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105 WAYS TO BEAT WRITER'S BLOCK

Justin Arnold

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ISBN-13: 978-1484883631

ISBN-10: 1484883632

Introduction

"There's no such thing as writer's block." No doubt as a writer you will have heard that before, probably whilst sitting there facing the monumental task of writing the remaining 78,998 words of your novel, having so far managed merely to write your name. And even that's been redrafted to exclude your middle name.

Of course there's such a thing as writer's block, but what's perhaps not so clear is how this can be defined. Defining what we mean by writer's block is important, because it's only through this understanding that we can fully appreciate what the problem is and do something about it.

No matter how many hours you sit staring at a blank sheet of paper or screen waiting for inspiration to fall from the sky or the writer's block to fall out of your left ear it's unlikely that you'll make much progress.

The first thing to point out is that you are far from alone. If you have ever struggled to find the words to continue or even begin a story or book then you are in good company. Most of us at one time or another have found that our imaginations feel dried up and that we may never write another word again.

But this isn't a medical condition, at least not normally. It's important to remember that writing is a very creative process. Not every word will be unique, but the combination of those words certainly will be. You will be using words that have been used billions of times before, but in entirely new ways, expressing new ideas, imagining new worlds and creating new people to walk that other world.

It's a lot to ask, and far more involved than merely jabbing at the keys on a keyboard in the hope that given eternity you'll end up creating a masterpiece. Or the complete works of Shakespeare.

You may have experienced that wonderful sensation of writing busily on a new book or story, with words flowing so freely that you feel almost puppet-like, desperately trying to write them all down as quickly as possible before they are blown away like the dust of a morning dream. Yet later on in that same story you may be struggling to get anything down at all. You may find that even turning to another book or story results in nothing much happening. You may start to panic, worrying that you have run out of ideas.

Relax. You haven't. The human mind is considerably more inventive and creative than that, and there is no such thing as a writer's block that can't be unblocked. It's simply a case of understanding why the block has occurred, and working out how to unblock it so that you can move on.

In many cases the reason for the block is a physiological one. If you haven't slept well recently, or you haven't eaten for a while, perhaps the weather is stiflingly hot or you've been worried about a family member who is in hospital then your mind is hardly going to be firing on all cylinders, and you will simply not have the energy needed to focus on your writing. There's no doubt at all that writing demands concentration, and concentration demands energy. Without enough sleep, food and drink you cannot expect to perform as well as you would like.

But often the problem is down to the story itself. All too often exciting beginnings which seem full of promise whittle out, leaving you looking at a beautiful shell with absolutely nothing inside.

Sometimes the idea simply doesn't work, but that's not to say it can't be made to work with the introduction of a different angle, or another dimension.

Sometimes the story will seem to dry up, and the enthusiasm is lost, preventing the words from flowing. This can sometimes be caused by your characters. Good stories are more character driven than plot driven. Good characters make a story, and make the plot through their decisions and their interactions.

If you have been forcing characters to behave out of character, your characters are flat one dimensional cardboard cut outs, or they have been forced into certain behaviours purely to suit the plot then this could result in you reaching an impossible point where it just feels wrong but you don't know why.

Whatever the cause of your writer's block it is rarely going to be the same every time, and for this reason you simply can't rely on just one or two techniques to get you through it. You can try standing up, drinking a glass of water, walking around a bit and sitting back down. You never know, it might work. But it is unlikely, and even less likely to work again in future.

What you are holding now is a huge collection of 105 practical ways to beat your writer's block. But I need to explain how to use this resource in the most effective way.

What I would not suggest you try to do is to sit down and read it cover to cover. My intention for this book is for it to be a 'dip in' book. Feel free to randomly open it at any page whenever you feel you are struggling with your writing. Let the book open at any page, (or if you are reading this on a Kindle or similar e-reader then feel free to simply flick through the pages quickly until you feel the

urge to stop, or your thumb starts to cramp) and read the summary tip at the top. If it sounds intriguing then read the longer description beneath and perhaps try it out.

Although the 105 tips are written in summary form at the top of each page these often don't fully explain how to get the most from the advice, and don't explain why the tip may work. The longer description for each tip goes into much more depth, explaining how to use the tip effectively, ways in which you can vary the tip to suit you better, and an explanation of why the tip is likely to work, and how it works.

Understanding the rationale behind this sort of advice is important. These aren't simply writing games or writing exercises. Each one has been carefully chosen for this book specifically for its effectiveness in helping to work through a writer's block.

Having said that though, not every tip in this book will work for you, and of those which do, not all of them will work every time. The reasons for experiencing a block while writing are many and varied, and applying the same method each time isn't likely to help. It's important to have some understanding as to the problem, and then pick a technique in this book which is designed to help you.

