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# A Pro's Woe: Overcoming Writer's Block in a Hurry

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# A Pro's Woe: Overcoming Writer's Block in a Hurry

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

**P**icture this: It's late on a Friday afternoon, the sun is shining in your office window, and you're sitting in front of your computer staring at a blank screen. You also know full well that the response to a motion is due Monday, yet you cannot seem to even get a single word onto the page. In fact, you can't even get your fingers to the keyboard.

Sound familiar? Even though attorneys spend much of their lives writing, we are not immune to writer's block. Some of us have tried-and-true methods for overcoming these slumps, but even then there might be times when the go-to trick that has worked in the past fails to put words on the page.

So for this month we are going to look at some tips for overcoming even the worst episodes of writer's block.

## Brain dump

The brain dump is a great tip for the ultra-organized. I'm sure you know someone (me) like this. Everything has a place and everything is in its place. This goes for writing, too. There are writers who write everything in the perfect order. But sometimes these writers get stuck. Because they have to start with the first word on the first page, nothing else can flow if those first few lines can't flow.

Or maybe instead of being ultra-organized, you simply have too many thoughts bumping around in



your head. Every time your fingers hit the keyboard you see two new counter-arguments and a new approach to the main argument. You simply can't get all these thoughts onto the page in any sort of coherent order.

For these times, a brain dump can be a good trick to get over the bump in the road.

The goal of a brain dump is to get over the need for order. To dump your brain, set a timer for a short period of time, and then just start typing and don't stop until the timer sounds. Get over the need to put anything in order — instead focus on getting everything you know about the problem into a document. Go for quantity, not quality.

Once your ideas are on paper, you can start to see the order and move into a more polished and organized draft.

## Talk to yourself

Of course, for some people even the jumble of a brain dump floating on the screen is too much to take. For those times, close your door and talk.

Get over the need to put anything in order — instead focus on getting everything you know about the problem into a document.

Now, I'm not suggesting a full-blown conversation. Instead, grab your smartphone, open a dictation app, and start telling the phone everything you know about the problem. Then you can have a very patient assistant start transcribing your oral ramblings.

Even better would be to turn on the voice-activated software that

came with your computer and that you never use. You can cover the screen to avoid the distraction of the words going onto the page and just start telling your computer everything you know about the problem.

After you're done, you can take the jumbled transcription from your assistant or uncover your screen and start to impose some order on what you've been talking about. Many a great writer is made in the second draft!

### Take a break

Other times, a change of scenery can help. Walk down the hall or street for a quick cup of coffee or take your pen and a pad of paper into an empty conference room. The point of the break is not necessarily to stop: it's to change the landscape.

As Anne Lamott said, "Your unconscious can't work when you are breathing down its neck. You'll sit there going, 'Are you done in there yet, are you done in there yet?' But it is trying to tell you nicely, 'Shut up and go away.'"<sup>1</sup>

By changing what you're looking at, you give your mind a break. And sometimes just that little break is enough to get over the block!

### Outlines, bubble charts, and mind-maps

Occasionally, we start with an end-goal in mind, but no real idea of how to get there. (I find myself doing this when I'm really busy!) For those times, take a step back from drafting and make yourself a map to the end goal.

For some writers, going back to the outlining phase works: Open a new document on your computer and start by writing all the issues you will need to cover, then move into more detail from there.

Once you have all the ideas on the paper, look for big groupings of ideas. These big groupings are likely major topics you will need to cover.



Of course, for those writers who have bad memories of forced outlines from high school or massive outlines from law school, this technique can actually increase anxiety. Not great for overcoming writer's block!

If that's you, try bubble charts or mind-maps instead. These are more free form than outlining, but they will get you to the same end. Put a big idea in a circle in the center of a blank piece of paper (yes, use actual pen and paper for this!). Then branch out with ideas from there. Each big idea gets more bubbles with smaller, related ideas. Connect every related idea with lines between the bubbles.

Once you have all the ideas on the paper, look for big groupings of ideas. These big groupings are likely major topics you will need to cover. The lonely circles with no related bubbles might be useless ideas.

You can then move from the bubbles to a first draft and beyond.

### Start in the middle

The final tip for this month is a great one for perfectionists: Avoid the first few pages all together.

Chances are, there is some part of what you're working on that will be easier to write than other pieces. Pick that part and get to work. Once the juices are flowing, you can go back and fill in the more difficult parts.

### Conclusion

Don't beat yourself up if you get writer's block. We all struggle with it from time to time. This month I couldn't finish because I couldn't decide what to write about. I started three other pieces before beginning this one. I finally got out of the office, and I'm finishing this at home with my dogs asleep at my feet.

### Sources

- Suzanne E. Rowe, *Unblocking Writer's Block: Moving Ideas from Head to Page*, available at <https://www.osbar.org/publications/bulletin/06oct/writer.html>.

### Endnotes

1. <http://flavorwire.com/343207/13-famous-writers-on-overcoming-writers-block/3>, quoting Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*

### About the Author

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