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Writer's Block as an Instrument for Remaining in Paradise

How to beat writer's block: A multidisciplinary approach

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Abstract

At the Leiden University Medical Centre (LUMC), effective writing strategies and how to internalize these have been part of the Communication in Science teaching program for 20 years. Effective writing strategies concern openly acknowledging and discussing the problems one may run into during the writing process. Some students need more help: they suffer from writer's block motivated by perfectionism.

In this article, writer's block is unmasked as a myth, a form of self-delusion that allows the writer to maintain a sense of innocence and to avoid taking responsibility. Looking at writer's block from this perspective generates new possibilities for handling the issue.

The author has developed a 7-step coaching program to help writers who experience severe writer's block take an active, responsible role in handling their own problems, based on techniques borrowed from Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) and Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT).

This article is a written reflection on a workshop held at the EATAW Conference 2007 in Bochum, Germany.

Introduction

As a teacher of Communication in Science, I am regularly confronted with students who do not turn in their assignments, or turn them in late. They send me requests for postponing the assignment deadline, along with a range of excuses for why the assignment really could not be turned in on time. After a little probing, it becomes apparent that some of these students suffer from some form of writer's block.

Following the presentation of my perspective on writer's block, I will describe how the education at our department, Communication in Science, at the Leiden University Medical Centre (LUMC) in Leiden, the Netherlands, responds to this issue. The theoretical background underlying our program is influenced by discourse analysis (Gee 1999). Communication in Science forms a section within the studies Biomedical Sciences and Medicine. Finally, I propose a new method to help, individually, those students with severe writing problems.

Defining Writer's Block

The literature on writer's block provides us with a range of definitions. In addition to these useful existing definitions, I would like to present an entirely new view, in order to find new and additional strategies for dealing with writer's block. As a point of departure, I have

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formulated the following working definition: writer's block is the inability to start or to continue writing.
Although many people who suffer from writer's block start their task by gathering information, doing research and thinking about what it is they want to say, they end up putting off the writing itself. Why do they do this and do they do it for the same reasons?
Why do people procrastinate in general? Ferrari writes about procrastination among students: «ATP *(academic trait procrastination, SS)* is significantly positively related to a number of variables, especially fear of failure, self-handicapping, depression, guilt affect, and state anxiety. Alternatively, ATP is significantly negatively related to optimism and self-confidence». (Ferrari 2004, 21) Studies that describe procrastination often make a distinction between several types of procrastinators. Though Ferrari concludes that there is no such thing as a typical profile of a procrastinating student, he says that there are classes of procrastinators in academic settings. The C*ounselling the Procrastinator in Academic Settings* study devotes a separate chapter to one type of procrastinator in particular: ‹Description and counselling of the perfectionist procrastinator› (Flett et al. 2004, 181-194).
I was surprised to find that most studies on procrastination do not mention writer's block at all. On the other hand, I state that there is a connection between the two, if only because the writing itself is postponed, if not put off altogether. The fear of failure described by Ferrari is reminiscent of the frequently stated fear of the empty page experienced by the blocked writer. He or she struggles with the idea that their writing, from the first sentence, has to be no less than perfect. Therefore I am inclined to think that some procrastination is motivated by the same cause as some writer's block: perfectionism (Fig. 1).