At one time or another I have tried all of these techniques, and can certainly vouch for them being of enormous help. Having worked as a full time writer and copywriter for many years I have often been faced with the task of writing a huge number of words every day, sometimes producing 8,000 words a day for long stretches at a time. Writer's block isn't just a pain, it can mean missing deadlines, losing clients and losing credibility.

It has been important for me to have a range of techniques and understanding to draw upon in order to freshen up my writing and freshen up my mind.

The mind of a writer is an extraordinary thing, capable of constructing entire worlds that are detailed enough to be fully believable, and to hold those worlds for weeks, months or even years at a time in clear detail. But the mind of a writer is also treacherous, because it is really two minds.

As a writer you have a creative mind that is artistic, imaginative and enthusiastic, but you also have an editing brain which is constantly being critical, analytical and pours doubt on every sentence you write.

Very often writer's block is caused by the editing brain dominating the creative one, and holding it back. Many of the techniques in this book focus on this idea, and provide ways in which you can settle the editing brain down so that you are free to let your creative brain run wild.

It's important to remember that when you are writing you will not be producing the final version of anything which anyone will see. You are producing the first draft, and it is unlikely that very much of the first draft will survive intact and untouched by the time it is ready to be released into the world.

The worry though from a writer's perspective can often be that the words written down will be the same ones by which you will eventually be judged. They are not. They are merely the scaffolding put in place for your eyes only, allowing you to then work on the book in a more productive and effective way afterwards.

I hope you find these tips useful, informative, helpful and enjoyable. Feel free to write notes on the pages, glue bits of paper to those pages you particularly find useful or bend the corners of pages you want to come back to. I won't mind. It's your book after all. This is a book to be used, not to simply sit on a shelf and be admired.

Remember, no matter what people might say, writer's block is real, but it's also not incurable. You are a writer, it's what you do. You can't forget how to write, and your imagination is not a limited resource that will one day run out of ideas.

Give yourself permission to enjoy the experience of writing, abandon the idea that a first draft is something by which you will ever be judged, and remember, writing for a living is far better than having a proper job!

Justin Arnold

July 2013

Tip #1

“Write out six questions an interviewer might ask one of your characters.”

The Idea

The best stories are not event driven, or scene driven, or even necessarily plot driven. Characters and characterisation is often the hallmark of the best stories and writing. If your story isn't doing too well, and you feel as though you've reached an impasse then it may well be that it's not your scenery or plot which is the problem, but the depth of your characters.

This method of overcoming writer's block forces you to focus not just on one of your characters, but on what motivates them, what drives them, what concerns them, what worries them, how they are feeling, what they're thinking, what their views are on events, and even on other characters.

It is important to step away from being the writer interviewing your character, and think instead of the sorts of questions an impartial and objective interviewer might want to ask.

Write out the six questions before even beginning to consider the answers. Only when you have written out all six questions can you then begin to visualise your character answering them. What you will often find is that simply the act of answering these questions fleshes out your character much more.

It isn't just the answers which are important, because it's very much how your character approaches answering those questions.

Do they feel confident about saying the first thing which pops into their head, or are they constantly trying to present a persona which may not be truly how they are feeling inside?

Do they resent the questions, and if so, why?

Don't feel that you only can do this with your main character. Sometimes it is interesting to do this with a fairly minor character. You might find that suddenly they need to step forwards and take a more active role in the story. Or it could be that their view on the situation gives you an alternative way of considering how to take the story forwards.

Tip #2

“Write about how frustrating it is that you can't think of anything to write about.”

The Idea

This is the sort of bizarre reverse psychology which can actually work. Often the biggest problem writers face is getting started. Once you have begun the process of putting ink on paper, or hitting the keys on your keyboard and seeing words appear on your screen the process of writing suddenly becomes much easier, and the perceived block is all but forgotten.

What you will often find is that by starting to write simply about the process of writing, or about how difficult you're finding it coming up with ideas to write about, suddenly ideas begin to occur to you.

What you may find happening is that after writing one or two sentences about your experiences with writer's block, one or two ideas pop into your head, and you may even find yourself writing about those ideas.

In fact it's not unknown to begin writing about how few ideas you have, briefly mentioning that one idea has actually just occurred to you, and then to begin writing about that idea. You may even find that after a few sentences you're writing your article or story even before you've realised it, and simply by deleting the first few sentences you have what it was you tried to write in the first place.

It is important to remember that your imagination is unlimited, and the well of your creativity is infinitely deep.

Writer's block does not occur when you have no imagination, no creativity and no source of inspiration. It occurs simply when there is some sort of perceived block between those ideas and your conscious mind that is then required to realise them.

