



# Writers block? How to address challenges during academic writing processes

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# Franz Kafka:

«June 7.

Bad. Wrote nothing today. Tomorrow  
no time»

# Overview

Introduction - what is writer's block?

I. Examples of research literature. Lotte Rieneker's view of students' writing challenges

II. How to prevent and deal with writing problems from 3 different traditions in writing research and instruction

Rhetorical

Cognitive

Sociocultural

III. My own advice

IV. Research on postgraduate students' writing practices: practical implications for you?

# Some manifestations of procrastination or writer's block

1. You can't come up with an idea
2. You have a ton of ideas but can't commit to any of them
3. You have an outline but you can't get started
4. You're stuck in the middle
5. You can't think of the right words for what you're trying to convey in this one paragraph
6. You're revising your work, and you can't see your way past all those blocks of text you already wrote.

.....

Flatherty (2004 p 80)

Writing is a cognitively (and emotionally) demanding task.

Are these 6 points normal difficulties or writer's block?

# A definition

«Although writer's block can have many manifestations and many causes, all blocked writers share two traits: they do not write despite being intellectually capable of doing so, and they suffer because they are not writing.» (Flatherty 2004)

«Procrastination» - the tendency to postpone writing (find substitute work). This is experienced by all writers (!)

# Two ineffective strategies to overcome procrastination and writer's block

- Insisting on a perfect draft

Perfectionism is the surest way to writer's block

- Waiting for inspiration
  - What seems like inspiration is usually the result of internalized hard work.
  - «Writing is 98 % perspiration, and 2 % inspiration»

# Examples of psychological research and interventions

- Bergler (1950) Does Writer's block exist? **Conclusion: solve the personal psychological problems and you remove the blockage**
- **Rose, M.** (1980) "Rigid rules, inflexible plans, and the stifling of language: A cognitivist analysis of writer's block" (closed system thinking vs flexibility, open system thinking)

**Singer & Barrios** (1970-80ies) Studied blocked writers at Yale (no writing in 3 m)  
4 groups of blocked writers:

1. Anxious & emotionally stressed –excessive self criticism
2. Socially hostile - did not want their work to be compared
3. Apathetic & disengaged – greatest problems
4. Angry & disappointed, narcissistic – did not want to share their work

Treatment: exercises in directed mental imagery etc

**Main findings: "Therapy did not unblock creativity, but creative training worked as therapy"**

**Flaherty, A. W.** (2004) *The midnight disease, the drive to write, writer's block, and the creative brain*. (Neurobiologist: focused on wb as a 'brain state')

## Boice, R. (1997) *Procrastination and blocking*

- Critique of the “amiable tradition”: neglecting the problem.
- Four approaches in scholarly lit to explanation and intervention:
  1. excessive self-consciousness
  2. psychoanalytic
  3. behavioral
  4. personality factors

Boice advocates return to traditional explanations: i. e. perfectionism, low tolerance of frustration, low self esteem, a pattern of deficient skills

- Good examples of interventions: How do productive writers work?

Teach the tacit knowledge of success, for instance self management, task management and social management + motivation

Optimistic conclusion: the usually tacit, unmentioned ways of working that characterize successful students can be taught!



# Lotte Rienecker: Two main categories of students with writing problem in academia

- Disiplinary competent , ambitious, perfectionistic and stressed students
  - Often overcommitted to their studies
  - Risk stress, overwork, anxiety and burnt-out-syndrom.

Their texts are often correct but may lack independent thinking
- Students with disciplinary and/or study competence problem
  - Work too little Often undercommitted
  - Holes in their basic writing competences
  - Product & process problems.

Lotte Rienecker (2015)

