

Writer's Block: It's all in the Mind
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Over four hundred years ago the famous scientist Blaise Pascal referred to space as “having its circumference everywhere and its center nowhere” to illustrate the folly of using the limited human mind to encompass its distances. As brilliant as Pascal was, he did not realize also the power of the brain: within its three pounds of gray matter is a mass between 10 and 16 billion nerve cells capable of making 10^{800} connections (Wycoff 7). Likewise, it stores more information than all the libraries of the world. Confirming these ideas, quantum physicists tell us that the brain is a microcosm or miniature of the universe, containing the same subatomic ingredients found in deep space and is therefore in theory capable of tremendous potential.

Despite all of the brain's potential, most people use barely 3% of its capacity and sometimes cannot access even that 3%. Writers, for example, sometimes claim that they cannot come up with ideas or do not know what to write about. They are stuck. What a pathetic and ludicrous irony to be blessed with so much potential and not be able to access it! What is the problem? How can it be solved?

When writers say they are stuck, what is really going on? They are starting with nothing, “a blank tablet” as John Locke once described it. If the brain could talk, it would say that the ideas are there, but the writers are not asking for them. Instead, they are using a “blank tablet” or nothing to try to access something. “Nothing comes from nothing,” as Shakespeare remarks in *King Lear*. The universe is mirroring to writers exactly what they express. Waiting to do the assignment will not suddenly unearth useful ideas. In fact, the writer's mind may well imagine that writing is too difficult, thus reinforcing writer's block.

Thus, the direct frontal approach, something from nothing, does not work. Instead, writers need to access ideas from the brain indirectly. For example, suppose your teacher asked you to write a thoughtful appraisal of the film *The Shawshank Redemption* starring Morgan Freeman and Tim Robbins. Your first reaction might be to wait until later until you can see the film on video or when you can remember its plot. **Instead, why not use an indirect approach and start the writing assignment immediately. Within five minutes, for example, you could probably come up with three leading questions, a technique that cuts through writer's block.**

- 1) How does this film compare to other prison films? Is the day-by-day life different or unusual? If so, how so? If not, why not?
- 2) What is special about this film? I.e., Red Redding's narrative voice discussing how to survive prison life or Andy Dufresne's will power, resourcefulness, and subtle rebelliousness.

- 3) What is the final message of the film? I.e., crime does not pay; prison captors can be equally as corrupt and violent as prison inmates, what goes around comes around, etc.

If you were to answer these questions as rapidly as you can without being concerned about ideal expression, editing, or word choice, you could within a matter of minutes come up with some productive ideas. Just as likely, your thinking on the subject may well help you recall incidents from the film that will help complete your appraisal. As you continue to write, chances are you will unearth other ideas about the film, such as the difficulty of long-term prisoners to make adjustments once they are freed and, by extension, the need for appropriate counseling before they actually adjust to life on the outside.

By approaching a writing task indirectly, you can use the above technique to overcome writer's block. Here is another technique.

As soon as you get your assignment, within an hour or less, immediately do the following:

- 1) On scratch paper write as best you can and in a few words what your subject is. What have you been asked to do? Why are you responding? What do you want someone to do?
- 2) Now, for ten minutes or so, fill that page and others with ideas. Write answers to as many of the questions on the next page as you can. Rapid-write any ideas that come into your mind. Do not try to organize these thoughts—just dump them out of your head at random as fast as they come into your mind. Do not worry about spelling, commas, or mechanics: write, write, write!
- 3) Look over these words, taking notes in the margins and in and around the other words. Then, rapid-write again for another 10 minutes. Reconsider the questions on the next page, fill out in more detail the notes you already have, experiment with headings and create categories or columns of details.
- 4) Conclude by making a list of important ideas, plans, and details that you have written.

This is the prewriting exercise that will make your writing easier and stronger if you manage the entire task and **BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND**. Decide immediately what you want to accomplish by completing this assignment.

