

Over. Around. Through.

Writing with purpose
to cure writer's block for good.
Your way.



inkdrop
lit

by Sarah Welch



Writer's Block.

It's something every author has faced.

You sit down to write. You've got your favorite pen and paper or a brand-new word doc, or maybe your midway through a draft and excited to find out what happens next. But nothing comes. Not a word. Your writer's block could last for just a few hours, or it could stretch into days, weeks, even months, leaving you feeling discouraged, frustrated, and like a big ol' imposter. And the longer that block sits in your brain, the louder your inner critic becomes, until the vicious spiral siphons all the fun and passion out of your writing life.

But listen up: there's no need to wallow in your writer's block.



No matter what kind of writer you are—no matter what kind of personality you bring to the page—there’s a way to get around, over, under, or through it. And this guide is going to help you unlock your own personal antidote to writer’s block. Now, I’m not talking about setting up the perfect writing space with the right candles and supplies and music or distracting yourself with long walks or stream-of-consciousness freewriting. All of these things may result in words on the page (or, in the case of long walks, a new idea or two), but I want us to focus on building the tools you need to make progress on *your* story. Not just any story.

In *The Memoir Project*, Marion Roach Smith calls it “writing with intention.” While Roach eschews writing prompts and exercises and the like entirely, I’m all for them. But I do believe that, to be truly effective—and to provide a long-term cure for your writer’s block—you have to approach your prompts and exercises with purpose, as efforts to move a stalled story forward or get derailed chapters back on track. This guide walks through six exercises to help you shift your perspective, retrain your brain, and grease your writing gears. I’ll bet you’ll find a favorite, but I wouldn’t be surprised if several strategies work for you. Happy writing! I can’t wait to hear about what resonates.

Six Strategies to Overcome Writer's Block

1 Ask Questions

2 Shift Your Perspective

3 Jump to the End

4 Play "Yes, and"

5 Make a Plan

6 Apply a Formula

Ask Questions

“Thinking is your brain’s version of hard staring, and memory and meaning are shy. When you confront them straight on and demand that they deliver, they try too hard to impress you, and things get awkward.”

- Deb Norton, *PART WILD*

In her brilliant book on creativity and resistance, *Part Wild*, Deb Norton suggests coaxing our minds into a “sense of privacy” in order to break down writer’s block. I love this approach because many of the walls I hit in my own writing come from looking too hard for the answers. I’m desperately trying to work out what happens next or what a character wants or how she feels or why she did what she just did. And all that pressure to find the answer shuts down my creativity. When I need to take the pressure off my thinking brain, my favorite approach is to embrace what I don’t know.

When I catch myself trying too to find the answers, I make myself step back and ask questions, instead.

Give it a try. Start writing out all the questions you want to answer in your story—or just this scene, or even just this page. You can start general, with questions like, “What happens next?” but see if you can get more specific, too: “Why did they choose this restaurant tonight?” “What does she want him to say about the fight last week?” “What does he think she’s angry about?” And don’t be afraid to get silly, either: “What does the waiter think about this couple?” “Will she manage to finish her plate of spaghetti without getting red sauce all over her dress?”

Write down every question, and pay attention to where your brain takes you. What are you most curious about? Which points do you keep coming back to? By focusing on the questions, you might just trick your brain into showing you the answers.

Shift Your Perspective

Get into a secondary character's head by rewriting a pivotal scene from a different perspective. You may unlock new insights about your protagonists, stumble onto a great new subplot, or unlock a motivation you couldn't quite pin down.

There's a lot of talk about looking for new perspectives to overcome writer's block. Go to a coffee shop, print your work, write in the morning instead of at night. All those are great tools, and I've used them and recommended them. But to me they often feel like temporary solutions at best and avoidance tactics at worst.

When you want a new perspective that will really help drive your story forward, look to the characters, themselves. Let's say you've just written a big argument between your protagonist and her husband—maybe the same couple as in the last example. So now they're sitting across from each other at dinner, and you're not sure what happens next. You may not have enough perspective. After all, if you're writing from your protagonist's point of view, you only have her side of the story.

So rewrite that fight scene, but this time write it from the husband's point of view, as if he were the protagonist. Dig deep into his perspective—what his objectives are, how he's feeling, what he thinks the fight was really about, and how he envisions the relationship moving forward. Then, armed with clear, detailed insight on both characters, put them back at that dinner table and let your newfound perspective inform what happens next.



Jump to the End

I'm a rule follower. Always have been. (Probably) always will be. And that means that, when I'm working on a project—writing projects included—my default is to start at point A and move forward linearly, step by step, all the way to point Z. Of course, when I get midway through point L and realize I'm not sure what happens in M, that's when I get stuck. But here's the thing: we don't have to write linearly. If you're not sure what happens next, you don't have to stay stuck until you figure it out.

If you know the final scene, or if there's a big moment in the middle you're excited about, go there! It's absolutely okay to write the first chapter or two, move on to the end, and then jump around in the middle of the manuscript, following your inspiration. (Of course, this approach is easier if you start with an outline, but it can work whether you're a planner or a pantsier.)

