

Filling the Blank Page: Writer's Block and What to Do with It

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When the Internet failed to answer her questions about how to fix her writer's block, Tiffany Bishop turned to CHAT for a solution. The following article is her description of what happened.

Do you know that feeling when it's 10:00 p.m. and you've spent the last four hours either staring at a practically blank Word document or watching YouTube or Netflix in order to avoid staring at that blank document because your head feels like it's going to explode if you have to think about writing this essay one more time? I do. Except, it's not always with an essay, and it's not always at 10:00 p.m. Let's face it, I've wasted days stressing myself out so badly about writing something that in those days all I managed to do was write one or two sentences. And let's be honest, those sentences didn't even make the final cut when I finished the piece. I've struggled to write everything from a text message to a twenty-five-page paper for an English course. Each new or difficult task gives me this gut-wrenching feeling that I can't do it. For me, it consists of one-part panic, one-part self-loathing for not actually getting it done, one-part utter confusion, and one-part pure stress. The worst of it is, sometimes just the fear of writer's block is crippling enough that, even when I get back on track, I get stuck again two sentences later because I'm *scared* I'll get stuck again. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because I deal with this almost every time I write a paper, because I don't think I'm

alone, and because the Internet has failed me when I've turned to it for help, I decided that I wanted to try to solve my problem with writer's block.

So, What Is Writer's Block?

After searching the Internet for a definition of writer's block that I could relate to and after realizing that most existing definitions only cover part of my understanding of what writer's block is, I decided to come up with my own definition of what writer's block means to me. I define writer's block as a period of time when a writer can't figure out what they want to write, what to write next, or how to write what they want to or need to write. Despite what some people may believe, writer's block isn't just something famous writers and poets struggle with. Take me, for example. Unless I have a class with you, you've probably never heard of me. That means I'm definitely not famous. But I face writer's block on a regular basis, and I've been facing writer's block since I was a kid. Writer's block is something anyone and, I'd argue, everyone who writes must face at some point in their life. After all, just about everyone will be asked to write something at some point where they will struggle to figure out what to do next. Sometimes writer's block takes the form of a blank page that isn't changed for hours, days, months, or even years. Sometimes writer's block takes the form of a writer who writes the same paragraph eight times in eight different ways and erases it each time. And sometimes writer's block takes the form of procrastination, and the writer won't even attempt the writing until they absolutely have to (likely because of some kind of approaching deadline). Keep in mind that these aren't the only forms that writer's block takes. They are just the ones I am most familiar with.

How Do We Get Writer's Block?

Basically, when we get writer's block it is because we are stuck, in some way, in our writing. We can be stuck because something in our **writing-research identity** (the unique ways in which we write) doesn't match up with how we are trying to write, because of something in the **activity system** (everything around us that affects our writing, thinking, and being), or because of something in the **genre conventions** (the "rules" or "traits" associated with a certain type of text) of the text we are trying to write. Basically, each case of writer's block will be because of a different reason, so our response to each one will have to be different. This means that before we can solve our writer's block, we first have to figure out why we have it. Maybe this is why,

when I scoured the Internet for an answer on how to fix my writer's block, I found hundreds of suggestions, but none worked.

Writing-Research Identity

The environment in which you write, the things happening in the world around you, and the expectations that you and others have of your writing are all parts of the activity system that factor into how you write and why you write. This means that everything from where we are, to what time of day it is, to any anxiety we might have about an action or interpretation is part of the activity system that affects our writing. These factors can change or reinforce our writing-research identities and the ways in which we define ourselves as writers.

Our writing-research identities, much like our personal identities, describe who we are as writers. The things we do while writing, how we write, the things that distract us from writing, the things that motivate us to write, and the things that motivate us not to write are all wrapped up in our writing-research identities, like tangled balls of string that we have to unwind each time we sit down to write. Each strand of string in your ball is a tool for you to use with your writing-research identity to create successful pieces of writing. Though you may share strings with other people who write in similar ways to you, ultimately, your tangled ball of string is entirely your own. Since each person's writing-research identity is personal to them, it would be impossible for me to describe what works for you. Instead, I'm going to give some examples of some of the quirkiest things that I've learned about my writing-research identity and how it affects my ability to write in hopes that you can use my examples as a model to think about how your writing-research identity affects how, where, when, and why you write.

