraints can cause blocking for other writers. The emphasis on plain style in the interest of "clarity, brevity, and objectivity" limits the writers' choices (Lea 12), and can send them back to a painfully long search for the shortest and best word.

Lynn Bloom also criticizes stultifying business formats, which are like formulaic five-paragraph essays. She believes that the formats in business are much too regimented and cause extra blocking (122). There are opposing viewpoints as well, though. For example, in response to the question, "Do established formats restrict business writers?" John Keenan answers: "Not necessarily. In fact even stringent company dictated formats can still
allow room for a writer's ingenuity and intelligence" (26).
I have been teaching Administrative Communications at the
Junior College level for several years now; and recently
I've asked my own students about this very issue. Again,
there is an apparent difference of opinion. Some of the
students, all business education majors, feel inhibited by
rules and requirements. Others, however, insist they can't
write without them. Most of the feedback (about seventy
percent), favors exact formats for reports. Evidently, the
majority favor the security of a structure, such as the one
outlined below, for a manuscript assignment.

1. Front matter
   a. Cover
   b. Title page
   c. Authorization
   d. Acceptance
   e. Transmittal
   f. List of contents
   g. List of illustrations
   h. List of tables
   i. Preface, foreword, and acknowledgment
   j. Abstract

2. Body
   a. Introduction
   b. Main body (usually consisting of several
clearly defined divisions)
   c. Conclusions and/or recommendations
In addition to the specifications for the report's format, my students have a strong need to know the expected length of each section and how they should set up the pages. It would seem that they have been trained (during early education or on-the-job) to provide "just what the teacher or boss wants." Several of my most successful students, as measured by their writing ability and test scores, say they enjoy using prescribed formats because it is reassuring and easy—just like filling out a form.

There are internal as well as external causes for writer's block, and fear is a very real internal cause of writer's block. In fact, writer's block can be compared to another common anxiety: stage fright. Picture a young executive about to make an important presentation to an especially hostile audience. The adrenalin starts to pump through her body and causes perspiration, butterflies, tight neck muscles, rapid breathing, light headedness, and an overwhelming desire to run. An excess of adrenalin, brought on by a bout of anxiety, can also cause a disruption in the short-term memory (Rose, 1985, 23). How
many of us have panicked and wondered, "What was I going to say next?" The reactions suffered by this executive could just as easily face a middle-management employee who must write a manuscript. The parallel is very accurate if we imagine the project as an important one which might result in a promotion, demotion, or transfer. Yes, fear is a very real cause of blocking.

What fears might face business writers? Fear of exposure is one of them. James Metcalf, a coach, successful author, and English teacher, suggests, "Both written and motor expression involve the individual's ego. Perhaps writing anxiety and the dislike of physical education share a common etiology, for to perform either task is to lay one's ego open for insult" (21). Because writing is such a blatant exposure of self, it touches our most vulnerable spots and conjures up nightmares of being the only one at the party who forgot to get dressed. John Daly says avoidance of writing could be a protection against exposure just as a closed office door is a guard against invasion of privacy and space (10).

Another fear which causes blocking is the fear of consequences. Writing produces a permanent record of thought, and in business it feels like the writer is putting his educated guesses, tentative conclusions, and
innermost secrets on stone tablets for all to see. Nothing
can erase a mistake in business writing; especially after
it has been xeroxed, circulated, microfilmed, and filed
away for posterity. It is no wonder that business people
hesitate to take a "stand" in written form. Misdirected or
misinterpreted messages can cause loss of morale, loss of
an account, or even loss of a valuable employee. Plentiful
evidence (in the form of horror stories) reminds business
writers about repercussions caused by sentences taken out­
of-context, casual memos stored in personnel files, or
letters ending up in the wrong hands (Bovee 31). With so
much at stake, it is understandable why the fear of
consequences causes writer's block in organizations.