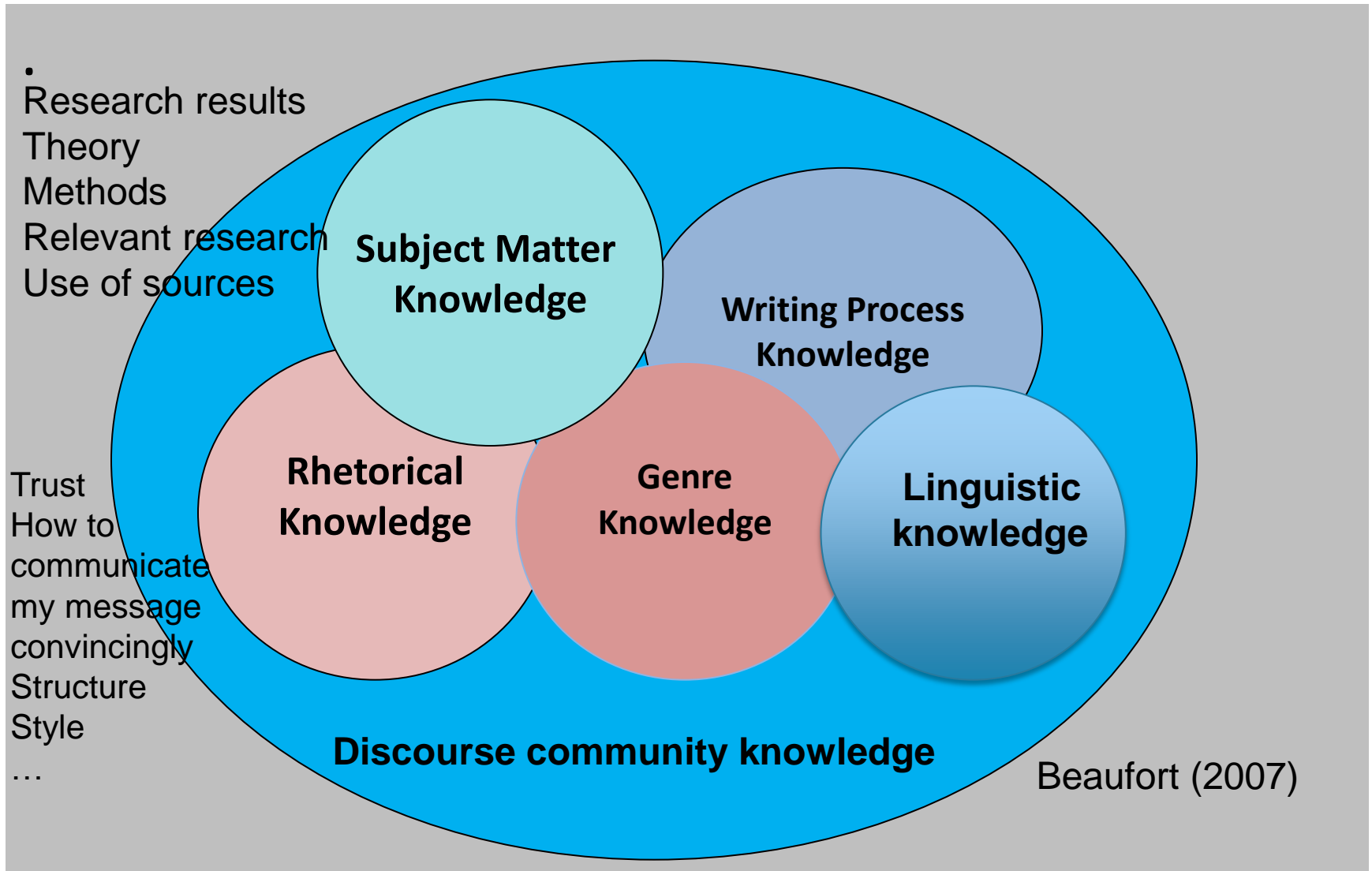
## A quotation from Rienecker

- «In my experience writing anxiety are in most cases a result of lack of knowledge and competence related to the type of writing tasks the students meet.
- But what they talk about is primarily anxiety and writer's block... Psychological problems are more acceptable as explanations for problems, - it is more ok to talk about having writer's block, writing anxiety, bad relations to the supervisor etc, than that you have not worked enough or lack writing competence or knowledge.
- I start from student texts, from knowledge and writing pedagogy to psychology, not the other way around».

## II. How to prevent and deal with writing problems. Advice from 3 traditions



# Knowledge areas in disciplinary writing



# The rhetorical tradition

- Aristoteles, Cicero, Quintillinan...



- Important principle in the rhetorical tradition: ***learning through models***
- **Advice: When stuck, read good texts**
- Read a lot of examples of the kind of text you need to produce
- Use models to structure your test

# A common rhetorical model of academic texts

## IMRaD:

- Introduction
- Materials
- Methods
- Results
- Discussion

Advice: start with the section you prefer. Read a number of examples of this particular section in several articles or thesis

# Rhetorical strategies for introduction to scientific articles

” What *gap* in research am I really trying to fill? How?”