For me, where I work, what I listen to when I work, and how I reward or punish myself for working or failing to work can be huge factors in the success of my writing. Personally, I like to work either on the floor or in bed. Desks are uncomfortable for me because I like to curl up with what I'm working on. Even when there is a desk in front of me, I rarely use it. Instead I put my computer onto my lap and curl up in the chair (see Figure 1). I once had the idea that maybe I "cuddle" my computer because it makes me feel like a loving "parent" to whatever I'm writing. If this isn't weird enough for you, I literally hugged my notebooks when I'd get writer's block as a kid. Before you mock me, hear me out. This "cuddling" had benefits. First of all, "cuddling" my writing got me to stop staring at it and stressing over it; second, it kept the text close so I wouldn't give up on it; third, it was a physical reminder that



Figure 1: Me ignoring a desk.

I do care about this piece of writing even if I'm mad at it. Okay, I get it. I'm weird. Please stop laughing at me now. Thanks.

Now that you're probably judging me, let's try a hopefully more relatable example—music. What I'm listening to when I'm writing has a huge effect on not only the mood I'm in while writing, but also what I end up writing (usually typing) on the paper (or computer). If my neighbors are blasting loud rap music, I find myself slamming my fingers on the keyboard and writing in a kind of factual yet probably sassy or even angry tone. This probably has something to do with the fact that I can't understand the words through the wall and it irritates me. If I'm listening to piano music, I write peacefully, and my writing seems to flow together. When I listen to country music, I focus on the characters of whatever I'm writing and that's when I create some of the strongest characters. When I have to write

action, however, I need some kind of pop-punk, rock, or metal mix, or I get nowhere. In writing this, I'm writing with no music playing (unless you count a loud clunky dishwasher) because, at least for this section, I'm mostly writing about my own experience and don't want to alter my perspective with music.

I've also noticed a few other strange things about my writing-research identity. I've realized that if I promise myself food after getting a certain amount of work done, I will do better work (and actually do work), whereas when I don't do that, I might get the work done sooner, but it will need more revising. That, or I just won't get anything done. I've also learned in the last couple of years that if it's 3:00 a.m., I need to just give up on writing academic papers and try when I'm conscious again the next day. However, 3:00 a.m. is the perfect time for me to get any creative writing done because I feel like my brain is in the creative mode that it usually uses for dreams.

Whether you relate to me or not, the point is that you, like me, have places and times and ways in which you work, and write, best. The other point is that understanding those aspects of yourself can help you adjust to new writing situations. Knowing that rap music makes me write with attitude

might encourage me to write creatively when my neighbors are playing it, or it might encourage me to put headphones on to stay on task. Not knowing that about myself would likely result in me continuing to angrily write a poor essay.

CHAT

Unfortunately, one's writing-research identity is only one cause for writer's block. Sometimes the activity system around a writer is what causes it. This is because writing doesn't happen inside any one person; it happens outside of us. Thus, we need to consider how writing is used in the world. To extend the scope past my personal relationship with writing to the activity system of writing, I'm going to try looking at my writer's block through **cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)**. CHAT is a flexible theory that has us look at the activity systems around writing and the social as well as cultural implications of writing. In essence, CHAT is going to give me the language I need to discuss the activity that was going on around my writing that caused me to get stuck. First, I'm going to look at the first time I had to write a twenty-five-page paper since I already know where my problem was with this essay. Then, I'm going to look at a current case of my own writer's block (co-authoring a book/manga) in which I didn't know where I was getting stuck until I sat down to write the first draft of this very article.

So, before we start, let's talk about what this CHAT thing is. The basic background of CHAT is that it's a theory for understanding activity in the world. In terms of writing, it helps us look at how people and tools and **genres** (types of writing) all work together in producing different types of texts. The ISU Writing Program uses a version of CHAT that consists of seven different terms: representation, distribution, activity, socialization, production, reception, and ecology, though there is a debated eighth term (trajectory) that I'm not going to discuss. I will give you my own definitions of each of these terms later when I am discussing them in the examples of my own writer's block, but since I think everyone understands CHAT a little differently (in part because the categories overlap, and in part because we are all individuals), I would suggest checking out "Just CHATing" by Joyce R. Walker in the first issue of this journal or "Understanding Language and Culture with Cultural-Historical Activity Theory" by Tyler Kostecki in the 3.1 issue in the archives of the Grassroots Writing Research website (isuwriting.com) if my definitions don't click for you.