HERE ARE TWENTY WAYS TO GET IDEAS:

1. **Free Association**: Take your subject and write it down at the top of a page. Now write freely on any aspect of the subject in short, meaningful phrases. Do not edit or even attempt to write complete sentences. Just let the ideas flow spontaneously and easily. Feel no need to justify, explain, or prove—or even stay on the same subject. Fill up at least three pages with these turkey tracks; just write for the fun of it. This exercise alone may spawn three to four ideas to use either in the current assignment or later.
2. **Leading Questions**: Write down three important questions about your subject. These questions should be valuable for any potential reader to know the answer to for full comprehension of your ideas. Free-associate the answers to each of these questions with the same rules that you applied under Free Association. Notice that this is the technique used to begin the critical review on *The Shawshank Redemption*.
3. **Purpose, General or Underlying**: Determine precisely what your essay will be used for, now and in the future. “Burn a hole” in your mind to establish short and long-range purposes. At this point you can establish audiences: who they are and what they will do with the ideas you are presenting. If you wish, think of alternative topics and their uses.
4. **Key Words**: Write down important words, buzzwords or key concepts involved in your essay and free-associate each of the words. By this time, you will be arriving at some crystal-clear concepts that will help you articulate your ideas easily for targeting to particular audiences. When possible supplement these words with pictures gleaned from magazines or Internet cites.
5. **Criteria**: Take any aspect of your subject and write down clusters of ideas that could relate to your topic. For example, if your subject were laptop computers, you might develop criteria by jotting down types, ages, features, operating procedures, troubleshooting, new models, types and sizes of paper, where to get these machines, who puts out the best brands, the history of laptop computers, etc. By considering criteria, you are establishing not only the content of your essay but also the different methods of approaching that content.
6. **5 W's & How**: Like the newspaper writer tracking down a story, do the same with your topic. If you do not know the answers to these questions, just ask yourself how you might get the answers. What materials do I need? Where do I get them? Exactly what am I looking for? Who do I need to speak to about my subject? How can he help me?
7. **Result**: What will happen as a result of the use of your ideas? Who will use them? How often? Will they be better than the current ideas?

8. **Devil's Advocate**: What legitimate objections may be made to my ideas and how they are presented? How can I counter those objections?
9. **Changing Perspectives**: Writers are sometimes blinded by their unique perspective on a problem and can't anticipate questions their readers might have. Civil engineers, for instance, make certain assumptions about stresses and moments, but readers who do not share those assumptions might question the engineer's designs. In order to anticipate those questions and to see the problem from different points of view, writers should deliberately change perspectives.

Analyze your readers, technical and non-technical, informed and uninformed. What would their perspectives be on your subject? Place yourself in each reader's position and ask:

- a. If I were the reader, how would I respond to the subject? To what has been said about the subject? To the data and visual aids?
- b. What questions would I (as one of the readers) have about the subject?

Try to raise objections to the ideas you've already generated. Also, look for assumptions (language, content, policy) you've made that your readers will not share. Then solve these problems by further brainstorming.

- c. Are the objections valid? Do they affect my conclusions?
 - d. If the objections are invalid, should I mention them in the report and argue why they are not valid?
 - e. Can I say anything that would prevent the objections from being raised?
 - f. How should I present my assumptions to my readers?
10. **Imitative Models**: Looking at how someone else has written about your subject can be a useful way of discovering ideas about the subject—but it can also be a straitjacket. Imitative models are fine if you don't copy the other writer's words or allow that writer's organization and language to stifle your own creativity. Your audience and your treatment of the subject will probably demand some changes in format, organization, and language.
11. **Expansion**: This technique can help you if you have trouble developing an idea. State the idea generally and ask:

“What would I, as an unknowledgeable reader, want to know after I had read that general statement?”

Write down your response to this question and ask:

“What more would I want to know after I had read this response?”

Write down your response to this question and ask:

“What more would I want to know after I had read the second response?”

Continue in this fashion, expanding on each response, until you reach a point of diminishing returns (when the responses become repetitive or when you think you have expanded the original statement as far as you need).

12. **Analogies**: discovering analogies/similarities between situations or things does much of our creative thinking. When we can say, “X is like Y,” we have found a way to explain X.

Suppose, for example, that you are a manager assessing paper flow in your division, and it occurs to you that the division has something in common with an automotive production line. You could then see paper flow in terms of system design: as a function of scheduling, workflow, and efficiency at each assembly point. The analogy (paper flow in the division is like a production line) gives you a new way of thinking about your subject.

The simplest way to create an analogy is to make the statement, “My problem is like . . .” Consider a broad range of possibilities: from other academic fields to sports, and from organizational or management models to the arts.