- **John Swales: CARS-model** (*Aspects of Article Introductions*, 1981)

- Move 1: Establishing a territory

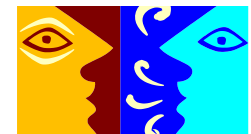
- Step 1 Claiming centrality and/or
- Step 2 Making topic generalization(s) and/or
- Step 3 Reviewing items of previous research

- Move 3: Establishing a niche

- Step 1A Counter-claiming or
- Step 1B Indicating a gap or
- Step 1C Question-raising or
- Step 1D Continuing a tradition

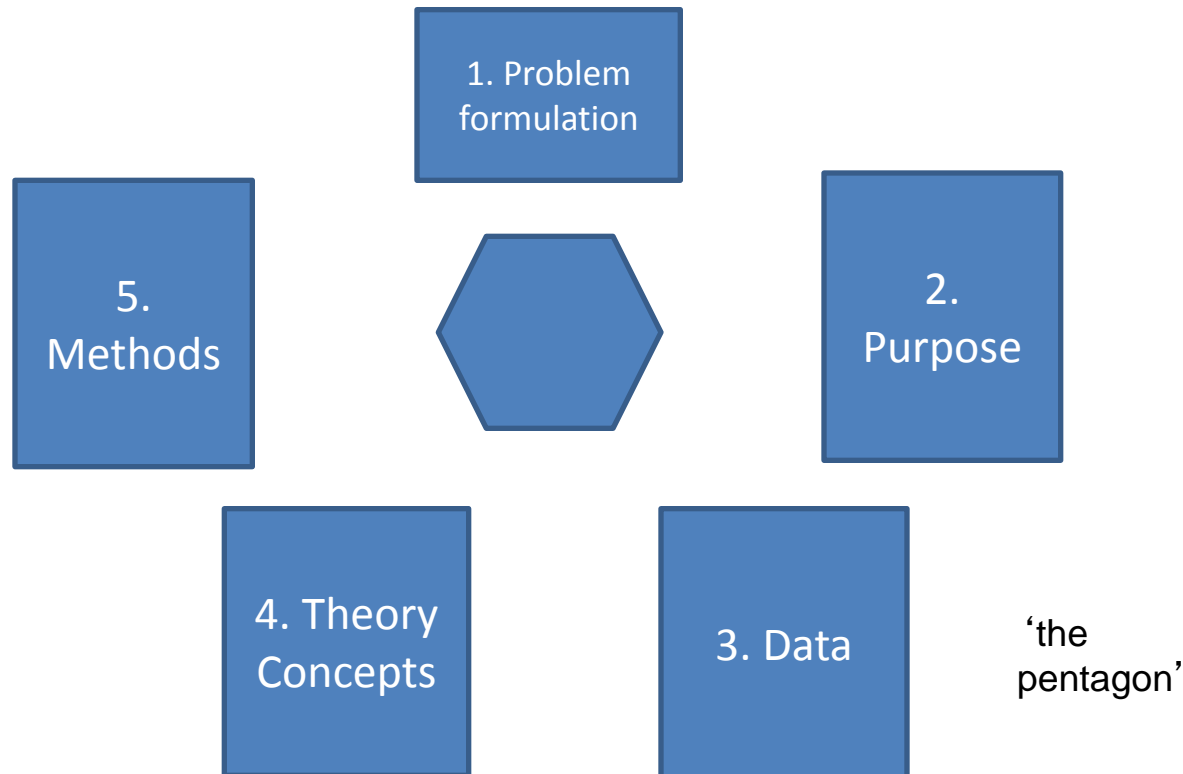
- Move 2: Occupying a niche

- Step 1A Outlining purposes or
- Step 1B Announcing present research
- Step 2 Announcing principal findings 1
- Step 3 Indicating research article structure



# The pentagon as rhetorical strategy in academic thesis writing

- Rienecker & Stray Jørgensen: *The Good Paper* (2007) : the pentagon & «the thesis as an argument» (use Toulmin's argumentation model).
- W. Booth et al: *The Craft of Research* (2003)





# Cognitive tradition – the lone writer

Early writing process models: Flowers & Hayes (1981)