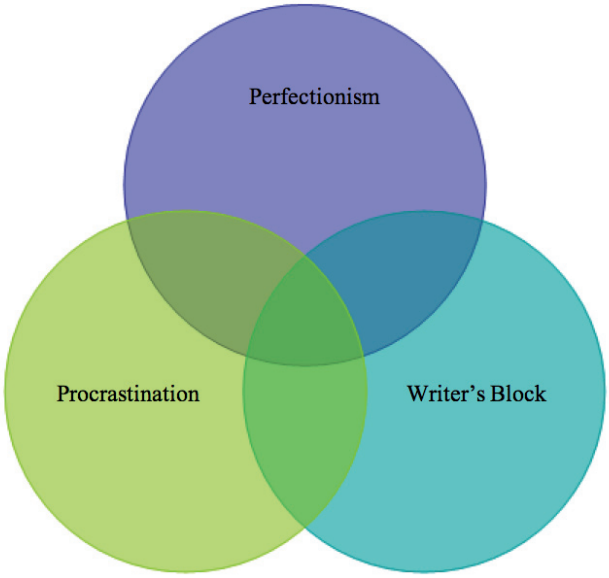

Fig. 1: Perfectionism motivates some procrastination and some writer's block

Although writer's block is a specific form of procrastination, I hope something can be learned from the way specialists in this field deal with procrastination. They claim that procrastination is learned[1]. If so then it can also be unlearned.
In workshops I have given on this theme (among which the workshop ‹How to beat writer's block› at the EATAW Conference 2007), I ask the participants to write down the answers to the following questions:

1. What is writer's block?
2. What causes it?

During the instruction, I tell them that after finishing the assignment I will collect the answers and distribute them within the group.
The assignment results not just in a heap of answers to the questions, but also in a discussion on the resistance people feel towards performing this task. Upon my asking where this resistance comes from, the participants generally give two answers:

1. The here and now of the task. A participant at EATAW even told me it felt like shock therapy.
2. The idea that others will read the text brings about a sense that it really has to be good. Participants tell me that this makes them nervous.

I believe that this resistance constitutes writer's block. Many people feel some amount of resistance when they have to write a text for a larger audience than just for themselves. In itself, procrastination is not necessarily a problem, similarly resistance to a writing task does not in itself indicate writer's block. This resistance is also caused by our relative inexperience with this form of interaction.

In terms of oral language use, we are highly experienced communicators in conversation situations involving two to three participants. The way interaction is organised in such a conversation is so familiar to us that we are never, or hardly ever, consciously aware of it: it comes to us easily and naturally. We tend to formalise interaction in less common interactive scenarios such as meetings.

Writing is another form of interaction in which we engage too infrequently to be able to bear the slowness of it and/or to bear being confronted with our own incompetence in an area where we otherwise excel: interaction. The sense of inexperience we feel feeds our fear of failure which, in turn, adds to the resistance. Much as the amount you procrastinate determines whether or not you are a problematic, chronic procrastinator, it is not so much that you feel resistance to fulfilling a writing task, but the extent to which you feel it. This determines whether you suffer from writer's block or not.

Knowing how to handle writer's block requires, I believe, some understanding of the psychology underlying resistance, and therefore of the psychology underlying writer's block.

How to recognize resistance? Whenever I meet resistance, for example in a teaching situation, I always notice that students do not easily admit that they find the task difficult. They start to complain about the task they are given: it's not realistic, it's not fair, they don't understand the task, they cannot write in this setting, etc. People tend to place the cause of their resistance outside themselves; they claim the cause is external. Linda Flower states in her *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing*: «The causes for writer's block vary. Although external forces such as a deadline often create pressure, it is internal forces that produce anxiety and writer's block» (Flower 1985, 32). We, however, do not like looking for internal causes, or, more precisely: we wish to think there are none. Of *course* we can do this task. We believe that we are competent writers. After all, we learned to write when we were seven years old and have been doing it ever since. We feel supremely capable at this, if not consciously then certainly subconsciously and completely internally. This is how we like to think of ourselves and it is the image we prefer to project to others.

We like to maintain the myth of being able to do things easily, more extremely; we like to keep up the myth of inspiration. We like to see ourselves as competent writers, though this is an illusion. Therefore, we project our resistance outside ourselves. Out of shame we think of ourselves either as competent writers or as competent writers with something special: writer's block.

If we encounter severe writing problems and we cannot maintain this illusion of being competent, we may need another one in order to avoid relinquishing the idea of being special. So we have to find another strategy to be able to maintain the illusion of innocence, and we may find it in claiming we suffer from a problem, a disease called writer's block.