Some business writers block because they are
indecisive (Harris 172). And this indecisiveness may well
carry over into other areas of decision making. Other
writers block because they are uncertain about the
instructions for the assignment or the rewards to be
enjoyed as a result of successful completion of the work.
Too often, supervisors give only cursory explanations with
no background about the problem or need for a solution. To
compound the difficulty, the employee, not wanting to ask
too many questions, starts to write without really knowing
why. Blocking is the natural result in this situation for
the same reason that blocking might develop because of "uncertainty about assignments and grades" for student writers (White 101).

Other writers block in response to specific outside circumstances. Bloom has noted, "The intensity with which the writer pursues the goals of working on and completing a particular task is inevitably influenced by his or her involvement in other roles and commitments to other activities perhaps unrelated to writing" (132). A business writer, for example, who has agreed to transfer her family to another location cannot dedicate all her attention to writing long-range plans for a project which others will complete. Clearly, conflicts of interest and role incongruity are specific examples of this blocking cause. In other words, a business writer is like a dancer who doesn't perform in a vacuum: "The dancer, the dance, and the place of performance are inextricably interrelated: they cannot be understood in isolation" (133).

Strong emotions can cause writer's block, too. Although reason dictates that an analytical approach is desirable in business (especially in the preparation of an appeal for funds, a persuasive letter, or a recommendation for dismissal), emotions are not easily put aside (Larson 22). Anger can really inhibit a business writer when he or
she feels put upon or burdened by a project at work. The writer feels anger which is directed toward the boss (who assigned the work), and peers (who may not give adequate help), or toward an innocent party who just happens to interrupt any phase of the writing. Oddly enough, these same interruptions are subconsciously sought after and welcomed because they get in the way of the writing and provide an excuse to stop the work. During research projects, people who are angry don't admit the anger; instead they feel "overwhelmed, flustered, pressured, or just scared." They also report being "plagued by inner voices that are critical of everything they write" (22).

A slightly different emotional response, but one of equal importance to blocking, is the frustration which comes when a writer sees a project as unnecessary. Many business reports (progress summaries, justifications, interim studies, and interpretative documents, etc.) are the result of policy or habit and have no real need or purpose; these exercises in futility are an affront to writers' abilities and intelligence. This "busy work" causes a deep emotional response and can produce righteous blocking.

Based on my research, there is one last factor which causes writer's block and sabotages written communications.
in business. I believe writer's block is primarily caused by an overwhelming desire for perfection. This block is closely related to the one caused by the fear of being exposed as being stupid or inferior. Since spelling, punctuation, and grammar are supposed to reflect our intelligence, our ability to communicate, and our reasoning power; no one wants to expose a weakness in this area.

During our early education, we are bombarded with rules and expectations about correctness, and at some point early in grammar school we internalize these values (Oliver 165). The most severe blocking of all comes as a direct result of the external critic we've known and the internal critics we have created. Writers, and not just those with the least developed writing skills, become so concerned with "correctness" that they become preoccupied with worry over violating rules and conventions. Business writers and others grope for the perfect word, the most pleasing phrase, the proper spelling, and the precise punctuation needed. As a consequence, many writers edit continuously, even on what should be a free-flowing rough draft; these writers are partially paralyzed by the blocking phenomenon.

The concern for correctness has been identified by interviews with students and professional writers. They tell about the blocking experience originating with a
panicked struggle over a half-remembered rule such as those discussed earlier. They also share feelings about being exposed, vulnerable, or somehow inferior to others (Rose, 1984, 3). Remember the case of the insecure writer who searched the files believing that anyone else could write more effectively than he could. So often these blocked writers wait, pen in hand, to be judged "worthy" or "not worthy." And who, after all, is sitting on the judge's bench? For authors the answer might be either their editor or the public; for students, it might be the English professor, and for business people it might be the boss, the marketing department, the customer, or the bottom line of an accounts receivable sheet. But most likely, in all the cases listed above, the most critical judges are surely the writers themselves.