So, where do we start? That's the real question. Well, because I knew I didn't have enough space in this article to do every step with you, what I

did was I start with the same thing this paragraph starts with: a question. I turned every CHAT term into a list of questions to get myself thinking about how each term would show up in writer's block. Then, I answered the questions and mapped those answers out into a chart (which you can see in Figure 2 and Figure 3). What will follow is what I learned about my writer's block in creating these charts.

The Essay

The first piece of writing I'm looking at is a twenty-five-page literary analysis paper on the poem *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot that I wrote during my junior year of college. It was the first paper I wrote that was longer than eight pages. After completing my CHAT analysis and creating my CHAT map, I realized that **representation** (how people think about, plan, talk about, and conceptualize a text), **activity** (what someone does while creating the text), **production** (how a text is made, what tools are used to make the text, and what genres and structures are part of the text), and **reception** (how a text is understood, used, and repurposed by others in ways that may or may not be expected by the author) were the places where I was most often getting stuck when I wrote this piece.

Since most of the feedback I was getting from my teacher was related to organizational issues, it was obvious to me that something was wrong with my planning of the piece. This led me to rethink the way in which I was representing my essay. Initially, when I thought about representation, I started with questions. How did I imagine this writing? What strategies did

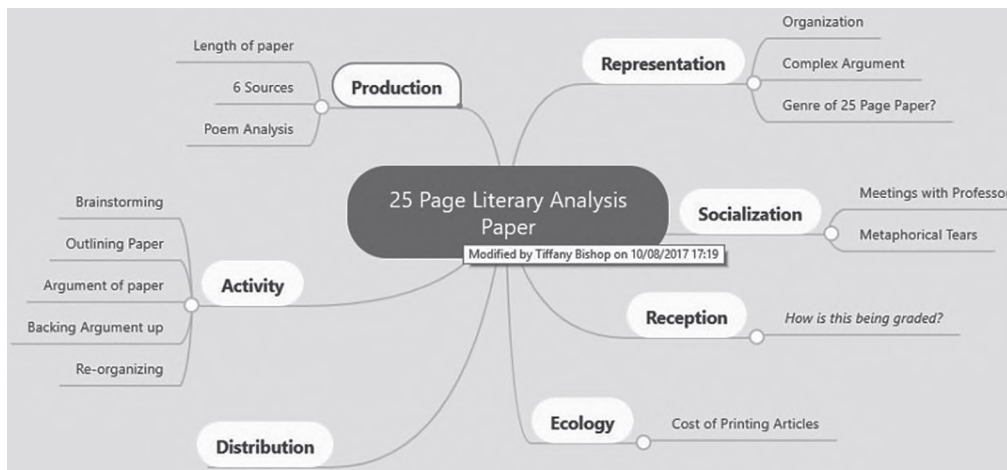


Figure 2: Analysis paper CHAT map.

I know that could have helped me approach this writing? How did I use the feedback that I was given to change how I was imagining this piece? In asking these questions, I remembered first that I had no idea how to organize a piece of this length, second, that I didn't know where I was going in my argument, and, third, I didn't have any strategies to help me organize my work. I also remembered that since I didn't know what I was doing in the paper, I didn't know how to respond to the feedback I was getting. In other words, I was lost, and I didn't know how to start my paper, so when I tried to do it, I failed. I had a lot of decisions to make on what I wanted my paper to look like and how I wanted to put it together before I could write it.

After remembering these realizations, I began to think about how my plans for production changed. While thinking about production, I asked myself, "What is the best way to format this text?" and "What tools did I use to help me create this piece of writing?" Since there were a lot of different ways to organize the text, the first question wasn't easy to answer. In the end, I had broken down my argument into two parts (war and religion), and then I had broken the religion category into two parts again (Eastern and Western religion) before bringing all the loose strings together at the end to make a statement that made some sense. The tools I was initially using for this were my laptop, my fingers, my brain, and whatever stuck out to me about an article. When I decided to change my activity, however, the tools I used changed, too. Since I work best when I can visualize things, I had decided that using the computer to organize my ideas might not be best, so I began with a printer, a highlighter, some blank paper, and a pen.

