

BREAK THROUGH writer's block

A veteran writer offers a variety of techniques he's learned, including reorganizing, jumping ahead and trimming material

By Michael A. Banks



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HAT DO YOU do when you know what you want to write but the words don't come? When you're agonizing over every sentence instead of moving on with the story? What about when you run out of enthusiasm and just don't want to work on this particular project?

Your first inclination is to attack the problem head-on. You try to force your way through the block by concentrating on the subject or story until the words flow. But this brute-force approach rarely lends itself to writing. It works fine with bricklaying, painting a house or gardening—things you can see and feel. But with writing, there's no way to stand back and *see* what you're doing.

So, if you can't get yourself to write by just plugging away, what can you do? Perhaps the most direct way to break through a block is something I learned from science-fiction writer Jerry Pournelle: Write what you know. "Get as much as you can on paper as fast as you can," Pournelle says. "Skip ahead and write the parts you already know how to write. You can go back later and fill in the rest." As you jump ahead, write notes to yourself about what you intend to write—or just leave a place-marker, like XXXXX.

I have often used this technique in writing fiction. I enjoy writing scenes with dialogue, so when I am stuck on a description or action, or have a problem with plot, I jump ahead in the story and write a scene that I know will take place. Doing this gives me a goal to work toward and often enlightens me as to how to write what must go before.

With nonfiction, I just move on to a later chapter.

Sometimes, being unable to move ahead with a project indicates a problem with how you've organized your subject

matter or, in fiction, a sequence of events. But this is not always a problem a writer can easily recognize, since organization and sequence are part of the work's *gestalt*.

I learned about this when I was writing a biographical piece for a state history magazine. Because my subject was from a different state, I felt obligated to open the article with an anecdote that directly tied him to the magazine's region. About halfway through the article, I got stuck. Something about the beginning bothered me. I kept going back and making small changes to it. Then I made bigger changes, and it still wasn't right. Eventually, going over and over the anecdote got so annoying that I moved it to the end of the article to get it "out of the way." Suddenly everything made sense. My enthusiasm returned, and I quickly finished the piece.

Moving things around gives you a different viewpoint. The change may reveal that the story, article or book should begin with what you thought was the middle—or even the end.

If reorganizing doesn't work, consider cutting. In 2005, when I was working on the biography of industrialist Powel Crosley Jr., I hit a point where I had a feeling that something was dreadfully wrong with the manuscript, but I couldn't identify it. I was stuck. I tried backing up and revising, and moving material around. But the sense that something was wrong remained and would not let me proceed.

I mentioned this to my friend Debbie. She knew all about

the project. I'd talked endlessly about my research and how fascinated I was with the subject. When I told her that I'd come up against this block, she identified the problem at once.

"You know too much," she told me. "You're trying to put in everything you know, and you can't."

She was right. In my enthusiasm, I felt compelled to share all of my research with the reader. I was trying to pack in all sorts of quotes and facts that had no place in the flow of the story. After Debbie pointed this out, I went through the manuscript and started cutting what didn't fit. This greatly improved the manuscript, and realizing that I wouldn't have to struggle to fit in every little fact was like having a weight lifted from my shoulders. I was more in control of my writing.

There are three lessons here. First, you don't have to tell the reader *everything*. You will create a more interesting work and save yourself time and worry if you don't exhaust your subject. (This doesn't apply, of course, to certain kinds of texts and references.) Second, when you cut away extraneous material, you have greater control of what's left. The final lesson is that you can sometimes break a block by talking about it. The other person doesn't have to be a writer, just someone with the advantage of not being you, who can see things you miss.

Speaking of different viewpoints, I learned early in my career that altering viewpoint can make all the difference in the world. When I submitted my first short story to *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine back in 1978, it was returned with a letter from Isaac Asimov himself. The letter opened, "Dear Mr. Banks, I have read your story and like it very much." Asimov then spent several paragraphs explaining why the story's final scene didn't work, pointing out that a particular character who was asking questions should in fact be the one being questioned.

It was a subtle difference, but Asimov was right: Changing the viewpoint of the questioner made the character and scene more believable. I rewrote the story and it was accepted. Since that experience I've often revived stories by altering viewpoints, or even replacing characters.

You won't know whether a change will help unless you try it. So when you can't get unstuck on a writing project, try changing viewpoints, or reorganizing chapters, events or whatever. Make an outline if you don't have one and begin there; experiment with moving various elements until they line up properly.

Writing out of sequence, moving things around and cutting may jump-start your brain when you have a project under way. But what about those times when you have an idea and don't know how to shape it, or find yourself uninspired? When these things happen, try this: Get a published work of your own, or someone

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else's—it doesn't matter—and start typing the work, copying it word for word. If you normally write first drafts with paper and pencil, copy that way.

This process of physically "walking" yourself through the act of writing can put you back in the groove. While you aren't writing something original, you *are* writing, and that puts your mind where it needs to be. You can also use this if you get stuck partway through a manuscript. Just print out what you have and start retyping it from the beginning. At some point, your mind will shift into creative mode and take over.

An interesting variation on this is to revise what you're copying. It can be a fast route to inspiration.

When you know where your story or article is going but don't know how to take it there, you may find inspiration in other writers' work. If you don't know whether to open your psychic detective novel with a character study, action or description, examine various approaches used in other detective or supernatural novels. You will eventually find your way to your own unique opening.

You can use the same approach to get moving on other elements. If, for example, you're wondering how to use fiction techniques to tell a true story, look at Erik Larson's *The Devil in the White City*. If you're stumped on how to use quotes to illustrate points in an essay, end a short story or make a flashback work, seek out works in the same genre that do these things successfully. Analyze how and why they work. I'm not

saying to use other works as templates; just observe the structures and adapt them to your work.

As a bonus, examining other writers' work in this way will also give you new ideas about general writing techniques and style.

If none of the techniques I've described works, it may mean that you need to get away from the troublesome project for a while. Stop working on it, and don't look at the manuscript for a couple of weeks—or longer. And work on something new, so your mind will leave the other project alone. Eventually, you will be able to return to the old project with a fresh viewpoint, better able to determine and deal with what was blocking you.

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Beat the block

What should you do to get past writer's block? Try one or more of these tactics:

- Write the parts you know first
- Reorganize your material—e.g., by moving your "beginning" to the end
- Consider changing point of view
- Eliminate details that don't fit in your piece
- Get another perspective
- Copy another work word for word as an exercise to get into the physical act of writing
- Seek inspiration in similar works by examining their structure
- Set aside the "problem" piece and work on another writing project

—Michael A. Banks