



Trick the BLOCK!

Author and personal development trainer **Robbie Steinhouse** offers some tips from psychology to help overcome writer's block

If writers are allowed to use their imagination in writing – what stops us from also using our imagination to manage our emotions and boost our creativity?

Sometimes writer's block has a positive purpose, telling us to rest or pause for a while. Other times, it requires discipline to press on even if we are not blessed by a visit from the muse that day. At those times, I have found it useful to use my experience in personal development upon myself – effectively becoming my own coach. In this article I hope to share some practical suggestions that have worked for me.

Using awareness to manage my emotional state

I have learnt that the 'process' of how I structure my inner-words, rather than the 'content' of those words, is useful in-of-itself. CBT – cognitive behavioural therapy – asks us to notice how certain words negatively affect our emotional state. Overgeneralising words such as *always*, *never*, *must*, *should* or *can't*, inevitably move me into a negative state. The psychologist Albert Ellis also broke this down into three unhelpful 'musts':

1. I must do well or else I am worthless.
2. Others must treat me well or they are awful and should be punished.
3. Life must be easy and fair or I am desperately unhappy.

I find number 3 most relatable. I often say to myself during a time when I have writer's block that the effort involved in writing feels huge and far from easy. Why am I doing something so tough, when

life is meant to be easy and fun? CBT has taught me to replace this with a more useful and truthful thought: 'Writing can be tough at times and immensely satisfying at others. Put this into perspective and stop catastrophising!'

Mindfulness

However, to be able to make all these judgements about the type of thinking I am doing, I also need to become a detached observer of my thoughts – that is where the skill of mindfulness comes in. Otherwise, I become fully immersed in my thoughts and unaware that I am actually thinking. I practice mindfulness by counting my breaths; after a while, my thoughts interrupt me and I then lose the count. I become aware that this has happened and then deliberately return to the counting. That is mindfulness in a nutshell: focus, distraction, awareness of the distraction and then refocus. This practice has helped me become more disciplined about my thinking – I can choose to either remain present or allow more creative thoughts to come to the fore. I don't have to be lost in thought.

The 'why', the 'who', and the 'how'

Friedrich Nietzsche famously said, 'He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.' I write because I want to impart my knowledge and make a difference to peoples' lives. That is my purpose or my 'why'. I have also learnt that it is hugely important to differentiate between the 'who' and the 'why'. When I was sixteen, my

teachers told me I had talent at science rather than art or English. I therefore identified as a scientist and importantly created an identity as not a writer. Part of writer's block for me has been an ongoing struggle with 'imposter syndrome'. Nietzsche's saying provided me with the keys to escape this trap. Writing is also a capability – a skill that can be enhanced by practice. So, feeling I am not a writer is a confusion between a belief about my identity (the 'who') and a belief about my capabilities (the 'how'). I find these distinctions helpful. I have written enough to know that I do have a capability as a writer, so a negative belief about who I am is then not only a choice but also puzzling. To continue believing that I am somehow not allowed to identify as a writer is clearly self-destructive. I, therefore, gave myself permission to 'be a writer'. I decided to stop undermining my sense of purpose by identifying with memories of erroneous judgements made by my teachers.

Who is the who?

The Transactional Analysis model breaks down the human psyche into the following three component parts: the inner parent, adult and child (based on Freud's superego, ego and id). I believe that self-talk is not just coming from 'me' but coming from a 'part of me'. When I hear myself say a phrase like, 'I can't do it!' I try and be aware of these words and then replace them with something like, 'My inner child feels he can't do it; my inner

parent is scolding him for not doing it and my inner adult is reflecting on what might be a more useful course of action.’ I can then rise above the block and engage my adult ‘who’.