After I reorganized the paper conceptually, to actively pull my sources together, I had to first decide what was important from each source. This led to me highlighting any piece of the articles that I thought related to my argument. There were papers everywhere. I then grouped the articles according to related topics (all of the war and language sources in one pile and all of the religion sources in another). This cut down on the amount of time I spent searching for an article. Then, I handwrote an outline of what I wanted to say and went through my outline to note which articles would fit where. If an article fit in multiple places in my argument, I wrote the article's name and a number one, two, or three next to it. I also put the one, two, or three in the article next to whatever part of the article corresponded to the number in my outline. When it came time to write the paper, I began with my argument, used the outline to find the sources that were already discussing the part of my argument I was making, and looked through the text to make an argument about things that people weren't already discussing. After a few hours of labor, what was a ten-page paper doubled in size and actually had a point to it.

Though these were the biggest problems I had, I also had one other problem. I am proud of the paper I wrote, but my teacher's reception was different than my own. Initially, I asked, "What does my audience want or expect?" but I quickly turned that question into "How is this being graded?" That's when I was reminded that I was unfamiliar with the teacher and how she graded. Not finding an answer to this question before submitting the paper is perhaps my biggest regret. As it turned out, I got a full ten points taken off for grammar alone. I was so focused on making sure that my argument and organization was well done (because that is what the teacher and I spent the most time talking about) that I forgot to edit for grammar, which is a key part of the "rules" and genre conventions an academic paper is expected to follow.

Though I already knew where I was stuck in writing that piece, looking back on it and analyzing it through a CHAT lens helped me find a way to talk about the places where I was struggling. It also allowed me to see some of the ways in which I've grown as a writer and learned more about my writing-research identity.

The "Book"

Now, for the more authentic example of me trying to work through my own writer's block—the book. My friend, Taylor, and I are co-writing a book. I'm doing most of the writing, but she is helping me develop some of the characters and giving me feedback on the plot. She, after the book is

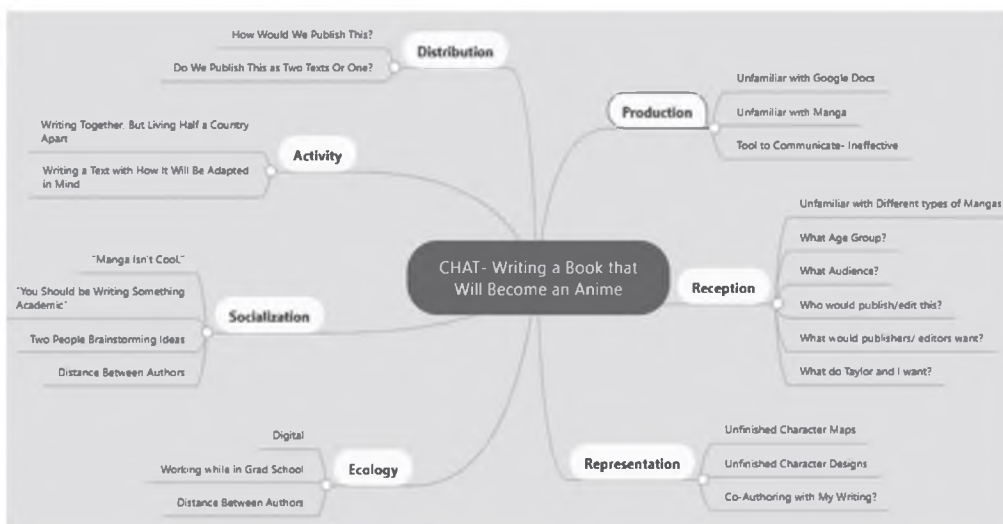


Figure 3: Book CHAT map.

complete, is then going to turn it into a manga, at which point I will help her by giving her feedback. In the first draft of this article, I realized quickly that co-authoring was a problem that showed up under all of the categories on my CHAT map. This meant that it was likely my biggest problem and the one I should address first in confronting my writer's block. The categories in which it was the most significant issue, however, were **distribution** (how texts are distributed, who texts are distributed to, and where texts go), **ecology** (the physical, biological, and environmental factors that affect the text), **socialization** (how people talk about and engage with the text while they are making it and after it is made), and reception.

When I looked at distribution, I asked the question, "How do I get this text to people?" Though initially I was thinking about how I would get this text out to an audience when it is finished, I realized that I also have to distribute the text to my co-author, Taylor, while I am writing it. Because of this, I have to change which tools I use to write the story. In essence, the only option I have is to use a Google Doc, or to send her an email every time I update the story. Since sending an email is a pain and since she doesn't often check her emails, that leaves me working on a platform that I dislike. This makes me less enthusiastic to work on the story.

