

By Susan X Day, TAA #414

Second in a Series

Susie Day received her bachelor's and master's degrees in English from Illinois State University (1971, 1973), has been an instructor and lecturer there since 1973, has written or co-authored twelve college textbooks in the field of English, and has nevertheless managed to lead an exciting and varied life. Susie is now studying to be a psychotherapist; her thesis research concerns writer's block. With a colleague in psychology, she is currently writing a text on psychology of women.

The first article in this series (*TAA Report*, July 1992) concerned the primarily emotional factors that contribute to writer's block. Though textbook writers are obviously not completely crippled by writer's block, most of us have experienced some form of writing anxiety during some of our projects. My thesis research involves studying writers' blocks and observing graduate students write theses and dissertations—long complex, and mainly self-paced writing projects (like textbooks). As authors, you may find my research interesting and helpful; it also may allow you to lend a hand to prospective fellow textbook writers.

Cognition and the Writing Process

The cognitive side of writing is the most widely studied of the three categories of influences (emotional, cognitive, and situational). Cognition refers to what goes on in your mind—your beliefs, thoughts, memories, and plans, for example. Your performance is very much dependent on these mental processes.

For example, have you ever tried to learn something when you secretly believed that you would never use the learning? It's practically hopeless. Think of junior high school; most of you let either sentence diagramming or algebra float gently through your head without obstruction. More recently, how many of you have politely let your spouse explain the intricacies of tuning the home entertainment center—again?

Beliefs and plans affect our writing performance profoundly. Currently, the most famous research on cognitive processes and writing problems is Mike Rose's, detailed in his book *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension* (1984). Rose set up an elaborate experiment using six college students with high writing apprehension and four with low writing apprehension. He videotaped each student for 60 minutes as he or she worked on an analytical essay which involved short reading selections (an assignment Rose had pretested to make sure that it did not present reading or understanding difficulties). He analyzed the tapes and discussed the tapes with the students to find out what they were thinking at various points, like during long pauses.

As expected, high-blockers (anxious writers) produced shorter essays and received lower mean scores from outside readers than low-blockers. The new dimension of the study was that Rose was able to identify the characteristic processes of anxious writers.

His analyses showed that anxious writers have identifiable systems of beliefs and plans. Let me list these and expand on them with related cognitive research and examples.

1. The rules by which they guide their composing processes are rigid, inappropriately invoked, or incorrect. Examples are "You should never begin a sentence with *and* or *but*", and "You're never supposed to have passive verbs;" in reality, there are many rhetorical situations in which both of these

"rules" should be broken.

2. Their assumptions about composing are misleading. Most commonly, anxious writers believe that good writers compose smoothly and evenly, without crossings-out, false starts, and crumpled-up re-jects. They would be surprised to see our manuscript pages when they come back from the copy editor! When I show my class an especially untidy, rewritten typescript page from one of my own books, trying to prove my point, my students still do not believe me: at least one always says that I dummied it up just to show them! The equation of sloppiness with poor writing skill, unfortunately, may be a product of teaching methods in early grades.

Incorrect assumptions about composing lead to the next problem, one of timing.

3. Anxious writers edit too early in the composing process. Most of you, as successful writers, don't worry over details of surface correctness when you are first getting your ideas down on paper. You go ahead and write a few messy, awkward, or even incoherent sentences as you move ahead, knowing that you can come back and rehabilitate them later.

However, blocked writers may suffer from the belief that each sentence should be perfect before they continue writing. Cognitively, this concern distracts them from creating meaning, and they often forget what they intended to write while worrying, "Should this be a comma or a semicolon?"

4. Blocking writers lack appropriate planning and discourse strategies or rely on inflexible or inappropriate strategies. Writing center expert Muriel Harris noted one student who seemed to believe that her outline was magical and tinkered with it endlessly in an effort to perfect it before (and even during) writing. As a professional writer, you know that no outline is perfect—some of our most inspired production comes when we stray from our expected plans. These inspirations are suppressed by writers who allow their outlines or plans to

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control utterly the direction of their thought.

Another strategy that anxious writers often dismiss is brainstorming--just letting ideas flow with no censorship, simply developing material through free association. My co-authors and I have found brainstorming to be a rich source of ideas, which we come up with together faster and more thoroughly than any of us separately could. Jumping straight to a planning stage without this playful, imaginative preparation can limit a writer to stale and obvious points.

