

Building Blocks: Process Makes Perfect

Maddi Kartcheske

For as long as there have been writers, there have been those who feel they cannot write. In the following article, Maddi Kartcheske takes a close look at writer's block to determine how much writing is done when we think we're not writing.

My story as an undergraduate English major is a typical one. I wrote tons of stories when I was a kid, always got As in language arts, and took a particularly inspiring English class during my senior year of high school. After navigating Ms. Hussain's Literature of Moral Conflict class, I became fascinated with the way that written language can guide, shape, and alter how a reader understands a text. I ended up deciding to study it in college and dove headfirst into reader-response theory, rhetoric, and any field of study that looked at the purposeful construction of the English language. While I'm fascinated by this technical and utilitarian approach to studying all kinds of writing, it's hard to get outside of my head when I produce my own. With every single sentence, I'm faced with the same questions I ask when analyzing literature in class: What purpose does this sentence serve? Is this tangent contributing to an overall theme? Why choose this verb over a different one?

As you can imagine, it becomes difficult to get words on the page when I'm constantly questioning my choices. In the most simple terms, this seems to be writer's block. I, a writer, am having trouble writing. But this

doesn't match the typical image we see in stories of a writer staring at a blank page and crumpling up half-finished drafts. It feels like a lot more work than that. In typical English major fashion, I turned to books to try and marry my experiences with what I'd come to understand from other peoples' accounts of writer's block. I flipped through my used copy of Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, a book with life and writing tips, and I noticed a familiar sentiment written in the margin by a stranger on page 103. In dark black ink, they wrote "is this my problem???" Though it was nice to know that I wasn't alone in my confusion, I wanted to know more about writer's block. I knew turning to research wouldn't fail me, but I also wanted a cohesive record of my findings. What better way to analyze writing than by writing about it?

It's All in Your Head

I found articles like "Writer's Block: 27 Ways to Crush It Forever" and "How to Overcome Writer's Block: 14 Tricks that Work." These articles, while entertaining, adhered to the image of the "blank" writer. In the first article mentioned, written by Henneke Duistermaat, she attempts to relate to the reader by describing her idea of writer's block: "Let me guess. You're staring at the blank screen. Your brain is fried. You can feel a headache coming on. You know you should be writing, but . . . You can't do this anymore. Your muse is gone. Your well of inspiration is empty. Finished. Stone-dry."

Though I'd hoped some of the tips would be useful regardless of the way she described writer's block, I failed to understand how "2. Curse like a Sailor" and "5. Chug Some Caffeine" were going to help me understand the phenomenon. Duistermaat described tips and tricks to calling your muse back, suggesting immersing yourself in a new environment to "get the creative juices flowing." These were all too mystical for me to understand: *What is creative juice? Where is it in my body? Why does it stop flowing?*

Down pages and pages of these search results, I stumbled upon Rjurik Davidson's article "On Writer's Block," which was different right off the bat. Like a breath of fresh air, he echoed my thoughts perfectly:

Because I had accepted a romantic notion of art, it all seemed a mystery to me. Art was *meant* to be unfathomable. To ask questions about the process, to break it down scientifically, would be to destroy it, I thought.

So I put the problem down to some mysterious personal weakness.

. . . I never really believed in writer's block. When people had mentioned it, I thought they were referring to a lack of

ideas, with the blank page representing the blankness of their imagination.

This was not what I was suffering from. I was suffering from an *unnecessary* blockage, a self-undermining behaviour. My writer's block was something much more *functional*: the writing-paralysis caused by anxiety, fear or a similar kind of discomfort.

Any attempt to deal with writer's block, then, needs to begin with an understanding of what it is and how it functions (25–26).

No mention of a muse, of a juice, or a quick fix, just a readiness to learn and understand writer's block. I was in heaven. In the rest of the article, Davidson briefly discusses ten different psychological theories from a wide variety of scientists on what areas of our brain affect our writing (and, most importantly, what stops us). Finally, some science! One of the scientists that Davidson studies, Robert Boice, attributes writer's block to impatience. "Writers are blocked, Boice suggests, by 'their over-eagerness to write quickly and to completion'" (qtd. in Davison 26). Our expectation of producing literary genius on the first try "pre-shapes" how we will write it, and when we fall short of these ideas, it makes sense that we would feel discouraged and unable to write. This negativity can be paired with our tools as well, as Davidson also observes, "If we conclude that facing the blank page is the cause of our distress, we're pretty likely to leap from the computer and find other things to do instead" (27). All the negative things that we say to or about ourselves can be referred to as "negative self-talk," a term coined by Robert Boice. Davidson's summaries led me to believe that writer's block was a lot more common than I thought. Though I was slightly more informed on the origins of writer's block, I also needed to know how to write a *Grassroots* article. This took me to the online archives on the ISU Writing Program web page, *isuwriting.com*.