# Strategies and techniques for generating ideas and text

Cognitive writing researchers saw retrieval of ideas & knowledge from long-term memory as crucial

- Brainstorming: "idemyldring"
- Freewriting ("non-stop writing")
- Brain mapping ("tankekart")
- WIRMI: "What I really mean is...."
- Satisficing - delay the perfect ...
- Start writing where you are (what you know)
- Break the writing task into smaller pieces

# Peter Elbow: 'Freewriting'

('writing-to-think', 'non-stop writing')

## Why ?

- to counteract procrastination and writer's block
- to improve productivity
- to foster creative thinking

Technique for getting started, for improving writing and for creative writing at all levels

"It is a way to end up thinking something you couldn't have started out thinking "(p.15)

Elbow, P. *'Writing without teachers (1973), Writing with power (1981)*

# Elbow's own instruction to students

**How?** «Write for 10 min (Later 15-20). Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. ... The only requirement is that you *never stop*.»

- «Freewriting must never be evaluated, but you may share it»

**Why does it work?** We are inculturated into avoiding mistakes, 'getting it right', and we edit away unacceptable thoughts and feelings. *Freewriting helps you to give up control!*

- By separating internal editing from production, we open up for unconscious thoughts, for new ideas, for our own 'voice'. «It is our own source of power»)

# Strategies (heuristics) designed as tools for the individual writer with problem spots in the mental model

- Linda Flower: *Problem solving strategies for writing* (1981/93)

Examples:

**Generate ideas:** Use the strategies of creative thinking to explore your own knowledge. **Your goal is to discover useful ideas stored in your memory and create new ideas by forging connections among the old.**

Strategy 1: Turn off the editor and brainstorm

Strategy 2: Talk to your reader (role-play different audiences)

Strategy 3: Systematically explore topic

Strategy 4: Rest and incubate

# Freewriting – advice from Elbow

- Traditional advice: «Think first, then write» vs: «Write to think»  
Use to find topics, warm up, get started, overcome procrastination, discover new ideas
  - **The main usefulness not the immediate product, but the gradual effect on future writing.**
- Keep a freewriting **diary**: just 10 min pr day
- Don't be afraid of **digressions**! (Notice when it happened, where it took you, how it connects to other thoughts. Next step: explore & reflect)
- **Exaggeration vs** Hedging

# Christian Koch's advice: Use this «tool box for writing» (or «How to juggle with one ball at a time»)

## 1. Brainstorming

Unsensored ideas

## 2. Freewriting

a series of unorganized short texts about questions and problems relevant for the topic

## 3. Mindmap

a graphic structuration (or a linear disposition)

## 4. First draft

a continuous text which is a preliminary version of the finished text



# Example of contemporary cognitive writing research: David Galbraith's dual process model (1999/2009)

## Writing as discovery

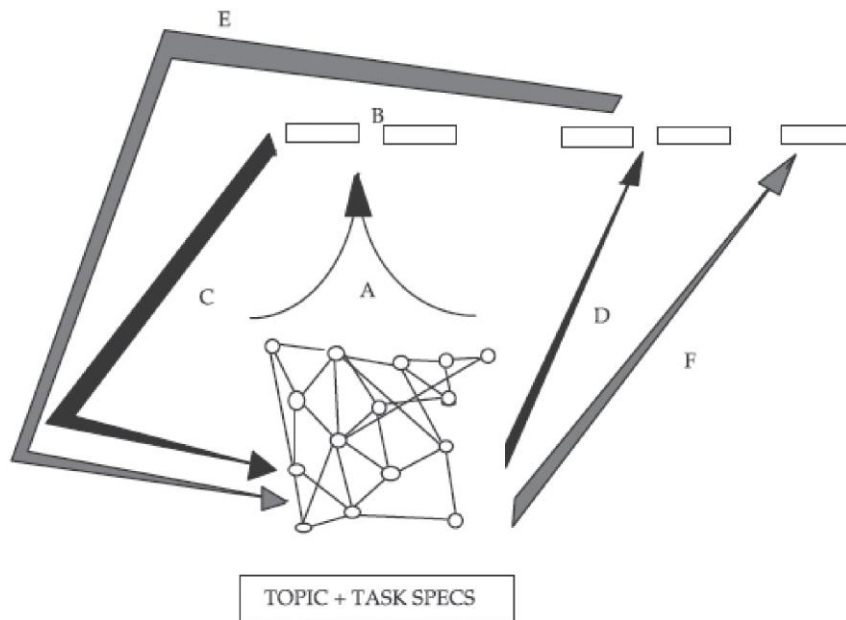
A fundamental conflict for writers:

1) retrieve knowledge from pre-existing ideas in explicit memory

2) produce new ideas

• *High self-monitors*

• *Low self-monitors*



Explains why you have problems writing the discussion – where you need both 1 & 2



# Sociocultural tradition of writing



Mikhail Bakhtin: *Meaning* is created through **dialogue** and **co-production** with the reader

# Socio-cultural perspectives on writing

- *Language* is not just a vehicle for thoughts already produced, but a way of thinking (Vygotsky)

Advice: When you are stuck, write to explore and to think

Jfr Elbow

- *The writing process* itself is social – writing is a constant negotiation with the reader(s)

# Bakhtin:

## Difference and confrontation as resource

- Bakhtin:
- Understanding and development of knowledge emerge through *negotiation of meaning in the encounter between different voices*
- The learning potential is greatest when different points of view confront each other
- Seek multivoicedness, disagreement, resistance, confrontation as a way to stimulate your writing, even provocations

# Practical implications of sociocultural perspectives: Writing strategies to prevent (and help) writer's block

- **Use social strategies** at different points of the writing process
  - Writing groups (online groups or face-to-face)
  - Social prewriting strategies: Dialogue/discussion with others (chat, e-mail, phone, face-to-face while writing)
  - Feedback strategies (in groups or dyads)
- **Use dialogical feedback practices**
  - Ask a fellow student to read 2 pages of your text and discuss it with you when you are stuck

Reciprocate!

### III. My own best advice about how to prevent and procrastination and writer's block 1.

1. Join a writing/support group og get a writing partner
2. Establish a regular schedule for writing every day

(Silva: *How to write a lot*

1. Write first (before checking mail!) When is your peak productivity time of day?
2. Warm up (Freewriting: Begin writing about anything that comes to mind)
3. Alternate 45 min writing with 15 minutes of rest
4. Review similar papers or doctoral dissertations
5. Identify where you are stuck and get help
6. The ultimate advice?



<http://www.nextscientist.com/writers-block-phd-students/>

## My general advice 2

- Use disagreement and conflicting views to trigger your writing when you feel empty and lack ideas
- Use revision as creative spaces for developing your ideas
- Be conscious about what kind of a writer you are - on a scale from planner to chaos writer. Self confidence?

Find out what strategies to fight writer's block that work for you and use them regularly

# Research on PhDs' writing strategies & productivity

Torrance & Torrance (1994) *Development of postgraduate writing skills*

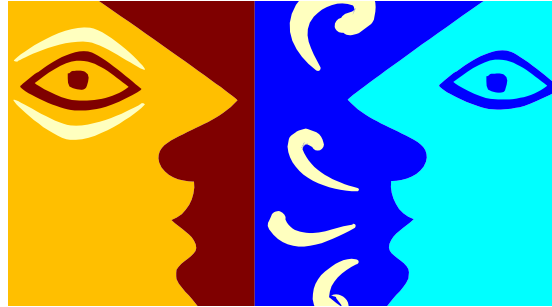
## Findings:

- «**PLANNERS**» think-then-write, fewer drafts than B & C, revised for style & clarity of expression
- «**REVISERS**» started writing without plan and clear ideas (reported that writing clarified their ideas & understanding), more drafts than A, revised also for content change
- «**MIXED STRATEGY WRITERS**» planned content before writing, but wrote more drafts than A & C and revised for content

## Findings and interpretation:

- **A** most productive (ratio of words to hrs of writing) – Strategy that suited them
- **A & B** both enjoyed writing & satisfied with product – Strategy that suited them
- **C** had great problems, less productive + anxiety      No coherent strategies

# How can I improve the quality and my effectivity as a writer? Share and support



What kind of writer am I? Does it depend on the writing task?  
What are my strenghts? My weaknesses?  
What specifically do I need to work on to improve the quality and the effectivity of my writing?

Who could be my writing partner' with and how can we organize collaboration that is useful for both of us?



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