Do you ever sit down at your keyboard and say to yourself, "I'm going to write a 500 page book now?" Probably not. You probably think, "I'm going to do a rough draft of Chapter Five now," or, "I'm going to wrestle with that *#** Preface today!" This breaking down of a big job into manageable sections seems automatic to you, but it is actually a cognitive strategy that protects you from being overwhelmed.

Allan J. Ottens (1982), in clinical observations of procrastinators, found that they "tend to perceive outstanding tasks *in toto*, thereby allowing them to assume monumental proportions." Rennie and Brewer, too, discovered that some of their blocked thesis writers were so daunted by the magnitude of the project that "they never really go to the point of structuring the task." I have found this research helpful when I feel particularly sluggish about approaching my keyboard: I look at my plan and see whether I can break the current job down into smaller pieces that I can consider achieving more comfortably.

5. Anxious writers invoke conflicting rules, assumptions, plans, and strategies. Many psychologists emphasize the stress created by a belief that two contradictory courses of action are both required at once: the terrible, immobilizing feeling of being torn has a cognitive basis. So consider a writer who believes, for example, both "Writing should be spontaneous and natural" and "You must have a complete outline before you start writing." or both "Good writing sounds conversational" and "Good writing sounds

stylistically elevated." A recipe for paralysis emerges.

6. Blocked writers evaluate their writing with inappropriate criteria or criteria that are inadequately understood. Rose (1980) gives an example of his student Laurel, who said, "You must always make three or more points in an essay. If the essay has less, then it's not strong." This criterion probably bears some relation to advice Laurel received in the past, but it surely does not apply to judging the strength of all essays.

Confirming the similarities in cognition between blocked undergraduates and other writers, Robert Boice (1985) studies 60 academicians involved in scholarly writing projects. He had them list their self-talk on cards during writing sessions for a period of five weeks after he identified them as blockers or non-blockers. (Self-talk is what goes through your mind *while* you're writing.) He and his assistants categorized the 5000 cards he got into three general categories: blocking/maladaptive, neutral, or psych-up. "Blockers were more likely to list negative thoughts and less likely to evidence 'psych-up' thoughts during writing sessions."

Some of the blockers' self-talk will probably sound quite familiar: "I'll never get this done in time;" "I shouldn't have taken on such a big subject;" "This sounds awful;" "What if I can't handle this?"

Psychological researchers Rennie and Brewer (1987) interviewed successful and blocked writers of theses and discovered another cognitive difference between thesis blockers and non-blockers: "In general, the non-blockers experienced the process of doing a thesis as meaningful, and the blockers did not." Writers who thought that their theses were going to make a contribution to the field or society were able to value the process of writing them and to see the struggle as worthwhile.

This finding is thought-provoking for us as textbook writers: perhaps when we feel blocked in a project, the cause is a disillusionment about the import of our task. I know that when I fear that most college students don't read their textbooks in

introductory courses, my enthusiasm for writing these books dwindles. And I have talked to other textbook authors who are engaged in "cloning" a bestseller and find themselves frequently blocked, perhaps because they know that their work represents no new contribution to the field. Sometimes, then, writer's block is a sign of existential pain.

Removing Cognitive Barriers

What can be done to remove cognitive barriers to writing? (Other than existential pain, which is really outside the scope of *TAA Report*, don't you think?) To combat premature editing and rigid rule-following, many researchers endorse free writing--the practice of writing continuously for a set amount of time, paying no heed to correctness or coherence.

An instructional change that will help relieve students of rigid rules and inflexible plans is the current shift in teaching composition--from focus on the written work as product to focus on writing as a process. Most writing teachers now emphasize that surface correctness and neatness are matters to be dealt with near the last stage of the writing process, not in the first draft.

Many researchers suggest various cognitive-behavioral therapies for writing blocks. Muriel Harris has students watch her as she composes and asks them to copy her behavior. She talks as she writes, expressing what she is doing and demonstrating strategies like "the simple problem-solving technique of selecting a reasonable option and pushing it until it fails or succeeds," a crucial technique for situations in which we never have enough information to decide beforehand which of several options is best.

Rennie and Brewer suggest that advisors help students learn "to limit research goals, set subgoals, and establish time limits," skills that many advisors (and editors) wrongly assume that their advisees already have.

