

Coping with Writer's Block

Dr Jocalyn Clark
Senior Editor, *PLoS Medicine*
Consultant, Grand Challenges Canada
February 2012

Writing is tough

- Even the best or most naturally gifted writers struggle with writing sometimes
- The pressure and stress of grant proposals and deadlines can be paralyzing – having the opposite effect on your free flow of ideas!
- Downloading the ideas in your head onto the page is hard
- But....

Help with Writer's Block

- There are tips and tools to help with writer's block, whether it's to:
 - Begin writing
 - Getting unstuck

Tips and Tools

1. Getting away from the computer
2. Free writing
3. Concept maps
4. Building an outline
5. Team writing
6. Setting a workplan

1. Getting away from the screen

- Most of us have learned to “write” by sitting in front of the computer, checking PubMed, and shuffling papers around our desk
- The actual writing part is helped by the work you do away from the computer:
 - Before you begin writing *or*
 - When you’re stuck and need a re-boot to get writing again

Get *thinking* not writing

- *Thinking* rather than writing – on your bike, while walking, sitting in a café
- *What is it that you want to put across in your writing? What is it you want to say to your audience?*
- Try saying it out loud (talk to yourself)
- Make notes in a notebook, no matter how trivial

2. Free writing

- Leave the computer aside
- Needs only:
 - Pen and paper
 - Time
 - Peace and quiet
- Set a timer for 2-5 min
- Begin writing and do not put pen down
- No going back, crossing out or fixing typos
- Write as fast as you can and don't stop to think

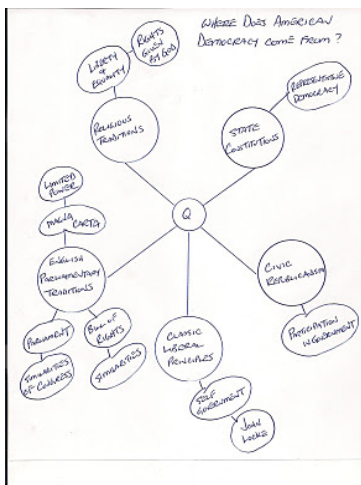
2. Free writing

- Take a highlighter pen and mark the important text
- This text forms the bones of your writing
- Highlights the more important concepts and ideas that you can build on in your proposal writing
- Can also show you which bits are not as important (and you can discard)

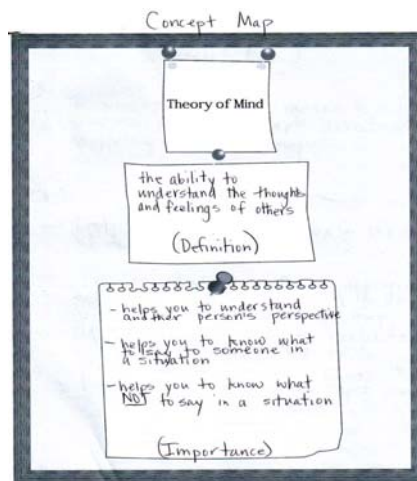
3. Concept maps

- Sometimes called mind maps or spidergrams, but can be any drawing that links your ideas
- Could look like a flow chart of different concepts or a series of boxes and circles
- Does not need to be pretty! Can be very messy
- Helps form your conceptual framework – how your main concepts relate to each other

3. Concept map - examples



<http://mrdavishistory-joe.blogspot.com/>



<http://www.do2learn.com>

4. Building an outline

- Outlines are simple bulleted lists of key ideas that form a piece of writing
- The list should indicate the flow of the argument
- You can write an outline for each section or an overall outline for the whole proposal

4. Outline - examples

My Project
I. Goals
A. Increase # of engagements
B. Command higher per-event price
C. Streamline booking process
II. Initiatives
A. Marketing
1. Web site
2. Email Newsletter
3. Podcast
B. Advertising
1. PPC
2. CPA
3. Sponsorships
4. Tradeshow

Five Paragraph Essay Outline

I. Introductory Paragraph
A. Create a topic sentence that will draw in the audience.
1. Note subtopic 1 (this will be topic of 2nd paragraph)
2. Note subtopic 2 (this will be topic of 3rd paragraph)
3. Note subtopic 3 (this will be topic of 4th paragraph)
B. Create a strong transition
II. First Supporting Paragraph
A. Restate what subtopic 1 is.
1. Supporting detail or example
2. Supporting detail or example
B. Transition
III. Second Supporting Paragraph
A. Restate what subtopic 2 is.
1. Supporting detail or example
2. Supporting detail or example
B. Transition
IV. Third Supporting Paragraph
A. Restate what subtopic 3 is.
1. Supporting detail or example
2. Supporting detail or example
B. Transition
V. Conclusion or closing summary
A. Synthesis and/or conclusion of thesis
B. Restate main topic and subtopics

5. Team writing

- Team writing can help to distribute the labour of writing a grant proposal or can help with editing and revising
- This can be especially helpful when the task of writing a whole grant feels daunting
- If appropriate, delegating different sections to different team members can share the workload
- Meeting in-person as a team at least once can help with writing and dividing tasks

5. Team writing

- Team writing can also help with review and revision
- Have a lead writer:
 - To make minor revisions to ensure each section is consistent in tone
 - To keep everyone on deadline
- *Set out a plan in advance:*
 - When can team members expect to receive the first draft of the grant proposal
 - When they are expected to submit their comments

6. Setting a workplan

- Can help manage the deadline, and separate the work into manageable bits
- First, set a “soft” deadline for completion of the grant that is at least one week before the real deadline
- This will allow you to set your “final” grant proposal aside for a few days and return to it fresh to make the absolute final changes

6. Set a workplan

- Workplans also include a series of internal deadlines for you and your co-applicants to prepare the grant proposal
- Circulate and agree on these deadlines *in advance* so that expectations are clear
- Be specific with deadlines

Workplan - example

Person responsible	Task	Deadline
Jocalyn (principal investigator)	First draft to co-applicants	15 Mar
Barbara (co-applicant)	Gather supporting documentation including letters from partners	30 Mar
Co-applicants	Comments on first draft submitted to Jocalyn	30 Mar
Jocalyn	Second draft to co-applicants	10 Apr
Co-applicants	Any further comments	20 Apr
Everyone	Submit CVs to Jocalyn	20 Apr
Jocalyn	Final draft complete	25 Apr
Jocalyn	Grant proposal submitted to Funder	1 May

Keep writing!

- *The secret of getting ahead is getting started. The secret of getting started is breaking your complex overwhelming tasks into small manageable tasks, and then starting on the first one. (Mark Twain)*
- *Don't get it right, just get it written. (James Thurber)*