- a. To what other situations or things is your problem similar? What is it like?”
 - b. How does the analogy provide you with a new way of thinking about your subjects?
13. **Scoping**: In effect, put a microscope on some aspect of your subject and apply any of the preceding techniques to expand this one particular part of your subject. Then use a mental telescope to view your subject in a larger context with all of its implications and changes. In both of these instances, make a comparison, either a one-on-one comparison or a comparison with a figure of speech, such as a metaphor or an allusion.
14. Succinct statement of subject of your essay.
15. **Mind-Mapping**:
- a) Put a word or two representing what you consider the main subject of the chapter in the center of the page and circle it.
 - b) Next pencil in the two or three key sub ideas and draw lines connecting them to the central idea.

- c) Examine each sub idea one at a time and add any ideas they suggest in a cluster around them.
- d) Then examine each sub-sub idea and jet down any subsidiary ideas they might suggest and so on until you feel you have included everything important.
- e) Leave room for new circles to contain any ideas or relevant facts that you learn or think of later (Stine 101).

16. **Jump-Start Your Thinking Processes**

- a) Take five minutes to breathe deeply and clear your mind of extraneous mental static.
- b) Deliberately, consciously, and with as much will as you can muster, order your mind to focus on and think about your subject. Then actively begin thinking about it yourself.
- c) Ask yourself what you feel about the subject. Be honest. Tune in on yourself. When you have the answer, ask yourself why you feel that way.
- d) Ask yourself what you think about the subject. You may not know how to start thinking about it, but you do know what you think.
- e) Use your mind all of the time. Think about everything – not just what you have to. Ask yourself questions about what causes things, why people act the way they do, compare what’s happening to something similar that happened some time ago, decide what you think about what you see on television. Keep your thinking processes shaken up and going throughout the day. That way your mind won’t need to be jump-started – it will always be “up and running” (Stine 178)

17. **Processing of an Idea**

- a) Tell what it is and explain it fully.
- b) Pinpoint specifically what you have learned from the idea.
- c) Identify the perspectives or ways of looking at this idea.
- d) Write down the connections with something you have **read**, **experienced**, or **observed**.
- e) Fully process this idea by using the Web, which “provides the key to the accumulated wealth of humankind’s knowledge through the ages” (Ayan 19).
- f) Discuss the value of your idea for the future.

18. **Persistent Questioning**

- a) Ask a key question about an idea you have studied and write down the answer.
- b) Then ask why about the answer and write down your response.
- c) Continue this process until you have explored all possibilities.

19. Morning Pages

- a) Write two to three pages every morning.
- b) Sometimes this expression, also known as free writing, will be simplistic, tautological, or aimless prose.
- c) Ultimately, through regular practice, including class exercises, you will continue this "mining process" until you begin to "strike gold," that is to write ideas of creativity and quality.
- d) This idea comes from *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron; she suggests that every morning the aspiring writer complete three pages. After two or three months, the writer will make quantum leaps in generating ideas.

20. Scratching

- a) doing something else, such as weight lifting, watching a TV show or movie, dreaming, or eating
- b) just put an idea or two on a piece of paper, unconsciously, with no particular goal in mind
- c) this is just something to start the process of creativity – like “clawing up the side of a mountain to get a toehold” (Tharp 95) Then let the process work in your unconscious mind like a seed – eventually, subliminally, it will sprout into an idea. Sometimes two little ideas combined will make a difference (97).

The Processes of Tapping into Your Creative Mind

Exactly how does the creative mind function? There is no precise answer to this question, but there are some good theories. Here is the standard four-step process developed in the late nineteenth century:

- 1) **Preparation**: You use the above techniques to discover what you think about your subject matter. Do not half-heartedly participate in this process or trivialize its importance. In fact, build upon it by doing research, gathering information, and discussing your subject with a friend or colleague. This is the raw material for your intended essay. Without a full commitment to this preparation, the other steps that follow may not yield the desired results. Even if you feel discomfort or agony because you don't know what you are doing or what you will achieve, allow those feelings their sway. The feelings too are sometimes part of the process.
- 2) **Incubation**: During this phase you do not consciously grapple with the ideas. Instead, you merely let the ideas work on a different level of your mind – something like a fetus growing within the womb. (In other words you are pregnant!)