By tricking your conscious mind into writing even when it feels as though there is nothing to write about, you can often end up producing some excellent writing before your conscious mind has even caught up with what's going on.

Tip #3

“Try playing some music in the background. Easy listening, jazz and classical are good, but it's a personal choice. Just keep it as background music, and don't play it too loudly.”

The Idea

This idea works in three different ways. The first and most basic way in which playing music in the background works is simply by helping you to relax.

One of the causes of writer's block is over-anxiety. Stressing and worrying about the possible inability to write creatively is inevitably self fulfilling. Playing calm and relaxing music can help you to unwind and release some of the anxiety which may be holding you back.

The second way in which playing music can help is by drowning out other distracting sounds. You might not always be aware of it but there may well be sounds either in the house or outside which are inhibiting your ability to relax and focus solely on your writing.

Whether it be people talking outside, traffic, sirens, alarms or other noises, either consciously or subconsciously it is likely that they will be pulling your imagination away from your pen and paper, or away from your keyboard, wrenching you away from your imagined world whilst forcefully reminding you of the world

immediately outside your window. By playing relaxing music you can help to keep the world outside at bay, focusing more on the writing you need to do.

The third way in which playing music can help you to overcome your writer's block is by helping you to immerse yourself in the mood of the scene.

Think of it a little like the soundtrack to the film adaptation of your story. By playing a type of music which fits the mood of your writing you can find yourself feeding on the artistic creativity of the musician, visualising your story more effectively.

It's worth keeping this tip in mind whenever you hear a piece of music you feel might help to reflect a certain mood or evoke a certain feeling. Make a note of the music, and if possible obtain a copy so that you build up a library of music which you can play whenever you need to feel a certain way, whether that be energetic, romantic, anxious, angry or happy.

Tip #4

“Skip ahead to a section of the story or article which comes later on, and begin writing that section before coming back to where you were stuck.”

The Idea

It can be infuriating to find yourself stuck on a portion of your story where you feel you are unable to break through to the next section, yet all the while having a clear idea of what needs to happen or will happen later on.

Beating yourself up because you are unable to get through one section whilst excitedly looking forward to getting started on a section of your story which might come either immediately afterwards, or perhaps not even until near the end is not a productive or sensible way of working.

There is no rule which says that you have to start your story at chapter 1 and write sequentially all the way through until the last chapter. If you're feeling frustrated and unable to achieve very much then it may be useful to select a scene, event or conversation which may not be scheduled to occur for some time, and get started on this straightaway.

The process of writing a section from your story you haven't yet reached can be liberating. You are no longer limited by the words

which have just preceded it, and can instead allow your imagination much more free range than before.

It may well be of course that as a result of writing sections of your story out of sequence you may need to make changes either to earlier portions of your story, or even to the later sections when you eventually catch up with yourself.

That is fine, and indeed healthy, since the editing process is likely to help tie those sections together more fluidly. Yet at the same time the quality of your writing is likely to have been improved since you are writing with more enthusiasm.

Tip #5

“Change your targets from time based ones to word count targets.”

The Idea

Although this tip might not suit everybody, since not everybody has the flexibility of extra time, if you are able to switch your targets away from time based ones then it can help to alleviate some of the pressure which is probably resulting in your writer's block.

If you tend to have a target of spending half an hour writing then you may find that either consciously or subconsciously the pressure almost immediately increases right from the very start. If you only have 30 minutes then you inevitably feel that you must start writing immediately, and that you cannot waste any of the time.

Unfortunately creativity and imagination don't always work to such time limited targets. Rather than thinking about spending 30 minutes writing, try a target of 400 words. Of course, the number of words you choose as a target will be up to you, but often this can be more successful.

By having a manageable and achievable target which is based on the number of words, and not on the amount of time you will try to spend writing, you are much more likely to find that you make productive progress.

You may well still find that you are able to write for much of the time you have scheduled anyway, but you won't feel guilty about sitting back and just thinking about what you are going to write. It is important to remember that writing is not a process which sees you constantly adding words to the page.

The actual creation of words in written or printed form is only the very last step in the process of creating characters, plot and story.

Of course is also worth noting the fact that by having a daily word count target you can more accurately schedule how long it will take to complete your short story, or novel.

Thank you!

Thank you for previewing this book. I hope you have enjoyed reading the suggestions, and have found some of them to be really useful to you with your writing.

Please now consider purchasing a full copy of this book, with all 105 tips to provide you with the maximum range of techniques and ideas to help fire up your writing.

105 Ways To Beat Writer's Block is available both in paperback and Kindle editions.

UK:

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Ways-Beat-Writers-Block-ebook/dp/B00E9DYGPO>

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