Suffering from ‹something› makes you special again. It gives you a serious reason why you cannot write; perhaps this form of procrastination gives you the opportunity to be proud that you were able to do the job in very little time, often only the evening before the deadline. Therefore I believe writer's block is a myth, produced in our minds to protect ourselves. Writer's block functions as an excuse. It functions as an instrument for maintaining innocence, for remaining in paradise: «I can't help that I can't write. You see, I have writer's block». And, in doing so, we are destroying the capacity to write rather than using it well.

From writer's block to writer's challenge

Earlier, I expressed the hope that something could be learned from the strategies that specialists apply when dealing with procrastination in order to deal with writer's block. An expert on procrastination, Schouwenburg, shows us in his contribution to *Counselling the Procrastinator in Academic Settings* that the different interventions researchers present for procrastination depend on their particular point of view on procrastination (Schouwenburg 2004, 16-17). Among the interventions presented in this study, we encounter: time management techniques, goal setting, changing unproductive thoughts (REBT[2]), self-efficacy, taking responsibility, facing fear, and reducing guilt and anxiety. Many of these interventions will return in the following suggestions for handling writer's block.

The cause of the block should dictate the solution. Two frequently seen causes of writer's block will be discussed below, each followed by a possible way for handling them. Because other causes for writer's block have been discussed extensively and satisfactorily in other studies (for example, Kruse 2000), I do not discuss these here.
The strategies for dealing with writer's block described below are intended to complement rather than to replace other solutions.

Poor writing strategies
Much of the literature on writer's block agrees that poor writing strategies are one of the main causes of writer's block (Flower 1985, 29-30). These writers have not learned or not internalized efficient writing strategies and therefore teaching writing should involve not only textual training but also teaching students such strategies. This means that students need to be taught that writing involves different stages: those of brainstorming, planning, writing first drafts and rewriting, to finally come to the ultimate version. Teaching about the product therefore should be interwoven with teaching about the writing process. In doing so the student does not only learn what the final product needs to be, but also how to get there. Focusing too much only on teaching about the product creates the pitfall of writer's block.
This is one of the reasons why, at the LUMC in Leiden, we start with rewriting instead of writing. As the first assignment in the first year, we present the students with several pages of sentences that are written very informally and colloquially; much like sentences you might write in a first draft. The sentences are taken from work from their peers from earlier years. The students are asked to rewrite these sentences in a scientific register. In doing so, we protect our students from the obvious pitfall of fearing the empty page and the associated need of immediately writing the definitive version. We also teach them to deal with earlier, imperfect versions. This rewriting assignment is followed by 9 assignments, first in Dutch and later in the first year in English. The second and third year of the bachelor's programme are built up in a similar way. The students complete the Communication in Science bachelor's programme by writing a training period report in the form of a scientific article in small groups, under supervision of the writing tutors. At this point, students correct each others' reports by means of peer assessment, which means that they learn to trust their colleagues with rough versions of their texts.
Gradually and repeatedly we teach the students and let them work with the various stages of the writing process. Our transmodular program spans the years of the (bio)medical programs at the LUMC, giving us the opportunity to teach students necessary academic skills and to help them internalize these strategies. The final attainments must be met; if the student fails to do so during the regular teaching hours, he is supported individually until the level is satisfactory. The students are all textually competent after completing this programme.
The emphasis of our program is on the writing and therefore on the writing process itself. Throughout the writing program we make explicit the problems, in terms of the writing process, that one runs into while writing a text that is meant to be read by others. For example, in the first year of the Biomedical Sciences, we surprise our students after a rewriting assignment by asking them to write, here and now during the lecture, the Material and Methods section for their next assignment, a scientific article. This always brings about a lot of resistance, in the manner described earlier. Many external factors are blamed for not being able to perform this task there and then. We make use of this opportunity to discuss the very issue of feeling resistance while writing. Shameful resistance is openly discussed. This is the kind of shock therapy mentioned by one of the participants at my EATAW conference workshop in 2007. We illustrate and discuss these difficulties in order to help students cope with them.
This is also why we only work with authentic writing assignments, in our case, work that is being produced as part of the (bio)medical program. Only authentic assignments will present real writing problems. In-authentic ‹practice› assignments teach nothing about the process, which is why students prefer these. The idea of these teaching methods is to teach students to optimally cope with resistance.
In our programme, serious writer's blocks usually do not become apparent until students write their training period report in the third year, their master's reports and thesis, or even their PhD thesis. Individual support is offered to these, usually, about 4 or 5 students per year.

