

# ***The Power of the Shitty First Draft***

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

***a special publication from Firebelle Productions***

## **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.
- 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.
- Try multiple versions. If you are stuck because you don’t know the right approach, try creating two or more versions to see what works best. Fiction writers, for example, may try writing a few chapters both in first person and in third person before they decide which they prefer. Trying to decide what is “right” for your project may be difficult without exploring the options.
- 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.
- 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.
- Determine what the end product is supposed to look like. When someone gives you an assignment to create a document that you have not written before, don’t hesitate to request additional guidance if needed. The person who gave you the assignment may have a clear picture of the end product in his or her mind, but the picture may be less clear in yours. Be clear as you start the project.

If your current writing assignment is one of several documents on a path toward the ultimate “end product,” set it up with the goal of reusing as much of the work as possible. For example, when I create documents now in my job as a paralegal—a job unrelated to Firebelle Productions—I am thinking ahead about what I will need at trial if the case doesn’t settle beforehand. Prior to working my first trial, I couldn’t see into the future to know what the end product would look like. Consequently, I had to redo a lot of my work for every new document. I am far more efficient these days, often setting up my documents so I can copy and paste between them.

**Remedies for writer’s block vary based on what is causing the creative constipation.**



**Consider some basic remedies, such as clearing away distractions, tackling easy parts of the project first, and using placeholders to get beyond the elements that have you stuck.**

- Look at samples and templates if available, since verbal descriptions alone may not paint a clear picture. Additionally, create your own samples binder or templates file. You will find this invaluable both for projects you do often and for those you do infrequently.

Samples and templates do not have to be lengthy or elaborate. They can be built one sentence or one paragraph at a time in response to specific needs or problems. Shown below is an example from my job as a paralegal. It is a liability statement I would use in a claim packet or mediation brief for a rear-end automobile collision.

[Police Agency] Officer [First Last] determined that [Defendant] caused the collision by following too closely in violation of California Vehicle Code section 21703, which states, "The driver of a motor vehicle shall not follow another vehicle more closely than is reasonable and prudent, having due regard for the speed of such vehicle and the traffic upon, and the condition of, the roadway." Liability for this incident is clear. [Exhibit 1]

Without this template language to follow, some of my coworkers would instead write such things as, "The police report determined that ..." Police reports do not determine anything; police officers do. Once I provided my coworkers with template language, they were better able to write in what sounds like our attorney's voice.

- Determine jurisdictional requirements. Not knowing jurisdictional requirements can stymie your writing efforts. It can keep you from even starting the project because you don't have clear direction. Or you may waste time writing something that you will later have to rewrite or discard because it doesn't meet the requirements.
- Know the rules; know when to break the rules. Creative constipation can result from trying too hard to "follow the rules."

## 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 information 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.

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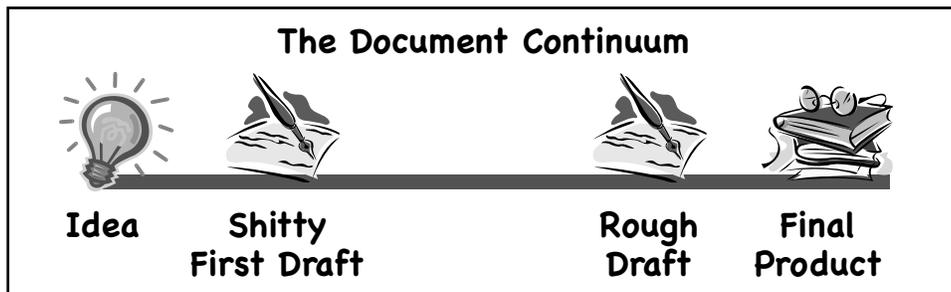
**Giving yourself permission to write a shitty first draft is a powerful tool for getting past the persistent desire to edit on the first pass.**

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 selves long enough to get your thoughts on paper. Here's where we see the power of the shitty first draft.

## 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 to 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.

Consider what authors (and would-be authors) are taught ... Great books are not written; they are rewritten. The same is true of many other types of documents. So revel in the shitty first draft. It is the groundwork for what may be great writing at a later stage.