As I was studying the genre of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, I read Heidi Bowman's article, "'Good Enough': Getting the Writing Written and Letting It Go," an article about her own experiences with writer's block. The way she described her difficulties struck a particular chord with me: "I know the answer is twisted up in the tangles of perfectionism, procrastination, and, as I think when I'm not being nice to myself, good ol' laziness" (101). I was fascinated by the idea that someone who had her Master's degree and was teaching at a university would still feel the same negativity and "meanness" as an undergraduate sophomore does. Through my research, I had found a practical application of Boice's concept of negative self-talk.

Though I knew I was doubting myself, my research brought my attention to anxieties that I hadn't even noticed. I knew this article would be used in an English 101 course, but I didn't realize that I was worried about how it would



Figure 1: A glamour shot of my youngest cat, Sam.

be used in the classroom: *Will those who don't yet understand cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) still make sense of it?* And after all this research, I had even more questions floating around: *What can I do with this information? Davidson, Bowman, and my questions all seem to be connected in some way, but how? What's the common factor I can use to find some solutions to this problem?*

These questions followed me for days, until, surprisingly, I saw the answer in my cat, Sam (Figure 1).

(Bear with me, I promise I have a point.)

1, 2, 3, All Eyes on Me

From my kitchen table where I do most of my writing, I often watch Sam toss a crumpled straw wrapper up and down the stairs. It's mundane, but I could watch him play fetch by himself for hours. My role in this game is to make myself as still and quiet as possible. If he notices me watching, he freezes. He stares at me with big green eyes, hoping I'll look away before he gets too scared. As I watch him play, I'm reminded of **reception**, how an audience may interpret or repurpose a text.

In my experience, people like to write, whether it's for school, fun, or Twitter. When writing for myself, I rarely worry about things like reception (how others will understand my story) right away. Since the story is for me, I know that I can edit it later to clear up my own confusion. When I'm writing for, say, a writing research journal used in an English 101 classroom, I'm much more aware of the reception of future students (you). Writing, like the straw wrapper, becomes an activity for an audience rather than an activity for a writer (or cat). I start worrying about what people will think, how a professor will use it, if a student will like it. Constantly worrying about what my audience will think makes it a lot more difficult to put words on the page. These fears, I realized, are all based in reception.

A Sixth Sense: CHAT Analysis

Once I saw CHAT in my cat, I saw it in everything. For example, I've always had trouble reading on a screen. As I was conducting my earlier research, I was struggling to read Davidson's piece online. I planned on printing it, but

it has full color images and would take up sixteen full pages of ink. I spent hours rereading the articles, straining my eyes against the bright florescent screen, ultimately failing to make any headway on the project. I realized that this issue was based largely in **ecology**, or the “physical, biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing” (Walker 76). I couldn’t afford to waste \$14.00 ink on these sources when I have other classes and projects that require me to print weekly papers (the physical force that affects my writing here is being a broke college undergrad).

But not all problems are that straightforward. As Davidson mentioned before, we get stuck when we fall short of our own expectations and get discouraged by our negative self-talk. Bowman found herself criticizing her writing process, labeling her avoidance of the blank page as laziness. This, instead, could be a problem based in representation. Using **representation**, we know that how we think about a text affects what we write, so Davidson’s negative self-talk and Bowman’s admission of “laziness” both change how we write (which is to say, we don’t).

What? And, So What? [In Other Words, It’s Not Just a Pen]

The easy part was identifying these problems using CHAT. The more complicated part is finding solutions for them. The first of my own issues I solved was by considering **production**, or the tools and practices that help shape a text. Using this definition of production on a surface level, we might say that the tools a student needs in order to write an essay might be a computer and research material. These are physical items (tools) that are absolutely essential to writing an essay. If a student were missing their computer, their writing would be extremely difficult and the process may stop altogether.

So, when I sat down to write, I had all of these things in front of me. I wrote a few words, but then I stopped. My arms were cold. I rubbed them with my hands, hugged myself, and blew hot air on them before continuing with my writing. Another sentence later, I repeated the process and wasted time. I realized that if I’m cold, I’m not writing. I’m focused on warming myself up.

In the spirit of productivity, I got up and grabbed a blanket. I started to write again, but the blanket kept slipping off my arms and wouldn’t stay around my frigid toes. I spent even *more* time re-wrapping myself. The blanket was more distracting than the temperature itself! I finally swapped the blanket for a warm sweater and socks, and my need to fidget went away immediately. The sweater stayed on my shoulders and covered my arms, but left my hands available to write. The socks eliminated the need to tuck and

re-tuck my feet. I was finally able to focus with a sweater and socks, but I wasted an entire hour trying to find this solution.