- 3) **Illumination**: Your unconscious mind has worked on its own, and suddenly you get a focus or a concept with little or no conscious effort on your part, something like the Eureka Phenomenon that occurred to Archimedes while he took a bath. As soon as he realized his famous Law of Displacement, he was so thrilled that he ran naked throughout Syracuse, Greece, claiming, "I've got it! I've got it!" Notice that this "aha" awareness may occur anywhere at any time, not necessarily while you are writing your essay.
- 4) **Implementation**: This activity occurs when the rubber meets the road and you put your idea into action to complete your essay. In this first draft preparation, the essay almost writes itself. Still the writer must go back to refine and polish those ideas and articulate them in a fluent manner (Ayan 7).

Very Important: Although this process seems linear, sometimes it functions in an unpredictable manner. You may get your illumination during the preparation stage or the implementation stage. Sometimes the idea may be preceded by a time of emotional turmoil or agony. Remember to capture the idea by writing it down before you forget it. An idea journal is a useful way of keeping track of your original ideas. As you can gather ideas, you will notice that creativity can be a spontaneous, even random function. Allow for this possibility. It is a kind of magic that makes writing such as exciting, mysterious process.

Excerpting a Subject for an Essay from a College Reading Assignment

To come up with an interesting subject for a composition based on a reading requires five skills: 1) careful, conscientious reading, 2) knowledge based on scholarship and experience, 3) critical thinking, 4) imagination, and 5) rhetorical strategies. For the beginning college student, such skills may seem overwhelming, but with motivation and practice, they can be developed and refined. Using the essay “The World of Epictetus” by Vice Admiral Stockdale, let us use these skills to figure out some interesting subjects for compositions. The same processes can be applied to reading any college-level essay.

A careful, conscientious reading of the essay yields five subjects that Admiral Stockdale discusses at length:

- 1) stoicism
- 2) philosophy
- 3) education
- 4) ethics
- 5) theatrics

Using our knowledge based on scholarship, experience, and critical thinking, we can concoct some interesting and sometimes unusual subjects.

- Stoicism:** “Stoicism is the safe way to avoid risk-taking and challenges, the stuff of successful lives.” “Stoicism is the perfect prescription for mediocrity.” “Existentialism is better than stoicism.” “In the long run stoicism is the best policy.”
- Philosophy:** “The motto ‘Life is not Fair’ helps people spend more time on productive enterprises and less time on recrimination.” “Understanding that ‘Life is not fair’ causes people to seek spiritual solutions to their problems.”
- Education:** “Education is an ornament in prosperity and a refuge in adversity sounds profound but is false.” “Stockdale misjudges computers.”
- Ethics:** “Although honesty is often the best policy, sometimes lying is a better choice.” “Integrity should be practiced in little ways.”
- Theatrics:** “Acting skills are the important ingredients for successful interviews and for successful lives.”

Imagination, of course, is unlimited and can often yield unusual, even strange subjects. Consider these thoughts. Stoicism claims that its adherents only deal with matters within their power. If great innovators like Copernicus, Kepler, and Einstein had limited themselves to what society believed was within their power, their enterprises may

never have occurred. If we were to consider time travel simply the stuff of science fiction, then it may never happen. The same could have been said for journeys to the moon. Thus we can use this alternative concept as a starting point for a thoughtful, argumentative essay.

The rhetorical strategies, originated by Aristotle, provide the novel ways in which subjects may be expressed. Some of the more popular ones are comparison-contrast, classification, narrative, argument, definition, cause and effect, process analysis, and exemplification. One might easily use them as a means to come up with interesting subjects for writing. Here are some examples:

Process Analysis: how to integrate stoicism into one's daily schedule: how the studying of acting can produce outstanding speakers: how to develop a memory that rivals Stockdale's memory.

Definition: What does integrity really mean?

Argument: Academic education does not teach a student how to be successful in life.

Cause and Effect: Training in theatrics can produce outstanding speakers.

Classification: Three types of education exist in my college: academic education, practical education, and ethical education. These three categories include Stockdale's emphasis on the classics and ethical behavior.

Naturally, these titles are only the beginning of the reading assessment process. Once you have figured out your subject, you still need to identify your purpose in writing the essay and your audience. Then, you need to free write, brainstorm, and cluster so that you can "flush out" your ideas, devise a structure, and write out a draft copy.

Works Cited

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