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Head Space

CREATIVE AND EFFECTIVE METHODS FOR OVERCOMING WRITER'S BLOCK

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Writers at every level occasionally struggle with the writing process, specifically with getting started.

Oftentimes this isn't due to a lack of ideas, but rather difficulty in channeling these ideas concisely and cohesively into a first draft.

The main problem, to me, lies in an overly structured learning environment that stifles creativity. This problem is compounded by the current era of overstimulating environments with too many distractions—digital and otherwise.

Personally, I think writers can benefit from taking the time to clear the clutter from their mind—**by using a variety of techniques to get into the proper headspace.**



Why Proper Headspace?

Starting to write is often the most intimidating hurdle of the writing process. Many novice writers especially struggle to formulate exactly what it is they want to say. The cluttered, disconnected ideas that often result are usually made worse by a hyper-active daily routine that encourages multi-tasking, which is actually counterproductive for writing since it overloads the brain's capacity for critical thinking.

In order to sort out and express their ideas, writers need to draw on methods to enter what I will call the proper "headspace" for writing—that is, a state of clarity and direction conducive to creative thought.

Ultimately, the writing process shouldn't have to be painful. Instead, it should be a "growth" experience, one that constantly evolves and changes over time. If you want to access this sort of experience as a writer, you'll want to be open to adopting new methods and perspectives in your approach. This sort of experimentation will keep you fresh and help you continually sharpen your craft.

Productive Distractions

Sound like an oxymoron? I think of a “productive distraction” as a low intensity stimulus that functions much like a warm up prior to intense physical exercise. Some examples: walking outdoors, listening to music, or even playing with toys (more on that in a moment). Such activities encourage the discovery of ideas by freeing up your attention to the nuances of your thought—just try it. Thoughts will come up out of nowhere! Just be measured and disciplined about your time, and be wary of *counter-productive* distractions that lead purely to procrastination, such as checking phones or going on social media. Those will just saddle you with endless streams of new content that either preoccupy or overstimulate your mind.

Alleviating Stress through Play

By incorporating play into their writing processes, writers can simultaneously take a break from their work and still exercise the creative functions of their brain—while also associating their work with positive feelings. Writers who approach writing as a marathon often find themselves exhausted by the process, and as a result their work suffers. Think of your writing process more like a relay, or as a series of different events that require different speeds and distances. Using play to pace yourself between different bouts of writing will keep you energized and help you get past the anxiety that often hinders a writer’s creative process. For more specific tips, check out another West Point guide by my friend Hope Hack (’20), “The Power of Play.”

Reflective Journaling

Once you’ve generated some key ideas, reflective journaling can help you organize and refine them. Keeping a journal for your thoughts about your ideas, distinct from your paper itself, offers a platform for less constrained thinking, whether in print or digital form. As you regularly write in your journal, you’ll also find yourself conducting analysis that you’ll be able to adapt into your formal paper. Just like working specific muscle groups at the gym, reflective journaling provides valuable, consistent repetitions to grow the strength of your analysis and capacity for extended critical thought.

Cooperative Writing Groups

While the flow of ideas in a writer’s head are often more flimsy and garbled than we like to admit, reflective journaling offers a judgment-free external space for us to transport our ideas. Our ideas solidify into tangible concepts that we can scrutinize, improve, and revise. While reflective journaling revolves around the individual, though, you can also seek out social spaces and groups that also help you do this work. Consider sessions with a favorite consultant at the Writing Center, or forming small ‘writing groups’ where you work together with friends or peers to formulate and organize ideas. Working in group settings enables you to hold each other accountable for maintaining focused efforts, to provide support and motivation, and serve as sounding boards for new ideas.

Techniques to Consider

- **Meditating.** Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it—you really can reset your mind to write more productively.
- **Listing to music.** Bursts of listening to music between writing stints, or even continuously as you draft, will keep you going.
- **Playing or Walking.** Many creative thinkers find that their best ideas break through as they walk or play—and those activities are also great rewards for a job well done once you finish.
- **Changing Your Scene.** Ever try writing a bit outside? Or a different location? Switch it up.
- **Warm-ups.** Try out some creative writing, or a free write (*write continuously without stopping to reflect or edit for a set amount of time*), to ease in to your main writing task.
- **Writing Groups.** Conversations with friends or classmates can spark all kinds of ideas and motivate you to move forward.