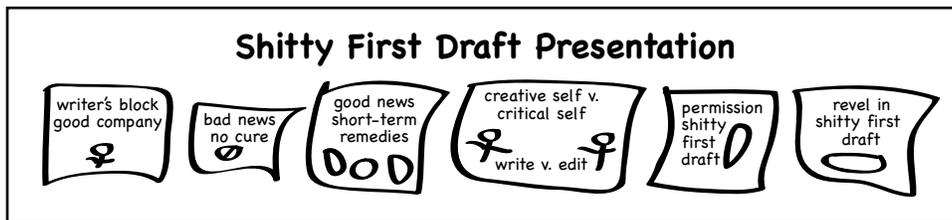
**Sometimes giving yourself permission to write a shitty first draft is not enough.**



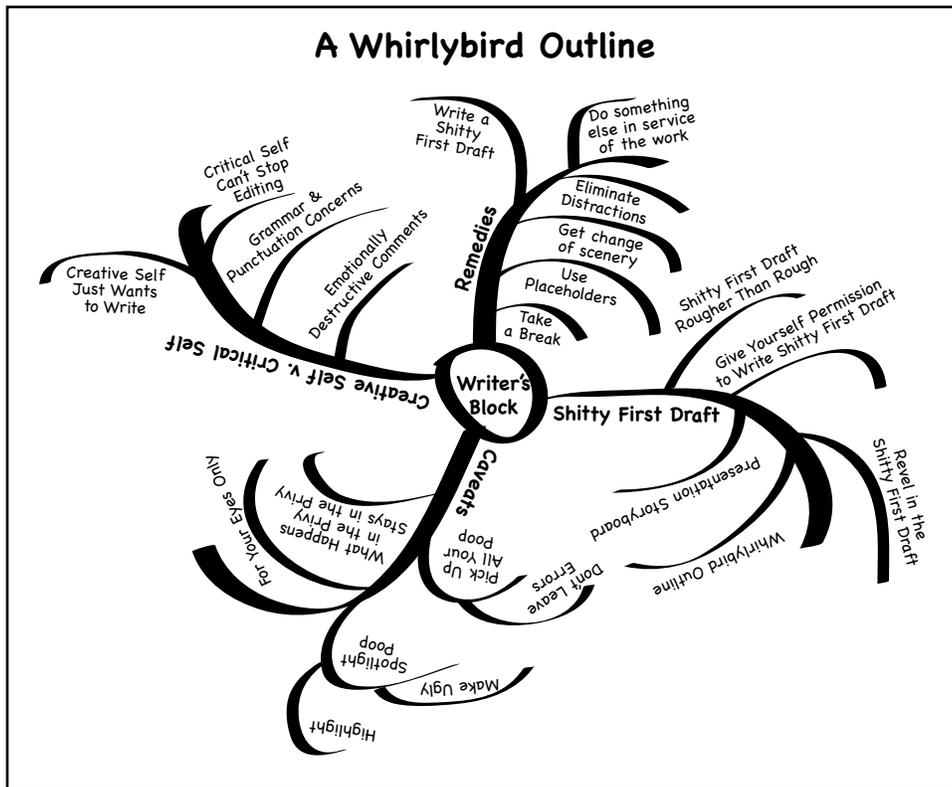
**When you need something more powerful, *revel* in that shitty first draft. Enjoy and embrace it as if it is a work of art in itself.**

## 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 the slides, 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.



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 are 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 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.**

## A Few Important Caveats

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

### ***Let the Shitty First Draft Be for Your Eyes Only***

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.

### ***Pick Up All Your Poop***

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.

### ***Polish the Turds As Best You Can***

Third, polish the turds as best you can. Some documents will be problematic for reasons beyond your control. For example, in my job as a paralegal—a job unrelated to Firebelle Productions—I often have to navigate around problems in my writing, because most cases have “warts.” Most cases have one or more facts that can potentially hurt the case or diminish the value of the client's claim. It is my job to present the information in the best light I can while still remaining truthful. When in doubt, I ask myself whether I can put my document before a jury with a straight face. If I can't, I know that I have more editing to do.

Sometimes it is best to get bad news out on your terms. Not addressing bad news in your documents may cause readers to distrust you. Sometimes it is better to transition past bad news, not calling attention to it. The right answer is not always obvious. It may take drafting your documents with and without the bad news before you can truly assess the best route.

Whether you are struggling to present difficult facts or to clean up what started life as a shitty first draft, polish the turds as best you can. Let your final product be a positive reflection of you and your writing skills.

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### ***Flush or Plunge As Needed***

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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