We can clearly see from all of these examples that the causes of writer's block are as individual as fingerprints. Each case is unique and important. And each different type of block must be treated with a specialized cure in order to restore the writer to a satisfactory level of efficiency.
CHAPTER III: CURES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Before identifying treatments for writer's block, it is appropriate to review the groundwork set down so far. Writer's block, especially within the parameters of the business world, is a serious concern. In fact, it is more than a concern; it is a crisis because it causes lost time and revenue. Research into the problem of writer's block shows that different levels of blocking exist, and even those people identified as low-blockers struggle with achieving satisfactory work. Blocked business writers can produce writing that is too short or long, too vague, too passive, too unorganized, too laced with gobbledygook, or too full of distracting errors. Any one of these problems can easily keep the written communication from achieving its desired goal.

Writer's block can develop at any stage of the process of writing and can be caused just because writing is hard work. Additional causes, presented in chapter two, include inexperience, indecisiveness, external (business) pressures, internal (personal) pressures, fear distractions, strong emotions, or the crippling over-concern for first draft perfection.
An effective program of treatment is only possible if the underlying cause of the blocking has been identified. "Personalized attention to writer's block can be the very key needed for success" (Bloom 132). Toward that end, I have put together a questionnaire to help business writing students identify their particular blocking problems. (Please see Figure 1, Page 41.) I've used this writing assessment tool with students in my Administrative Communications classes and have received immediate and positive feedback from their comments. But more importantly, some of the writers have been able to understand their blocking problems and overcome them more effectively than ever before. This same assessment questionnaire could be used just as well in workshops or on-site locations where an improvement in writing attitudes and products is desired.

What cures can be implemented after the causes have been identified? For some blocked writers, the outline (as a way of ordering chaos) is a useful strategy. I would recommend that even writers who need to outline should use an informal style rather than the complicated Roman Numeral approach. Again, finding out the needs of individual business writers is crucial because, "In the hands of some writers, the outline can become an inhibiting device,
a structure that by its rigidity can limit further
invention or by its complicity hamper the writer's
progress" (Rose, 1980, 394). In other words, any cure is
effective only if it satisfied the need of the writer
involved.

Some writers discover that they block when their
emotions run high. If they identify that as a cause, Reed
Larson would recommend they postpone the writing for a
"cooling down period" (19). He cautions against waiting
too long, however, because some emotional involvement in
the writing process adds life and interest to the finished
product. This lesson in emotional block-busting can be
presented through the experience of writing a crank letter
during a classroom or seminar setting. A handout for
discussion purposes and a related assignment might really
help writers with this special type of blocking disorder.
(See Figure 2, Page 44.)

When a writer blocks because he or she feels confined
by the restrictions of required business report formats,
all is not lost. In fact, John Keenan suggests "stepping
out of bounds can be both relaxing and exciting at the same
time" (25). Experimentation, he believes, is a good tool
for breaking down writer's block.
"It's even OK," he says, "To use the white space of your paper as a way of drawing attention to an important point" (26).

Lynn Bloom offers good advice to blocked writers when she, in effect counsels: Writer, Know Thyself. She believes (and I agree) that we have internal biological factors that can cause blocking (122). If we become more aware of our own peaks and valleys of creative energy, we can schedule our important writing tasks for the best times, and our writing will be better for it. Her research also includes interviews with writers who block for no apparent reason. They just get stuck. Brainstorming seems to help this type of blockage, but sometimes writers are at a loss even for a starting possible solution. To help these writers, I use another class handout (Figure 3, Page 47) which lists several block-busting techniques. Exercising, relaxing, and changing approaches are just three of the thirteen possibilities.

Certain treatments can best be administered only by the supervisor of the blocked business writer. The boss can be most helpful if he or she were to practice giving good instructions about a project before it's begun and
positive reinforcement for the work in progress. Moreover, effective supervisors can use their knowledge of Frederick Herzberg's job satisfaction theory and realize that the task (and topic) can motivate writers (Hemphill 18). Herzberg has demonstrated that achievement through success with the task at hand is the best motivator; therefore, whenever possible, employers should tailor writing jobs and assignments that mesh with employees' interests and backgrounds. A positive feeling toward the writing task produces a very desirable physical condition, increased memory skills, good muscle tone, and an increased attention span (Larson 36).