With some things in life, we do have to go step by step, and we can't move forward until we figure out what comes next. But that's not the case with writing. In fact, if you're stuck on chapter 3, allowing yourself to skip to a later scene in the book might just help you unlock the block.

Play "Yes, and"

Often, writer's block comes from that inner critic's persistent and unsympathetic tendency to shut down our ideas. As you're writing, that little voice in your head keeps saying, "No, that's no good," or "What kind of idea is that?" or, "Definitely don't write that."

If that pesky inner critic is the source of your writer's block, then I'd suggest practicing the first rule of improv: "yes, and."

The basic idea is that, when you're improvising a scene on stage, you accept whatever your scene partner throws at you, and then you add to it to move the scene forward.

Next time you've hit a wall, next time your inner critic is telling you your writing is unoriginal, derivative, boring, or anything else, remember this rule, and rather than let her shut you down, make her play "Yes, and" with you to keep that plot moving forward. Will every idea be great? Will every scene be perfect? No, but it doesn't have to be. That's why they call it a first draft. But if you "Yes, and" your way to a finished story, you'll have something to work with.

Tina Fey describes "Yes, and" in her memoir, **BOSSYPANTS**

"The first rule of improvisation is AGREE. Always agree and SAY YES. When you're improvising, this means you are required to agree with whatever your partner has created. So if we're improvising and I say, 'Freeze, I have a gun,' and you say, 'That's not a gun. It's your finger. You're pointing your finger at me,' our improvised scene has ground to a halt. But if I say, 'Freeze, I have a gun!' and you say, 'The gun I gave you for Christmas? You bastard!' then we have started a scene because we have AGREED that my finger is in fact a Christmas gun. [...]

"The second rule of improvisation is not only to say yes, but YES, AND. You are supposed to agree *and then add something of your own*. If I start a scene with, 'I can't believe it's so hot in here,' and you just say, 'Yeah...' we're kind of at a standstill. But [...] if I say, 'I can't believe it's so hot in here,' and you say, 'I told you we shouldn't have crawled into this dog's mouth,' now we're getting somewhere.

"To me, YES, AND means don't be afraid to contribute. It's your responsibility to contribute. Always make sure you're adding something to the discussion. Your initiations are worthwhile."

Make a Plan

Here's another way writer's block sneaks in: you're thrilled about your novel idea, and when you sit down to write, the words pour out of you. You race through the first forty or fifty pages like it's nothing, and you just know you'll have a finished first draft in no time. Until suddenly, you stop. This story and the characters that were so clear at first have vanished, the words have dried up, and you have no idea where to go next.

When that first rush comes to a halt, it's time to get organized. (Yes, even if you're a pantsler.) Go back through what you've written, and make a list of everything you've teed up: characters, plotlines, key moments, and anything else you'll need to resolve by the time the story ends. You don't have to make a full outline here—for some writers, outlines are too restrictive. But your list of loose ends will help you at least sketch out the scenes, conflicts, lessons learned, and anything else you'll need to add between your stopping point and “The End.” With a clear sense of what you need to accomplish, you can get that train back on track (writing in whatever order you want) to finish your story.

Apply a Formula

Often, writer's block is all about plot. You may have a great setting, a vivid cast of characters, and a powerful theme, but no idea how to make it go anywhere. When that's the case, I recommend this teacher resource designed to help elementary students learn how to summarize stories:

Somebody wanted but so.

Fill in the blanks, and you have your summary. But you also have a great formula authors can use to take a critical look at their own work. Because don't superobjectives drive plot?

Gatsby wanted to marry Daisy, **but** she chose someone who could give her money and status, **so** Gatsby got involved in some shady business dealings and began throwing elaborate parties in order to win her affection.

And don't short-term objectives drive scenes?

Mr. Collins wanted to marry in order to please Lady Catherine, **but** Elizabeth refused him, **so** he asked Charlotte.

Charlotte wanted security, **but** she didn't have any suitors because she was poor and "homely," **so** she accepted Mr. Collins's proposal.

Mrs. Bennet was desperate for her daughters to marry, **but** Elizabeth refused Mr. Collins, **so** Mrs. Bennet appealed to her husband to talk sense into Elizabeth.

SWBS identifies the character, her objective, the primary obstacle, and the action she takes to overcome that obstacle. All the structural elements of a successful story. When you're not sure if your story's going anywhere, look back at what you've already written to see if existing scenes fit the formula, and use it to sketch out new scenes. Sometimes a little structure is all it takes to free up your creativity.

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a dark blue sweater and jeans, is sitting at a black metal table. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. On the table in front of her is a laptop and a glass of iced tea. The background shows a wooden structure, possibly a porch or a studio, with some equipment visible.

Let's Keep in Touch!

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When it comes to writer's block, which strategies resonate with you? Are you somebody who goes over, around, or through?

Reach out anytime to tell me what you're working on, what you're struggling with, and what obstacles you're overcoming. And if you need accountability, coaching, or editorial support, I'd love to talk about how we can work together!