If I analyze this situation through the production lens of CHAT, I can identify the sweater and socks as my tools. Instead of spending an hour next time trying to solve this production-related issue, I can remember my analysis and gather all of my tools before I sit down. Alternatively, this is another example of how ecology and production affect the writing process.¹ Either way, I've eliminated a distraction—one of the reasons I was blocked.

This may seem like another tip and/or trick, but we've approached this situation differently than my initial online research. Instead of telling *all* writers that being warm with a sweater and socks will help them write, CHAT forced me to look at my own unique situation and needs. Some writers may find the cold useful to stay alert, or might need a fan or ice water to fend off the heat. Instead of looking at production in a two-dimensional way, we can expand our view to include all tools that assist in our writing.

After CHAT, my list of tools had a major makeover, also illustrated below in Figure 2:

BEFORE	AFTER
Laptop Sources	Pen and Paper Laptop Hard Copies of Sources Classical Music (no lyrics) Sweater and Socks Thesaurus Hair Clip

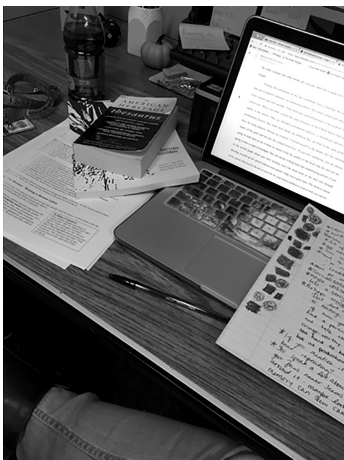


Figure 2: A messy desk is a productive desk full of useful tools.

I looked at my production/ecology printer issue that I mentioned earlier and spent time fiddling with the settings to invent the “Mini-Source”: a full-length version of my sources printed at half or a quarter of their original size to save ink. And, as Davidson mentioned about pairing our tools with our negativity, the way we *represent* a text starts to bleed into the way we *produce* a text. Recognizing this direct relationship could remind writers, as I remind myself, to be patient with the process and that thinking poorly about yourself only hinders your ability to write. These solutions save me time that I can put towards writing.

Once You've Seen It, You Won't Be Able to Stop

As I was reading through the archives on the ISU Writing Program's website to research the genre in the first place, I noticed tons of writers performing these exact same steps and analyses without even mentioning it. In "The March of the Llamas: Or, How to Be an Effective Note-Taker," Nathan Schmidt identifies his need to doodle on notes to introduce "*disorganization* into an otherwise organized system" and "re-select and re-structure [his] environment in the classroom" (103, 106). He identifies an issue with his own personal reception of his notes and solves the discomfort through doodling. Matt Del Fiacco does his best writing under a forced deadline, a unique tool that can be identified through the production lens, admitting that "it wasn't a muse or unseen force that finally got the work done. It was NaNoWriMo [National Novel Writing Month]," in his article "CHATting About NaNoWriMo" (75). He went into NaNoWriMo knowing that it had very specific parameters. These parameters "pre-shaped" how quickly and effectively he wrote his novel. Eric Pitman used a blend of production and representation when talking about his adapted method of taking concise notes and using that method to write effective flash fiction in "Flash Fiction and Remediation: Ironing Out the Details" (114). Samuel Kamara had trouble with the reception of U.S. textbooks, and so he relied on marginalia—a tool he used to better understand his assignments in "Exploring Marginalia: The Intersection Between Reading and Cognition" (19). Countless examples of this occur in each article of every journal. An author will find out that one of their habits is actually an essential part of their writing process, and then write about it in the journal.

These authors are self-aware. They're geniuses. They most definitely suffer from writer's block. Maybe we all do. But the key, I think, to "curing" writer's block is to harness the same kind of analytic awareness that these authors do. Instead of blankly looking at our process the same way we do an empty page, we can use CHAT to understand some of the tools, behaviors, and activities that we absolutely need in order to write.

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Endnote

¹Here, we can see that production and ecology have overlapped quite a bit. The problems themselves are most closely related to the ecology of my activity system (temperature, uncooperative blankets, not having money for ink cartridges). I found solutions by looking at production and the number of tools I would need in order to write (socks, sweater, advanced printer settings). To look at one aspect of my writing, I used a combination of two terms. This may seem like a complicated way to look at CHAT, but CHAT is complicated! These terms don't act as strict boundaries or boxes that we can put different aspects of our writing processes in. The production of this article was directly affected by its ecology, and that complexity is what makes the activity system worth writing about!

Maddi Kartcheske is a junior at Illinois State University majoring in creative writing and minoring in civic engagement and responsibility. She loves her home state, North Carolina, large bodies of water, and studying the English language. She wishes she could artfully craft a clever bio, but she suffers from as much writer's block here as she did for the article itself.