What else can supervisors do to help blocked employees? Lynn Bloom's case studies of blocked professional writers might provide an answer to this question (136). If supervisors were more educated about how outside pressures of role conflicts or family concerns cause and compound blocking problems, they might be more willing to make an adjustment in working hours or assignments. In the long run, a less anxious employee produces much more effective writing.

Boice's solution to writer's block is to accept the fact that it is a natural part of the process. "There is nothing mysterious about it. Writers must establish
regular and moderate writing habits if they are to remain productive and contented" (11). His advice might work for those writers who block because they lack discipline. But other researchers (Flower 43, and Murray 220) disagree with any forced writing on a programmed schedule. They think writers need to procrastinate (with lengthy periods of no writing) and that these periods of inactivity can be valuable for planning and "resting up" for the other times when the desire to write forces the writer into a frenzy of high production.

The block which results from a reaction to an external or internal "correctness" critic might be responsive to a number of different cures. John Keenan suggests trying to banish the critical voices by releasing the need to impress others (14). If a writer is able to do this--after much practice--he or she will no longer try to imitate bad models and will, instead, start writing in a more clear, concise and well-organized way. The recent invention of word processors might also help reduce adverse effects of this type of blocking. Perhaps the need for perfect sentences and precise spelling will be less of a hindrance if the writers realize they can "fix" it all before pushing the print command. If, however, the writer is unfamiliar
with (or anxious about) computers, this cure would certainly not work.

Many business writers suffer from a need for first draft excellence because they think other people always write spontaneously and perfectly. They think, "Everyone else does it better than I do," because they have seen only finished products and were not privy to the pain involved in producing the work (Mack 26). When they feel confusion in mid-sentence, they block. And worse yet, their self-esteem is crossed off or erased along with each unsatisfactory word choice. The kindest thing a boss could do for these employees would be to show them the process of revisions in action. I am very fond of the advice offered by Jacques Barzun (Mack 118), and it might be reassuring to some other blocked writers:

Convince yourself that you are working in clay not marble, on paper not eternal bronze: let that first sentence be as stupid as it wishes. No one will rush out and print it as it stands. Just put it down; then another. Your whole first paragraph or first page may have to be guillotined after your piece is finished: it is a kind of forebirth.
Some writers who block because they think poorly of themselves are helped by a process called imaging (Adams, Ashton, Fezler, Galyean). This technique resembles positive thinking and the use of a very positive mental attitude. This treatment is especially valuable for those who block due to inexperience or insecurity. Imaging is most successful if the writer visualizes or images success in specific terms. For example, at a moment of frustration, writers should close their eyes and see themselves pulling the last page out of the typewriter or handing the completed proposals to their bosses. Better still, the writer could picture a scene about getting a promotion as a result of a well-written manuscript.

Relaxation therapy is also used as an aid for writers who suffer debilitating bouts of anxiety. Recall Larson's research about how over stimulation causes tight muscles, memory lapses, and unorganized thinking (22). When this happens, relaxation is certainly the appropriate cure. Many professional authors have sought help with therapists and even hypnotists in order to break through a very stubborn block (Benson, Edmonston, Minninger). Methods that are easy to employ, without outside assistance, include progressive relaxation (from toes to head), time-out to listen to some music, or to do some deep-breathing
exercises. An added advantage is that these treatments can even be used within the confines of the office.

It is my belief that education is the best cure for writer's block. As with any other problem, facing it head-on, and understanding its causes and effects, can go a long way toward defusing its destructive power. Business people are becoming much more aware of writer's block as the volume and importance of written communication increases. Some organizations are even talking positive steps to provide help and appropriate training for employees who must write effectively. Several of the Fortune 500 companies are hiring "creativity consultants" to conduct seminars in writing improvement. One such seminar uses tapes and computer software to encourage relaxation and to break down the barriers which prevent good writing.

Many such programs are being offered to satisfy the growing need for more education about problems in writing. Recently, I attended a conference for the Independent Writers of Southern California. In a workshop titled, "How To Stamp Out Writer's Block And Get In Touch With Your Creative Unconscious," I learned more about conquering my own blocks (or, more accurately, how to live with them).

