



Students Shouldn't Have Writer's Block These Days

Stephen D. Senturia

I was once a student. It was in the middle of the last century (really!). We didn't have computers or word processors. We had pencil and paper and, when we were ready, typewriters. When a teacher gave an assignment back in those days, we literally had to start with a blank page, risking that horrible dread: writer's block. Nowadays, I write on my computer, enjoying the spell-checking, the grammar and syntax checking, even the auto-correct (sometimes). When I sat down to write this article, I started with a blank screen. Here are my tips for getting over whatever impediments that blank page/screen can create:

1. Understand your goal.

Is this an essay on a prescribed subject, like "what is justice?" A current-events opinion piece, in which you are free to vent? A report that must cite sources, like a history paper? Creative writing, like a short story? A "how to" piece, like this article? Whatever it is, you need a central idea. You might not be able to state it as concisely as you wish before you have written your first words, but there are many different types of writing, and each will have a different goal. You should be able to make a stab at describing it. This article, for example, is directed toward getting you, as a young writer, over the hump of having a workable draft.

2. Do your homework.

You thought that the writing was the homework. No. That's only the second step of the homework. The first step is (and you can pick the appropriate one from this list) to read, read, read, read, or read. An essay on justice: Whose ideas of justice are you going to comment on? The Book of Job from the Bible? Or Antonin Scalia? An opinion piece: What does Paul Krugman or David Brooks think about your topic, and do you have anything different or interesting to say? History: Which sources will you be citing, and why those and not others? Fiction: As William Faulkner said, you have to read, read, and read some more, and then you can write. For this "how to" article, I confess (*mea culpa*) that I didn't read anything before writing it, but I'm drawing on nearly sixty years of writing experience!

An important caution: it is hugely tempting these days to download something from the internet as a starting point. This is a bad idea, for several reasons: first, it's a lazy-person's way to start, and risks falling into the trap of turning off your brain just when it most needs to be turned on. But second, and more important, it might lead you to commit plagiarism, passing off someone else's work as your own. You might get away with it once, or even twice, but it won't succeed in the long run, and the sanctions can be serious (at Harvard, for example, you could get tossed out of school). Melania Trump's speech at the Republican National Convention in July was partly plagiarized from Michelle Obama, and she and her husband's campaign for president got nailed for it, in the press, on TV, everywhere.

3. Organize your thoughts.

It can be on notecards, in a set of bullet points in a Word document, or, as I like to do it when I'm writing fiction, a spreadsheet with the timeline of the story captured with columns of dates

and events. You may revise your sequence of thoughts once you start writing, possibly quite a lot, but you need a launch point. For this article, the bullet points were few enough for me to keep in my head, but I did have them in mind before starting the first paragraph.

4. Write like mad.

Bad writing is better than no writing, and good writing is better than bad writing. Most of us, unfortunately, have to start with bad writing. In the old days, when things had to be written in longhand or typed, it was tedious to create a draft. Ernest Hemingway used to agonize in his notebooks over individual sentences. Now, with word processors, you can dump words into document form with astonishing speed. So do it. Write like mad, even if you know it's junk. Free associate, if necessary. Get stuff on the page. Then the real work begins.

5. Rewrite like mad.

There are very few written works that cannot be improved with suitable revision. That includes this article as well parts of my already-published books. I have no illusions about perfection. The goal is to get to "adequate" and, when possible, to approach perfection. "Adequate" is good enough, unless you are trying to win the Nobel Prize in literature.

Think of your first draft as the raw material for a beautifully sculpted statue. You know that buried within what you dumped out during the "write like mad" phase is material relevant to your topic, but it's also probably bad writing. So fix it.

Different authors have different modes of doing the rewrite. Here's mine:

I mix the draft writing and rewriting. It's like three steps forward and three-and-a-half steps back: write like mad for a bunch of lines, step back to the beginning to review, polish it up, write like mad for a bit more, then go back into the older material, and rewrite again, fixing, polishing. That's what I did for the first draft of this article. But once I had a complete draft, I put it away for a while, then revisited the entire thing as a unit and worked it over until I felt it was adequate.

Stupid as it might sound, a useful aid in the rewriting process is to read your manuscript aloud, carefully, with good diction and pronunciation. You will discover all kinds of things you will want to fix, such as: colloquialisms; excessively flowery language; grammatical mistakes (although modern word processors help you out a lot here); repeated uses of certain words; a logical flaw in your argument; a mix-up of character names in fiction; and on and on.

How do you know when to stop rewriting? When it sounds good to your ear, has the requisite logical flow and communicates your central idea correctly, passes the word processor spell check and grammar scan (which you can, of course, override when appropriate), includes correctly formatted citations to your sources, and is carefully proofread for the kind of inadvertent mistakes we all make. Your teacher, of course, may not like it and may return it to you covered in red marks. How to deal with those is the subject of a separate article (my articles are posted at www.stephendsenturia.com/articles).

I enjoy hearing from readers. Send me your thoughts and comments at www.stephendsenturia.com/contact.

=====

Stephen D. Senturia was a Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for 36 years and has advised hundreds of students through their college years and beyond. He is now writing fiction. His first novel, [*One Man's Purpose*](#), was published in November 2015.

This article was published by [Education News](#) on August 11, 2016