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Olsen gives an impressive list of female writers who never married, those who married unusually late in life, and those who began writing after the age of forty. Women are socialized to place others' needs before their own, and the privacy, concentration, and egocentrism necessary to complete a long writing project are dearly bought.

Both men and women may find themselves in situations where spouses, family members, or significant others sabotage their efforts to write. Many times, the completion of a book signals a power shift in an established relationship, and this shift is not always welcome. Sometimes, less knowledgeable family members belittle or misunderstand the efforts of writers. My mother, for example, asked me on November 29 whether I was finished writing a book I had signed a contract for on November 6! She was clearly dubious when I said that the manuscript delivery date for that book was in 1994. The amount of time from inception to book-in-hand seems suspiciously long to non-textbook writers.

Similarly, anthologists often see their labors underestimated by people whose opinions affect them. "You didn't really write that book" is a all-too-familiar subtext, suggesting that our main tool is rubber cement. Since we are prone to see ourselves as others see us, being surrounded by people who minimize our work can cause discouragement and blockage.

Situations change with the completion of a book, and the natural fear of the unknown may cause a writer (consciously or unconsciously) to linger over the project. When we finish, we are faced with devising new projects, fixing the storm windows, taking up guitar again, re-evaluating a relationship--whatever we have claimed to put on hold while we wrote. This phenomenon has been labeled "fear of success," but that concept is widely questioned now by people like psychologist Michael Hyland, who sees "success avoidance as a compromise between achievement and other goals."

The best prescription for contex-

The Fine Art of Technical Writing, by Carol Rosenblum Perry, Blue Heron Publishing Inc., 24450 NW Hansen Rd, Hillsboro, OR 97125, 1991, 111 pp. (ISBN 0-936085-24-X) \$7.95.

This book addresses the key concepts that an author needs to be cognizant of for good technical writing. The intended audience is any writer or prospective writer other than those writing fiction.

The author has thirteen years experience in editing technical manuscripts at Oregon State University and as a freelancer. She has edited books, journal manuscripts, computer documentation, and user manuals. Most of her experience is for work in the natural science area, primarily in forestry.

This book addresses the psychology used in technical writing and the artistry required for a good presentation. This book is not, and not intended to be, an English style manual. Carol Perry states that writing is a "creative act, ... to write well, you must think and thinking is not mechanical."

The book consists of five chapters: Starting, Order, Conciseness, Vigor, and Ending.

In the chapter on Starting, Perry discusses defining your audience, doing "inner work", overcoming writer's block, and invoking a helpful metaphor. By "inner work", she means the fleeting thoughts that pass through an author's mind about the subject during the normal course of the day's (or night's) events. She suggests that one keep a notebook and jot down these thoughts before they are lost. Writer's block is overcome by starting anywhere -- start with the subject that is easiest to write about. Use this to "warm up" for the more difficult parts. As she

tual barriers to writing productivity, I believe, is connection with other people who share similar situations. I have depended for 15 years on the support and stimulation my co-authors, Betty McMahan and Bob

states, and I agree, the introduction is often one of the more difficult parts to write and should be saved for last.

The chapter on Order addresses logic flow, transitions, dynamics, continuity, parallelism, hidden dangers, and consistency. In the section on dynamics, Perry encourages the author to have passages with varying degrees of "loudness" and "softness" where the "loud" parts are the main points that are, for example, placed at the beginning or end of a sentence for emphasis. Don't try to tell the reader everything you know -- leave out some of that "soft" (minor) points that are of interest mainly to the author and that are really not needed.

The chapter on Conciseness has sections on information load, overlap, and repetition. Perry stresses that information load (i.e. density of information) should be an important consideration of the author. This is not sentence length or grammatical complexity, but the ease of understanding of what the words mean. Leave out sentences and words with no information load since they just make a "wordy" text, but include some low information words to give the reader some "breathing space" between the ideas and words with large information content.

The chapter on Vigor describes some important grammar considerations such as sentence type, verb power, voice, and ground language.

The last chapter, Ending, discusses editing considerations with sections on the cooldown period, self-editing, choosing outside reviewers, proofreading, and hints for improving your prowess as a writer.

As stated by the author, this book *continued*

Funk, provide. Textbook Authors Association supplies its members with a broader group of co-authors who can help each other, and I encourage you to make use of this network.