Here are just four of the suggestions from that workshop:
1) Deal with your personal demons (nervousness, an authority figure from your past, or an unsympathetic boss) by figuratively locking them out of the boundaries of your mind.

2) Get in touch with your own internal critic by roleplaying a dialogue with him or her about your writing and your realistic expectations.

3) Keep a calendar for your writing assignments; break them down into components and even include preliminary procrastination in your plan.

4) Devise a reward system for work accomplished (Lieberman).

Not everyone can attend seminars, so some businesses are having in-house classes and are publishing information to help writers in distress. An article from the Executive Fitness Newsletter starts in the following manner:

Your phone's ringing off the hook, your secretary just quit, and there are ten other crises you have to deal with before tomorrow. But in front of you, you've got the biggest crisis of all. It's a blank piece of paper (or empty computer screen) onto which you must write your thoughts in the form of a crucial memo to some VIP like your boss or a client.
Cursing yourself for not listening more to your high-school English composition courses, you attempt to put words to paper. What comes out is a poorly organized, overly complicated piece of writing. And you don't know how to fix it. You are suffering from acute writer's block brought on by the stress of writing under pressure.

The authors of this article list and discuss ways to take the stress out of writing ("Ten Tips"). Some of the ideas would help with block-busting and would eliminate some of the symptoms discussed in chapter two. For example, one suggestion is to write with the human touch. Sprinkle your prose with "I", "we," and "you." It softens your writing and makes it easier to read than the stiff, archaic business language of past years. Other advice is "Come to the point immediately, write to express, not to impress, and don't worry about grammar until after your ideas are worked out" ("Ten Tips").

In an attempt to discover what treatments are being prescribed by more formal training sources, I surveyed fourteen of the Business Education textbooks being used in junior colleges and universities in Southern California. (See Figure 4, Page 50.) Each of these texts has a listing in the Index for "Writer's Block" or for "Writing
Apprehension." Clearly, there is a new wave of emphasis and interest in better business writing. The best discussion about writer's block suggests free-writing techniques (Bovee 125) which echo the advice of researchers like Peter Elbow (194) and Linda Flower (69).

Another textbook, Business Communications Fundamentals, has a good discussion about the debate over which comes first, writing or organizing. Their recommendation is to "just write" because "people rarely write well, but they can learn to rewrite well" (Sorrels 126). This idea is just like the advice Mike Rose gives to some of his students who are high-blockers. Bobbye D. Sorrels also mentions the gap between thinking speed (400 words per minute) and longhand writing speed (25 words per minute). This discrepancy can cause blocking when it permits distracting thoughts to interfere. It can be productive, however, if disciplined into creative planning time. If this problem is identified as a real concern, Sorrels suggests using a tape recorder, abbreviations, or a word processor to type and store creating "random outpourings" (129).

The least helpful textbook I reviewed has this to say about writer's block: "No, writing is not easy, but like any task that requires work, effort and concentration; its
satisfactory completion is gratifying and rewarding" (Sigband 167). This advice offers little practical advice for business writers. In fact, it sounds slightly pompous and like the business language which is copied by insecure, blocked writers.

I believe that education about writer's block should include an answer to the question, are all of the effects of writer's block negative ones? Research is split on this question, but I support Mike Rose, Linda Flower, and Donald Murray in saying "no." Rose says that our composing is marked by "pauses, false starts, and gnawing feelings of discontent" (1985 ix). He cautions us to be aware of these messages and treat them as if they were gentle prods to rethink the problem or our approach to it. In other words, there may be value to making writer's block an advisor rather than an enemy.

Even the fear and uncomfortable feelings associated with writer's block have some value. Professional speakers welcome some stage fright because it keeps them on their toes and "up" for the performance. Athletes expect the tension before a contest and know that the adrenalin will help them "psych" themselves up for the event. Writers, also, can learn to accept periods of blocking and use these times more creatively. Recall from an earlier discussion
that blocking intensifies as tasks become more important. Perhaps blocking serves to improve written products even as it turns stress into distress.