Perfectionism

The educational programme in Leiden is set up to intercept potential writing problems, along with writer's blocks, in a timely fashion. Students who are not helped by this generally have a more deeply rooted writer's block. Experience has shown that such students are often perfectionists.

These students do not have motivation issues. To the contrary, they are in fact highly motivated; accomplishment is important to them. Nor are these perfectionists lazy, although this may sometimes seem the case. Some of them do not start working on the task before them out of fear that the end product will not be good enough and that they will have to bear the consequences of such failure. Perfectionists often link these consequences to issues of self-worth. Alternatively, we also see perfectionist students overwork in the preparation phase and then never daring to take the next step and actually start writing (Sapadin 1999, 27-71). These students have problems with self-management.

The multidisciplinary approach for helping perfectionists with writer's block

To help students with serious writer's block problems, I have developed a model based on techniques borrowed from Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) and Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT). This model was recently developed within a department where multiple disciplines are represented and where students with similar problems have been supported for the last 20 years. In this model the student is guided through a series of coaching sessions in which the steps outlined below must be followed in the indicated order:

Step 1

Help the student to change focus from problem to goal. Claiming to suffer from writer's block is clearly a problem-focused approach. Simply staring at problems is ineffectual in helping to find a solution. Instead of focusing on the problem, it is far more productive to try and get a clear picture of what it is one wants to achieve. NLP teaches that in order to reach our goals we must stop thinking of our problems. Continuously thinking of the problem makes it harder to let go of it, because it is constantly in your head. Instead, NLP teaches that it is far more productive to focus our thoughts on what it is we want, in positive terms. Therefore, we have to teach these perfectionistic, blocked writers not to focus on wanting to get rid of the problem, but to focus on wanting to be capable writers (O'Connor and Seymour 2002, 27).

Step 2

Next, the student must be helped in formulating the goal. It is very important that the student is guided in the formulation of a realistic goal. Perfectionists will inevitably set high, if not unrealistically high, goals. The perfectionist's fear of failure thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: because the goal is formulated to be unattainable, the student fails. This only increases the writer's block, instead of decreasing it. («The more you demand that you must be perfect, the more you are likely to procrastinate, assuring that your future self will be a disappointment to you» Sapadin 1999, 50)

When formulating a realistic goal, you have the option of making use of Ellis's REBT techniques to change unproductive, undermining thoughts into productive thoughts. In short Ellis says that unproductive, or as he also calls them, irrational thoughts (for instance: «Everything I do has to be absolutely perfect») reflect a form of absolutist «shoulds», «oughts» and «musts»: «I always have to be perfect». Or: «In order to gain some love and/or respect I have to be perfect». That in its turn reflects a form of pessimistic thinking: If what I produce is not perfect, it is a disaster. In helping the student, the coach compels him or her to make explicit the irrational thought behind the way they feel they have to perform their writing task.

Then the coach makes the student ask the three questions about this irrational thought that Ellis prescribes:

1. Is that true?
2. Is that practical?
3. Is that helpful?

If one of these questions is answered with a ‹yes›, then the coach explains to the student how this is an irrational thought. Following this the coach helps the student to change this irrational thought into a rational thought. An example of such an irrational thought formulated as a rational thought for the perfectionist blocked writer might be: «I'm going to give it my best. I will learn from the feedback I get in order to strive for the best result I can produce».