Learning styles and moving beyond words

A popular concept is that people either have a visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learning style. I personally believe we all use our own unique mix of these styles. I use this principle to work out how specifically I am experiencing writer’s block. I notice that I am not producing only inner self-talk, but also inner pictures, sounds and feelings (both emotional and physical). When I spot that I am running a negative narrative, I pause and become aware of any pictures and the location of those pictures in my mind’s eye. Also, the location of any sounds – perhaps I am replaying someone else’s voice such as one of my parents. What are the words I am using in my self-talk? Where specifically do I feel this in my body? (Usually just under my ribs and in my shoulders and sides of my neck). Can I then name the specific emotions I am feeling? Usually a mix of anger, sadness, powerlessness, fear or shame.

By being far more specific and labelling these experiences with my senses in this way, I become consciously aware of my unconscious negative thought patterns and then have a choice to refocus my efforts to the matter in hand.

Constructing positive states

Switching the above technique from the negative to the positive: how can I start to deliberately recreate positive states as an antidote to all this negativity? I recall doing a technique in one of my trainings when I was invited to either imagine or remember a safe and pleasant place. For some reason rather than picking something from a memory, I created an image of myself sitting on the bank of a stream, with my legs dangling down toward the water and sitting on a warm and comfortable surface. I also have a sense of a calm version of myself somehow watching over me. Although this might sound a bit odd, I can now quickly re-access this fantasy and regain a sense of wellbeing and creativity.

Having practiced it numerous times, it is something I can also do easily, sometimes focusing on different images such as a grassy meadow or the shape, shades and texture of the clouds. This ‘blows away’ my feelings of writer’s block.

Archetypes

Another key principle from literature that has been smuggled into psychology is that of archetypes, influenced by Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell’s classic story structure of the hero’s journey.


Although there are numerous examples from the classics, I have found that condensing these into three main types a more practical way to solve my writer’s block. They are: ‘Strength’ (Warrior); ‘Softness’ (Lover) and ‘Intelligence’ (Sorcerer). Archetypes also have shadows, the naturally occurring and problematic manifestation of an archetype. I also find these energies essential to explore in my writing. Let me explain how I use these myself.

I have a good ‘Strength’ archetype but can move into a shadow of cowardice in certain contexts. For writing, I have noticed that I can shy away from being fully honest, concerned how my words could potentially upset those close to me. Indeed, the other shadow of the ‘Strength’ archetype is that of cruelty – an essential energy to express in writing fiction and one I likewise need to avoid censoring.

To add to this, my work as a coach and therapist also requires a good

‘Softness’ archetype – showing genuine interest and compassion for others. As a writer, that compassion can dull the more dramatic requirements of telling a good story. I have had to wrestle with this as fiction needs strong shadows to be compelling. I have had to ‘let go’ of my bias towards positive transformation and access the far darker side of human nature. At the same time, I am still allowed some happy endings!

Building an imagined world and creating a compelling narrative, certainly benefits from the ‘Intelligence’ archetype. However, the shadows of intelligence can also be expressed as two extremes. On one hand, becoming manipulative, arrogant and guru-like, while on the other – feeling like a ‘dummy’. The writer’s block tip here is to reframe these feelings as entirely natural. If I can accept that I will feel like a ‘dummy’ at times, and rather than feeling shame, I consider it the naturally occurring shadow of my ‘gift’ of ‘Intelligence’. Likewise, being able to enter a world of scheming and seeking revenge is most useful to share on the page, especially for the cunning villain.

I hope that this article has provided some useful strategies to overcome writer’s block. I also hoped to convey that many of the ideas above can also be used to enhance our imagination and help us question the artificial limits we apply to ourselves. I would like to end by sharing a saying I often use during my trainings, ‘There is nothing as absurd as applying the rules of reality to your imagination.’ 



Robbie Steinhouse’s first four books were published by Pearson Education: *Think like an Entrepreneur* (2008); *Brilliant Decision Making* (2010), *How to Coach with NLP* (2010) and *Making Effective Decisions* (2013). In 2017 Routledge published his book *Mindful Business Leadership*. His latest book is a work of fiction, *The Process* (Troubadour, 2025). His books have been translated into Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic, Polish and Korean.

Robbie is also one of Britain’s leading personal development trainers and coaches. His passion for communicating stories and personal change led him to give up his former executive role and focus on writing, training and coaching over twenty years ago.