I recommend that information about writer's block, its causes, effects, and cures be incorporated into writing composition classes at the junior college and university levels. The Writing Assessment Questionnaire and two Block-Busting Technique handouts (Figures 1, 2, and 3) may be helpful as part of these classes or as part of seminars or workshops given for business writers. Moreover, I would recommend additional writing classes for business majors. English 101 (Freshman Composition) and Administration 495 (an upper division writing requirement) at California State University San Bernardino, may not be enough to prepare our business people for the increasing expectations of writing in organizations. Writer's block has been a crisis in business for too long; it's time to act and make it less of a crisis and more of a challenge.
1. What kinds of writing do you do as a part of your job? (Examples: letters, memos, reports, recommendations; if other, please specify)

2. Which of the examples listed above is easiest for you?

3. Which of the examples above is most difficult?

4. Describe a situation in which you could do your best possible writing. Consider: environment, time of day, type of project, your interest level, and the intended audience.

5. Give an example of a successful piece of written communication you completed. Answer the following questions about your work: What were you working on? What were the results? How did you feel about your final draft? What feedback, if any, did you get from others?
6. Describe a situation when you should have written but found it difficult to do so. In your response, list the problems you had. For example: interruptions, deadlines, lack of motivation (why?), or distractions.

7. Which parts of the writing process gives you the most trouble? Some possible answers might be: 1) thinking of ideas, 2) choosing the words you want to express those ideas, 3) putting your writing into an organized form, 4) using the format required by your business, 5) revising, 6) proofreading, or 7) feeling satisfied with your end result.

8. Does it help you to make outlines when you are writing? (Yes/No)

9. Do you write effectively when you experience strong emotions such as joy or anger? (Yes/No) Why?
10. Do the specific formats required by your business keep you from feeling free to write? (Yes/No)

11. Do you procrastinate as long as possible before you start a written project? (Yes/No)

12. Pick either answer "A" or "B" below:
A___When I procrastinate, I feel the time I waited is totally wasted, so I feel even more pressured to finish the job.
B___I need the "waiting time" of procrastination because it helps me plan and prepare for the task ahead.

13. Have you ever experienced what you would call "Writer's Block"? If so, what did you do to overcome it and finish the writing involved?
EMOTIONAL BLOCK-BUSTING

BLOCK-BUSTING TECHNIQUES

Writing is difficult enough when you're cool and organized, but it becomes even more of a challenge at those times when emotions run high. Extreme joy and anger can cause acute cases of writer's block.

One suggestion for dealing with the anger about a subject is to write a "crank" letter before actually drafting a copy to be mailed. Here is an example of such a "crank" letter:

Dear ABC Company:

Your Lion 500 is a lemon. The damn car broke down just one day after the warranty expired, and I've spent well over $1,000 on it since then—all in totally unnecessary expenditures....I'm ready to take you to court on this one. You can't and won't get away with this crime. The warranty isn't worth the paper it's printed on....Nobody is reimbursing me for the time I've lost at work or
Dear ABC Company:

I am extremely displeased with your product. I bought one of your Lion 500's recently (see enclosed copy of the purchase contract) and in the six months that I have owned it, it has spent more time in the dealer's service shop than on the road—literally. (See enclosed service orders.) Only one day after the limited warranty expired, the car's transmission failed. That was the first of seven major manufacturing or assembling flaws that I have had to contend with. Copies of repair bills and a letter from the
dealer—confirming my careful maintenance of the car—are also enclosed.

I expect you to extend my warranty and reimburse me for the extraordinary expenses outlined on the attachment.

Sincerely,

Jane O. Driven

Enclosure

cc: Consumer Protection Bureau

(Source letters: Mack 1979)

ASSIGNMENT: Remember a time when you were very angry. You might think about a product that didn't work, a service that wasn't satisfactory, or an incident at work that made you furious. Try to "feel" just like you did at the time and write a crank letter about the incident. When you are finished, write a more controlled version of your complaint.
Beginning writers, as well as experienced business writers, sometimes face a condition called "writer's block." Simply stated, this situation involves an anxiety which stops the writing process. Writers say that it is like having a case of paralysis of both mind and hand. Frequently, they say, "I can't think of an idea," or, "I can't get my idea down on paper to suit myself or my boss."