Step 3

When the student has formulated a realistic, achievable goal, the coach asks the student: «What is keeping you from getting there?» Looking at the goal instead of the problem, paves the way for being able to experience and examine the resistance. As discussed earlier, claiming to have a problem, in this case to suffer from writer's block, gives an excuse to remain innocent. This innocence disengages us of having to face our own blocks, our own resistance and possibly having to admit our own incompetence. It is important in this step to have the student answer the question as concretely as possible. In this way, the student can gain insight into the source of the resistance. The resistance might for instance be fear of failure. The source of the resistance will obviously play an important role in step 6, where how to help the student to achieve his goal will be discussed.

Step 4

The coach shows the student the function of resistance. The student is now likely to experience resistance as the enemy. It is important to explain to the student that resistance works for them instead of against them. Resistance, and the adrenaline that comes with it, are there to protect us from danger. Deprived of resistance, adrenaline and fear we would step unprepared into situations that may be very dangerous for us, even life-threatening.

Step 5

As resistance is a self-protection mechanism, it should not be fought, but handled. It is much the same with nerves students often feel when having to give an oral presentation before a group. Sometimes they ask me how they can get rid of these nerves. But that is not the right question, nor the right approach. Nerves also reflect fear, and as mentioned before, fear is a protective, life-preserving emotion. Fighting nerves/ fear is a battle that can never be won but one can, with experience, notice that the fear is unnecessary and therefore slowly overcome it. I explain to these students that nerves should not so much be fought, but handled. Likewise, resistance should be handled in order to stop it from blocking the writer. This brings us to step 6.

Step 6

In step 3, the student formulates what has kept him from achieving his goal. Thus he has defined what form his resistance takes. Now it is important to let the student formulate what he needs to achieve his goal or, in other words, what he needs to be able to handle his resistance. Here it might be helpful to use the NLP technique of letting the student stand (literally letting them stand in the physical space) on locations representing the various positions discussed in this step: the position of the current situation (student is blocked), the desired position (the blockage is resolved) and the position in between, where the student can formulate what his resistance constitutes (see fig. 2). At this position the coach asks the student what he needs to be able to step into the future to the desired position, hand in hand with his resistance (see step 5). Actually standing in the various positions helps to internalize what the student realizes during this exercise. The 3 different situations have to be experienced in thought, feeling and sensory experience. In this manner, the exercise of experiencing and dealing with the problem becomes a physically concrete matter, instead of just a rationalized matter. Feeling what happens also often helps in formulating what it is that is needed to handle the resistance. Having completed this exercise, the coach further discusses the help resource the student identified. How can the student get it? Where can he get it?

