



Writer s block? How to address challenges during academic writing processes

Olga Dysthe

Institutt for pedagogikk, UiB

Stipendiatdagen Psyk.fak. 26.03.2015

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 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 demanding task.

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 p 80)

«Procrastination» - the tendency to postpone writing (find substitute work) – 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 research literature

- Rose, M. (1980) “Rigid rules, inflexible plans, and the stifling of language: A cognitivist analysis of writer’s block”.
 - closed system thinking  flexibility, open system think
- Onwuegbuzie, A. (1997) “Writing a research proposal: The role of library anxiety, statistics anxiety, and composition anxiety.”
 - 81 grad students
- Flaherty, A. W. (2004) *The midnight disease, the drive to write, writer’s block , and the creative brain.*
 - *Nurobiologist: focused on wb as a ‘brain state’*

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

- Disdisciplinary competent , ambitious, perfectionistic and stressed students
 - Often overcommitted to their studies, and the risk is stress, overwork, anxiety reactions and burnt-out-syndrom. Their texts are often correct but lack independent thinking
- Students with disciplinary and/or study competence problem
 - sometimes work too little, holes in their basic writing competences
Product & process problems.
 - Often undercommitted to they studies. Inadequate texts.

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».

Knowledge areas in disciplinary writing



Beaufort (2004)

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

Cognitive tradition – the lone writer



Dysthe

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

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»)

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

4. First draft

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



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)

Sociocultural tradition of writing



Dysthe

Socio-cultural perspectives on writing

- *Language* is not just a vehicle for thoughts already produced, but a way of thinking (Vygotsky)
- *The writing process* itself is social – writing is a constant negotiation with the reader(s)
- *Meaning* is created through **dialogue** and **co-production** with the reader (Bakhtin)

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

Practical implications of sociocultural perspectives for writing strategies

- **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!

My own advice to PhD – candidates 1

- Establish a regular schedule for writing every day - stick to it
- Use freewriting strategies regularly to get started, for exploration and when you are stuck
- Organize a writing group - make it work for all participants
- Develop expertise in giving and utilizing feedback

My own advice 2

- Learn to use disagreement and conflicting views (in the group and in the literature you read) as hotbeds for new ideas and creative thoughts.
- Use provocations to trigger your writing when you are empty
- Use revision as creative spaces for developing your ideas
- Be conscious about what kind of a writer you are
- Find out what strategies to fight writer's block and procrastination that work for you and use them

What are the practical implications for you?



Which of the strategies have you used? Have they worked for you when you have struggled with your own writing?

What are your writing challenges right now?

What strategies will you try out?

III. Research studies of phd-candidates' writing approaches and strategies

Four relevant research studies

- Survey of 228 full-time UK social science PhD students
 - 34 % found writing highly stressful
 - 27 % found writing frustrating
 - 21 % thought the difficulties they experiences might jeopardize thesis
- Understanding writing problems of postgrad students
 - Think-then-write approach vs develop thinking through writing approach
 - Revision
- What writing strategies worked best for postgrad students?
 - Definition of 'writing strategy': «the way in which a writer partition the task of writing into more manageable components, and the sequence in which these components are executed»
- Evaluation study of 3 conceptual approaches to writing instruction
 - Product-centred course
 - Cognitive strategies course
 - Generative writing and shared revision course

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

Postgrads' writing strategies & productivity

- 1) the stage when they took decisions about content & structure
- 2) number of drafts & revisions

A «**PLANNERS**» think-then-write, fewer drafts than B & C, revised for style & clarity of expression

B «**REVISERS**» started writing without plan and clear ideas (reported that writing clarified their ideas & understanding), more drafts than A, revised also for content change

C «**MIXED STRATEGY**» 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?



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?

Literature

- **Dysthe, O.** (2002) Professors as mediators of academic text culture. An interview study with advisors and master degree students in three disciplines in a Norwegian university. *Written Communication*, Sage publications: 2002, 19/4, 485-536.
- **Dysthe, O.; Samara, A; Westrheim, K.** (2006) Multivoiced supervision of Master's students: a case study of alternative supervision practices in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31 (3), 299-319.
- **Dysthe, O. & Samara, S.** (red) *Forskningsveiledning på master og doktorgradsnivå. Oslo: Abstrakt.*
- **Elbow, P.** (1973) *Writing without teachers.* Oxford University Press.
- **Elvow, P.** (1981) *Writing with power.* Oxford University Press
- **Flower, L.** (1981/89) *Problem solving strategies in writing.* Harcourt Brace.
- **Flower, L. & Hayes, J. R** (1981) A cognitive process theory of writing. *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 32, 4: 365-387.
- **MacArthur, C. A.; Graham, S. & Fitzgerald, J.** (2006) *Handbook of Writing Research.* NY/London: The Guildford Press.
- **Rienecker, L.** (1991) *Tekster til tiden – undgå skrivebokeringer.*
- **Samara, A.** (2006) Skrivegrupper som inngang til PhD-studiet. En kasusstudie I Dysthe & Samara (red) *Forskningsveiledning på master og doktorgradsnivå.*
- **Silvia, P.**(2007) *How to write a lot. A practical guide to productive academic writing.* APA