Having a case of writer's block is like coming face-to-face with a cement wall. Just a few options are available: (1) retreat and try another path, (2) go over the wall, or (3) try to knock it down with block-busting techniques. Try to identify the cause of your own blocking; then take corrective action and implement one or more of the following block-busting techniques:

1. Don't panic. The problem is not a "terminal" illness (although it probably feels like one). All writers have shared the blocked feeling and have found it to be a temporary condition.
2. Don't bang your head against the "wall." If you've been sitting at your desk at home or at work, and you've been staring at a blank page for ten minutes, it's time to retreat, rest, and regroup.

3. Use brainstorming techniques to create lists of possible ideas or different ways of saying things.

4. Don't worry about perfection in your first draft efforts.

   -All writing goes through a process of revision. When you have only seen finished letters and reports, you may believe that everyone else has a magic formula, and that your efforts are weak by comparison. On the contrary, there are many ways of saying things, and yours may be just as good (or better) in the final analysis.

5. As you write your first draft, leave extra wide margins and space between the lines. These areas will be used to note your own questions, comments and revisions.

6. Experiment. You may find it helpful to letter or number your ideas to help in the organization of the final product. Some writers draw boxes, circles, or arrows on their first drafts.
7. If you feel tense because you're concerned about a reader judging your work, try to relax and pretend that you're writing to a non-critical friend.

8. Write as if you're talking to yourself. Jot down W.I.R.M.I. (what I really mean is....); then try restating your point.

9. Change your writing tool. Try longhand instead of typing for awhile, or vice versa. Use a pencil or a colored pen.

10. Get up out of your chair and take a brisk walk around the block.

11. If you feel your muscles cramp, relax your hand and arm and draw a creative "doodle."

12. Imagine yourself being finished with the project. Let your fantasy center on your success and the positive results you hoped to achieve with this piece of writing.

13. Break your writing assignment into small, manageable segments. For example, you might plan to brainstorm (generate ideas) on Monday, write three paragraphs on Tuesday, and have a rough draft ready by Wednesday. If you take one step at a time (and remove your self-imposed pressure for first draft perfection), you may discover that you've broken through your writer's block (Flower 38).
LIST OF BUSINESS WRITING TEXTBOOKS PREVIEWED


Hemphill, *Business Communication with Writing Improvement Exercises*, Prentice-Hall

Himstreet & Baty, *Business Communications*, Kent

Lesikar, *Basic Business Communication*, Irwin

Lesikar, *Business Communication*, Irwin


Pearce, Figgins, & Gollen, *Principles of Business Communication*, Wiley

Sigband & Bateman, *Communication in Business*, Scott Foresman

Sigband & Bell, *Communication for Management and Business*, Scott Foresman

Sorrells, *Business Communications Fundamentals*, Charles E. Merrill

Treece, *Successful Business Communication*, Alklyn and Bacon
Wilkinson, Clarke, & Wilkinson, *Communicating Through Letters and Reports*, Irwin

Wolf & Kuiper, *Effective Communication in Business*, South-Western
ABBREVIATIONS USED IN JOURNAL ENTRIES

CCC College Composition and Communication
CE College English
ED ERIC Document
EE English Education
EJ Education Journal
ERIC Educational Resources Information Center
JBC Journal of Business Communication
JER Journal of Reading
TETYC Teaching English in the Two-Year College
TFC Teaching Freshman Composition
TWI The Writing Instructor


Fox, Roy F. *Treatment of Writing Apprehension and its Effects on Composition.* (ERIC, 1979) 36 (ED 189637).


Bloom, Martin. Anxious Writers: Distinguishing Anxiety from Pathology (ERIC, 1979) 8 (ED 1722254).


Fox, Roy F. Treatment of Writing Apprehension and its Effects on Composition. (ERIC, 1979) 36 (ED 189637).


"I Just Can't Do English: Writing Anxiety in the Classroom." *TETYC* n1 9 Fall 1982: 19-23.


Zahahi, Walter R. "All the Answers to Writer's Block." *Communication Quarterly* n3 30 Summer, 1982: 203-209.