

The Power of the Shitty First Draft

***a strategy for overcoming writer's block
(a.k.a. creative constipation)***

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The Good News and the Bad News

If you occasionally suffer from writer's block, you are in good company. All writers, including the most famous and prolific authors, suffer from writer's block occasionally.

The bad news is that there is no cure. It's a recurring disease that afflicts all of us. The good news is that we have remedies for short-term relief.

Remedies for Writer's Block

There is no single remedy for writer's block. Rather, the remedies vary based on what is causing the creative constipation. This newsletter will concentrate on harnessing the power of the shitty first draft. But first, let's look at some other possible remedies:

- Clear away the distractions. Sometimes writer's block results from having other things clamoring for your attention. It can be as simple as a messy desk distracting you from your writing or as complex as other pressing obligations weighing on your mind.

To the extent that you can do so, clear away those distractions so that you are free to concentrate on writing. Be careful, however, not to use these as excuses to procrastinate. Even the best writers can wile away the day preparing to write but never writing a word.

- Take a break. If you're truly stuck, it may be because your mind has grown stale. Get away from the computer for a while. Do something else. Get some exercise. Recharge your batteries. You may find that when you return to the project, the ideas flow more easily than they did before. But again, don't use this remedy as a way to procrastinate.

Many writers get their best ideas while engaged in other activities. Some "write" while walking or hiking, talking through the problems as they go. Some talk out their problems in the shower or tub. There's no right or wrong way . . . though some solutions may be more appropriate than others while in the workplace.

Every writer suffers from writer's block occasionally.



There's no cure for writer's block, but there are several remedies for short-term relief.

- Try a change of scenery. If you have the flexibility to write elsewhere, try it. Perhaps sitting outside in the sunshine will inspire you. Perhaps curling up on the couch with your portable computer on your lap will relax you enough to let the ideas flow.
- Start with pen and paper, then switch to the computer once the ideas start flowing. For many writers, the “organic” nature of pen or pencil and paper allows them to be more creative.
- Work from easy to hard. Start with things you can tackle easily and work your way toward the more difficult material. This helps build momentum. And once the creative juices are flowing, you may discover solutions to the problems that held you back earlier.
- Clarify the scope of the project. If something has you stuck, perhaps it doesn’t belong in your document. Maybe it doesn’t relate well to the rest of the material, or maybe it’s something you can’t support with facts and evidence. Removing this “clog in the drain” may let your creativity flow.
- Use placeholders. If you’re stuck because you are missing some key information or because you don’t know how you want to present an idea, use a placeholder. A placeholder can be as simple as [text in brackets] or a box to mark where an illustration will go. This placeholder strategy is often enough to prevent the missing details from nagging at you and keeping you from moving forward.
- Do something else in service of the work. Most writing projects have several components. What else needs to be done? Is there some research you can do? Are there companion documents that need to be written? Do you need to create a table of contents, index, or illustration? If you’re stuck on one part, move to another. Do something else that serves the overall project.

The Battle Between Creative Self and Critical Self

One of the most common causes of writer’s block is the perpetual battle between Creative Self and Critical Self. Creative Self just wants to write, but Critical Self can’t stop editing.

Critical Self may start with reasonable comments. “The sentence structure is wrong.” “That’s not punctuated properly.” “You should double-check that before you commit it to writing.” These are all things that Critical Self *should* be looking for before you turn the document loose for others to see. But it can be counterproductive in the early stages when you simply need to get ideas out.

Worse, Critical Self may turn to more destructive comments. “You’re a lousy writer.” “You don’t have a clue what you’re doing.” “No one will want to read this.” “This project is a waste of time.” Few things can bring a writing project to a halt faster than such destructive thinking.

If the battle between Creative Self and Critical Self is a common cause of writer’s block, the obvious solution is to separate the two long enough to get your thoughts on paper. Here’s where we see the power of the shitty first draft.

One of the most common causes of writer’s block is the perpetual battle between Creative Self and Critical Self.

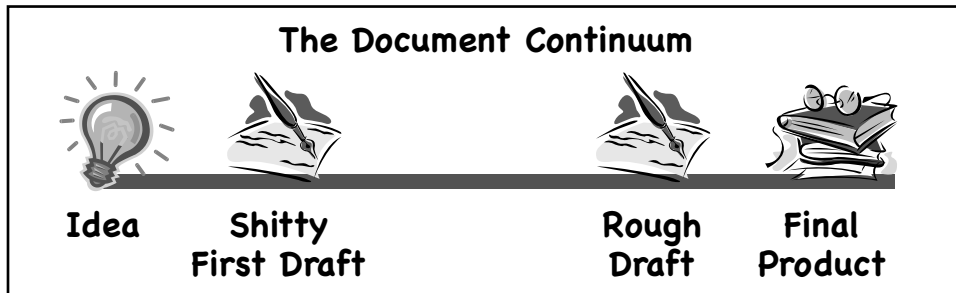


Giving yourself permission to write a shitty first draft is a powerful tool for getting past the persistent desire to edit on the first pass.

The Beauty of the Shitty First Draft

Since the time we were children, we've been taught the wisdom of writing a rough first draft without trying edit. That's fine for many people, but not for everyone. Perfectionists, in particular, struggle with this. For the perfectionist, a "rough draft" is something that is pretty darn polished. It's not perfect, but it's good enough that the perfectionist isn't embarrassed to show it to others. The perfectionist needs something rougher than a rough draft. Without it, he or she gets stuck.