The ecology of where I am working and how I am working is also a problem. Under ecology, I found myself asking, "How does location and space factor into this writing?" and "How does time factor into this writing?" Since I'm writing this book half a country away from my co-author (who is currently in Maine), it creates a different ecology than when we were co-writing the first chapter together in our apartment a year ago. When we were co-writing before, we were right next to each other and could easily bounce ideas off of one another or give each other feedback immediately. We were also on similar schedules. Now, she is teaching at an elementary school, and I'm taking classes in graduate school, so neither of us really has time to work. Furthermore, the digital platform makes it difficult for me to copy and paste writing that I've done on devices that can't access the Internet, and the digital platform can also cause me to lose my train of thought when I'm writing on the platform with Internet when the Internet stops working.

Because of the problems I have with ecology, I also have problems with socialization. In thinking about socialization, not only was I wondering, "What social structures influence the text I'm writing?" but I was also asking, "How do I co-write a text?" The physical distance between my co-author and myself creates a social distance as well because both of us are horrible at keeping in contact through technology. Add in the fact that neither of us are entirely certain about what it means to co-author, and it becomes really hard

for us to communicate with each other about the book. Furthermore, the fact that manga isn't socially accepted in the culture that I grew up in makes it harder for me to feel excited or proud of my work because I fear negative judgement.

The distance between Taylor and I also makes me fear how she will receive the text. Specifically, the question I was asking with respect to reception changed from "How will this text be perceived?" to "How will this text be perceived by Taylor?" because I suddenly became self-conscious about what I was writing and feared that my co-author wouldn't like it. I also realized that since I couldn't talk to my co-author, if I was writing in a style that made it more difficult for her to turn it into a manga later on, I wouldn't know that until far later which would mean that I would have to rewrite a lot more than if we were working together on it.

All of these factors boiled down to one big result: I feared writing this text, and I lacked the enthusiasm to write it because I lacked the ability to effectively communicate with my co-author. When I came across this realization, while writing the first draft of this article, I called Taylor on the phone—something neither of us ever do—and asked her what she thought about all of this. She and I decided that we should schedule two nights a month to video chat through Skype and talk about the book while I work on writing it. This way, when I have questions or concerns, they are answered right away, and I also have Taylor to hold me accountable to write. Plus, writing on a Google Doc isn't nearly as stressful when I can complain to the person who is waiting to read the document that it is broken. Since editing this article has taken several months, I can say that Taylor and I have had minor success at working on the book. Looking ahead to next semester, it will be easier to schedule times for us to work because the evening and night classes that I will have are, for the most part, a little bit earlier than my current ones. At the very least, whenever we do have time to work, our discussions are much more productive and much more writing is accomplished.

"So, How Does This Apply to Me?"—The Reader

Should you choose to try using a CHAT map to find the source of your writer's block, my suggestions are to start with a struggle that fits under multiple CHAT categories and see how those categories relate, or to look for the answer that seems the most significant or scary to you. I've found that once I start looking into the different categories, even if I start with the wrong reason for my writer's block, I often think of different problems that I am running into, and I can eventually find the one I am hung up on. From

there, you just have to think of a solution that targets the specific problems you are having. This is where the Internet might actually be helpful because with a simple Google search there are thousands of suggestions at your fingertips. I've also found that talking to others, as I did with my co-author and my professor, can be extremely helpful when trying to brainstorm ideas of how to deal with your writer's block.

What I'm hoping is that this article will provide you with some insight into how to think about your own cases of writer's block. I realize that you and I are different people and that your experiences and struggles with writing will be different than my own. I simply hope that by giving you my examples, I have encouraged you to think about how your writing-research identity and CHAT can help you with your own writer's block. Ideally, this article will change how you think about CHAT and help you see it as a tool to use when you are struggling with writing, as well as a way to analyze writing you are unfamiliar with. Last, but not least, I also hope this article might change how you think about writer's block. Anyone can get writer's block, and likely everyone will at some point in their lives, and most people see this as a bad thing or as something to be afraid of. Though I will admit that writer's block isn't fun or easy to deal with, I do believe that it helps us become better writers. Writer's block provides us with an opportunity to learn and grow as writers; it gives us new experiences that we can learn from and that can enrich our abilities to write. Writer's block is a bridge between what we know and what we don't know. All we have to do is determine the best way to cross that bridge.

Works Cited

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