Many other workshops focus on self-instructional training in which writers learn to use coping self-talk rather than negative self-talk. For example, whenever you would catch yourself thinking, "This is too big a project for me," you would be taught to replace the thought with a statement like, "I succeeded at my last big project."

The self-help book *Overcoming Writer's Block* by Karin Mack and Eric Skjei (1979) advances the Friendly Ear technique for getting over blocks due to complex discourse demands. The authors suggest finding a sympathetic, intelligent, good listener who is not an expert in the subject and explaining the material aloud. The listener asks questions and responds. This practice clarifies your thoughts, highlights the main points, and rekindles your enthusiasm for the project.

(I suggest that when you find a sympathetic, intelligent, good listener to talk with about your writing, you should not only talk but *propose*.)

Though I have concentrated here on writers who experience more difficulty than you do, I hope that some of my research will help you over those bumpy spots we all encounter. Next time: The Situational Aspect of Writer's Block.

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While most major publishers carry insurance for such lawsuits providing them with a legal defense and indemnity (i.e., the insurance company will pay for the *Publisher's* attorney and costs and will pay any resultant judgment rendered against the Publisher), few authors can afford to carry such insurance (this may also be true for some smaller publishers). If your publisher carries such insurance, it would cost little or nothing to add the Author to the insurance policy as an "additional insured", thereby affording the Author the same protection as the Publisher.

If your Publisher carries no such insurance or carries it but refuses to add the Author as an insured there are other ways to reduce the

potential hardship on the Author:

- 1) Ask for a provision that limits your liability to the amount of your advance, or to the amount of royalties paid; or
- 2) Ask for a provision that states Author shall incur no liability under this clause until after entry of final non-appealable judgment.

Royalties Clause - Domestic Sales

A small improvement in your contract which may result in substantial added royalties over the years has to do with the definition of "domestic sales" under the Royalty Clause. The basic royalty rate in the royalty clause is the highest rate paid in the contract and usually applies to "domestic sales." Some publishers define domestic sales to include sales in the U.S., its territories and Canada. Many do not, but will if the Author so requests.

Absent that language sales to U.S. Territories and Canada will generate royalties of 2/3, 1/2 or even 1/3 the basic rate. With growing foreign (including Canadian) markets for U.S. books, this change is well worth requesting.

A Negotiation Reminder

You may have sufficient experience and skills to negotiate your own contracts. A few authors do so with success equal to that of agents or lawyers. Many others, though possessing the negotiation skills themselves, prefer the services of an agent or specialized attorney to provide a buffer between the Author and those with whom he or she will ultimately work.

If you do choose someone to negotiate on your behalf, let them negotiate while you stay *entirely* out of the negotiations until their conclusion. That isn't to say you shouldn't be in frequent communications with your representative to get updates and to give further direction as to those matters that you are willing to compromise. The Author has the final say on what he or she is willing to agree to. If your representative is not responsive or

SAT SCORES HOLDING

The average verbal score was 423, up 1 point and the average mathematics score was 476, up 2. The number of minority group students taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test of the College Board reached an all-time high of 29 percent -- a hopeful sign according to Donald M. Stewart, president of the College Board.

incompetent, terminate his services and find another or carry on yourself.

But never *NEVER* hire someone to negotiate your contract and then allow the Publisher's representative to go around your attorney to talk to you directly. You will invariably torpedo your representative's well-laid negotiation strategy, provide the Publisher with information that will be used to their advantage and your detriment, and, likely prolong if not undermine the negotiations.

A Final Thought

At the annual TAA Convention I present a workshop on Contract Negotiation. I always try to have at least one publisher in attendance who can give the publisher's perspective on contract clauses and negotiation. The format has worked exceedingly well. I have learned a lot about the Publisher's concerns, most of which are legitimate, and I hope they have gained a better appreciation of the Author's perspective.

Many publishers receive this publication. Why not have the same type of give and take with publishers through the letters FROM THE MAIL ROOM section of the *TAA Report*. I'm sure some of the positions I set forth in "In Jure" must stir a desire to "set the record straight" from the Publisher's point of view. Who knows, the ensuing dialogue might even lead to improved contracts.

Ed. Note: Yes, let's have your letters. We'll be happy to publish them.