I was at a writers' conference years ago when I first heard someone say, "Give yourself permission to write a shitty first draft." It was like magic. The option to write a shitty first draft opened up that vast territory between a blank piece of paper and my idea of a rough draft that I could safely show to other people. It gave me another landing zone on "The Document Continuum." Whenever I found myself getting stuck on a writing project, I'd tell myself, "You have permission to write a shitty first draft." Usually that was enough to move past whatever I was struggling with. Usually.



Unfortunately, Critical Self is very persistent. I could tell Critical Self to take a break and not worry about trying to edit on the first pass. But Critical Self was still inclined to hover nearby. Sometimes I needed a more powerful weapon.

That's when I realized that the secret was to *revel* in the shitty first draft. I had to enjoy and embrace that shitty first draft as if it were a work of art in itself. The shittier, the better. The shittier the first draft, the more fun I could have editing it later. This did the trick. Reveling in that shitty first draft was more powerful than simply giving myself permission to write a shitty first draft.

Alternate Forms of a Shitty First Draft

A shitty first draft can take many forms. This concept isn't limited to text. For example, a classroom presentation can start life as a messy storyboard. When I started to develop slides for a presentation on shitty first drafts, I knew what information I wanted to put into my slides. But when I sat down at my computer to develop them, I froze. Critical Self expected me to go from blank slate to perfection in one leap, and it paralyzed me. So I walked away from the computer, grabbed pen and paper, and sketched something similar to the following illustration. Afterwards, it was very easy to create my slides.

Sometimes giving yourself permission to write a shitty first draft is not enough.



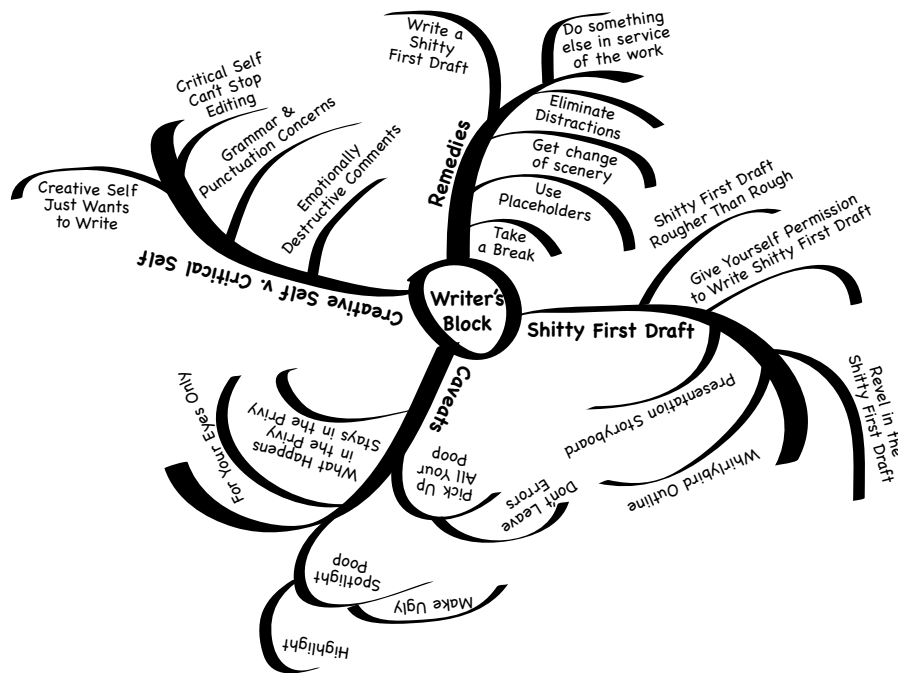
When you need something more powerful, revel in that shitty first draft. Enjoy and embrace it as if it's a work of art in itself.

Shitty First Draft Presentation



This same concept can be applied to outlining. Many people dislike outlining, because outlining is difficult to do before one has a sense of order. But an outline doesn't have to start life with the structured discipline we're used to seeing in outlines. Instead, it can first appear as a whirlybird, with ideas loosely strung together on related vanes. It gives the writer a temporary place to hang these ideas until their final position is determined.

A Whirlybird Outline



A shitty first draft can take many forms, including storyboards and whirlybird outlines.



The shitty first draft is a place to hang your ideas while you work your way toward the finished product.

Two Important Caveats

Giving yourself permission to write a shitty first draft has some drawbacks. So we need to have a couple of caveats.

First, what happens in the privy must stay in the privy. Let that shitty first draft be for your eyes only. This is not something you should proudly show your boss, expecting praise for how quickly you churned out the first draft. Such folly would only feed into a negative assessment of your writing skills and abilities, as well as your judgment.

The shitty first draft is merely a vehicle for getting your thoughts on paper. Once you do, clean it up. Turn it into a draft that is clean enough not to be an embarrassment. Do not leave it for others to find and correct your mistakes. Otherwise, they may conclude that they are better off writing documents themselves and cutting you out of the process.

That leads to the second caveat—Pick up all your poop. Equally important, spotlight the poop as you go. If you put thoughts on paper knowing that at some point you'll need to go back and check the accuracy of the information, highlight whatever it is that needs to be checked or fixed later. Otherwise, it's easy to be lulled into thinking that what you've committed to paper has already been fact-checked.

How you spotlight the poop is up to you. You can highlight it with color. You can make it stand out with ***bold, underlined, and italic type***. (Anything that ugly will catch your attention and remind you that it needs more attention.) Bottom line, spotlight any problems that need fixing later. Then pick up all your poop.

Paginal Diarrhea

Writer's block is sometimes a sign of "paginal diarrhea." Perhaps you are simply trying to say too much. If you find that fleshing out an idea is difficult, it may be because you need to cut and consolidate instead. Remember, sometimes less is more.

For more information on this topic, see my separate newsletter called "Strategies for Curing Paginal Diarrhea."



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