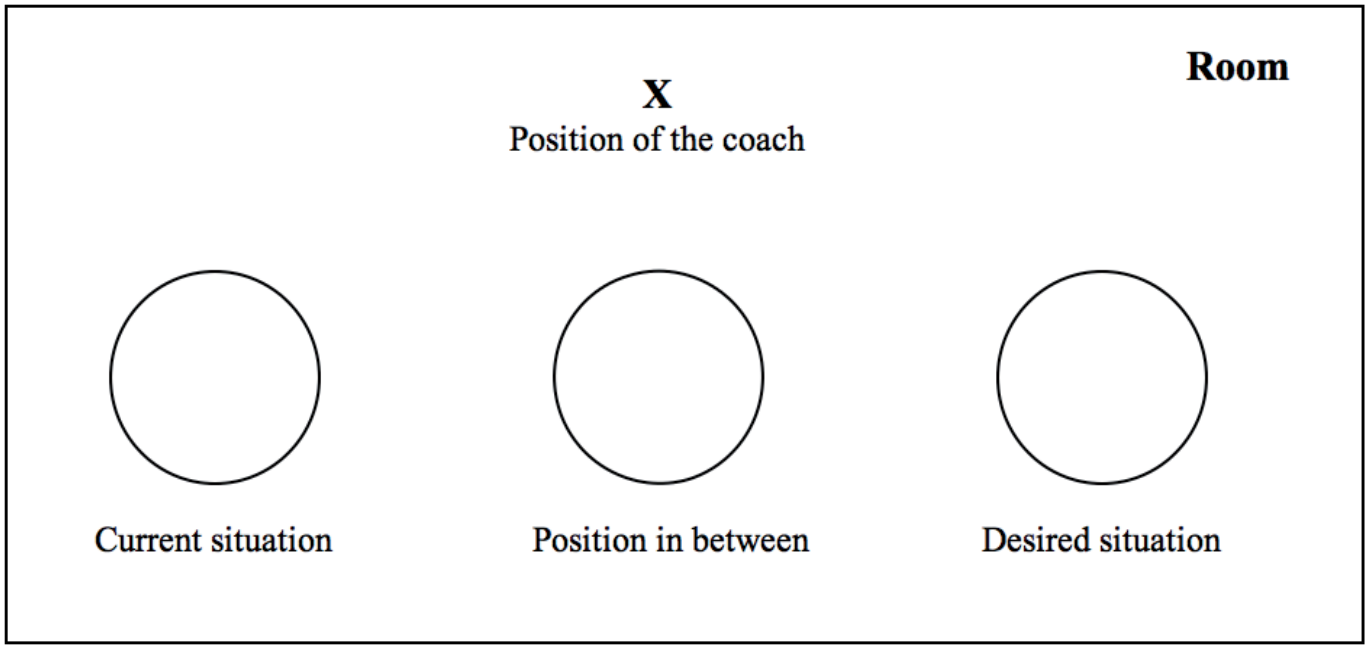

Fig 2. Representation of the various positions used in an NLP exercise. The coach invites the student to occupy the various positions.

Step 7

Perfectionists tend to think in terms of success and failure and do not recognize a shade of grey in-between. This needs to be discussed with the student who needs to be shown that in a learning process (and, clearly, it can also be discussed here that life is one big learning process in itself) there is no such thing as failure, only feedback. Failure is a matter of interpretation. The results interpreted as failure can also be viewed differently, depending on the perspective from which one views them. Failure provides no perspective at all. Regarding these results as mere feedback offers material and opportunity to improve your act and draw closer to your goal: without mistakes there can be no progress.

The idea behind this model is to change a passive role into an active one. Instead of blaming external factors for one's own writer's block, and therefore being dependent on others, one needs to start working independently on one's own internal problems. Though this is not easy, it has the benefit of bringing back a sense of self-control.

Conclusion

In this article, by taking a different perspective on writer's block to uncover new solutions for handling the issue, I have presented a multidisciplinary approach to writer's block. In doing so I state that writer's block is a myth that enables the blocked writer to feel victimized by external factors. He himself remains innocent of any involvement and thus develops a passive attitude towards the problem.

Most students seem to be helped by, on the one hand, internalizing effective writing strategies, and on the other hand, openly acknowledging and discussing the problems one runs into during the writing process. The students that need more help can be coached through a 7-step program, in order to help them take up an active, responsible role in handling their own problems.

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1 Several studies for instance have examined parental and family situation influences. «Together, these studies suggest that the dynamics of a person's family and home life influences his or her engagement in procrastination.»(Ferrari 2004, 23)

2 REBT stands for Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy, a form of therapy that was founded in 1955 by Albert Ellis. On the Albert Ellis Institute website, REBT is described as «an action-oriented psychotherapy that teaches individuals to examine their own thoughts, beliefs and actions and replace those that are self-defeating with more life-enhancing alternatives» (www.albertellisinstitute.org 06.02.2008).