Successful writing: Five roadblocks to overcome

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It is frustrating to be faced with frequent or large writing tasks if you lack the confidence that you can complete it well. Based on my experience supporting many different academic professionals in their writing, it appears that this (surprisingly common) feeling grows from a variety of frustrating previous experiences. This brief article shares strategies to conquer those frustrations and enjoy the creativity of writing again, or for the first time.

A Vision for Writing

It is my hope that you will grow to anticipate and experience writing as a powerful means of sharing your vision with the world. You will enjoy developing your major focus and vision and then identifying how to present it in a compelling and accessible manner. You will look at the books and articles you write as an opportunity to virtually sit alongside your colleagues around the globe and share your research, theories, and/or thoughts. Therefore, you will understand how you can exercise much of your creativity in your writing, much as you do in your instructional design. For instance, you may...
Use engaging means of presenting your content.  
Consider alternative formats and sequences to introduce the thesis.  
Focus on the needs and perspective of the intended audience so that you can best communicate your message in ways they will find meaningful, relevant and exciting.

I share this exciting vision with you because I find that many academics have a false impression of writing as rote, painful, dull and routine. In this article, I share ways to push past writing roadblocks, but I believe it is imperative to have a clear vision of the great possibilities in order to conquer these obstacles. A compelling vision of what writing accomplishes as well as how you will reach people and enjoy the communication will provide a strong foundation.

**Call to Action:**

Please review the previous paragraphs and highlight or mark those characteristics which motivate, excite, or inspire you. In addition, feel free to add your personal goals and strategies. Continue reading once you complete that activity.

**Recognizing Roadblocks**

Having assisted writers for the last 20 plus years in many different roles such as professor, coach, and colleague I have worked with many academics frustrated and stymied in their writing. In addition, I have written or edited 20 books myself and have had to conquer many writing roadblocks along the way. Over the course of my career, I have realized that people rarely realize that it is just a roadblock that stands in their way. What do prospective authors do instead? They blame themselves, which makes them more eager to avoid the “pain” of writing. Indeed, consider how writing roadblocks might appear in your life…

All you _know_ is you cannot _write_.  
Or  
You do not know where to _start_.  
Or  
You cannot figure out how to make the writing feel _coherent_.  
Or  
You cannot discover the means to make your message _compelling_ in words ...

But _you do know_ that you stare at the blinking cursor…. the blank screen…
Type a few lines and then delete all of it _again_…. and _again_  
Minute after minute  
Hour by hour  
Day by day  

The _right_ words do _not_ come.

These descriptions are all different forms of writing roadblocks. Certainly, you may encounter many different obstacles along the journey of writing. However, the good news is that the strategies we develop, the momentum of success we build from conquering even these first few, will strengthen us for the marathon ahead. This article will help you _buzz_ by those roadblocks and charge ahead towards success.

Over the years, I developed _five favorite ways_ to successfully knock down those roadblocks and continue the writing journey successfully. Explore these, strategies to succeed at and enjoy your academic writing more.
Strategies to Overcome Roadblocks

These techniques are several counter-strategies I use when faced with roadblocks. In essence, they include several of my trade secrets, which I recommend to students, faculty and business people to break the chilly stalemate between the keyboard and the blank screen.

Fingers poised over the keyboard... begin...

**Roadblock 1: I can Say it, but I cannot write it.**

Sometimes a piece that we are writing just lends itself more to telling. Sometimes we are more gifted as a storyteller or orator than a writer! So when we have to put that same account into written form, what are we to do? One solution is so simple people miss it. Speak the piece aloud! You might use a recorder, voice activated software, or perhaps a close friend will take notes or transcribe. The process is the same in all three methods: speak the project rather than write it. It is amazing how this strategy can unjam the writing roadblock for people. Some authors even discover it moves them towards developing better writing skills over time.

**Roadblock 2: Who is my Audience?**

Roadblock 2 oftentimes lurks at the crux of Roadblock 1. However, many of us never learned (or in deference to our English teachers, don't remember learning) about audience. Without this understanding, it is very difficult to have a clear view of whom we are writing for in our literary eye. However, this trick works wonders: when you sit down to work on your writing, close your eyes for a minute and imagine your readers sitting in chairs in front of you. Perhaps they gathered for an afternoon at the neighborhood coffee shop and are eager to talk about your newest book. Now, in your mind's eye, visualize them sitting to the left of your computer screen; imagine a few of them in detail: their clothes, facial expressions, posture... now with them clearly in "sight," start writing to them as if you were telling them the story. I have seen many roadblocks fly out of the way with this technique. Triumph!

**Roadblock 3: No idea where to start.**

Have you even been stuck at the beginning? It may be that you just cannot find the correct first scene, the opening line isn’t perfect, or you need a whiz-bang hook to grab your readers’ attention. However, regardless of how long you stare forlornly at a blank screen, you just cannot find the correct phrase or hook. No matter how long you try, or how many pages you delete; it just isn’t there today, yesterday, or last week. You are not road blocked; you are
Dead End roadblocked. The good news is that the solution is relatively simple: somebody forgot to tell you to skip the beginning! In fact, many experienced authors find the best beginning after having written the conclusion of the book. That approach seems backwards, but it makes sense if you think about. Free yourself from the chains of first paragraph paralysis by beginning on the second paragraph, page, or chapter. Begin wherever your strong point is. This section of the book is clear in your mind's eye. Go there! Let the writing juices begin to flow and it will fire you up to take on the world of the word!

Roadblock 4: Lost: I don't know where I am going.

Sometimes authors feel like they need a literary GPS to help them find their direction through their own words. Great news: you recognized that you were lost! Just imagine your poor readers otherwise! They did not write the book; how much worse it would have been for them if the words had meandered aimlessly chapter to chapter? You saved them and the solution is what our 2nd and 3rd grade teachers told us—but once again, we did not remember or we did not believe. After three books, I finally believed them: use an outline. I do not mean that you must be shackled and bound to every word of the outline: instead, use an outline as your guide, framework, and structure for your academic writing. When you need to change something substantially in the outline, add or delete it, and make sure it fits both consistently and fluidly. Keep referring to the outline during your writing and editing to stay on track. Your readers will have a much clearer picture of the direction and flow.

Roadblock 5: Literary Laryngitis.

"I lost my voice!" Sometimes, no matter how invested you become in your writing (or perhaps when you are too invested), your writing becomes disjointed and clunky. In addition, you might inadvertently (and frequently) shift from informal to formal writing, second-person to third-person, and constantly shift their ‘voice.’ This lack of voice might develop because you include too many facts, figures, quotes, or diagrams; or maybe you wrote sections of the book in different settings and different times or contexts. Whatever the reason, you need to re-embed your voice in the text. One effective remedy is to read the section aloud and determine if it sounds like the others. If it does not, start revising heavily. Another is to paraphrase direct quotes from other sources (giving credit for to the source of course) instead of directly quoting them. Readers want to hear the current author, not all the other "experts." They have your writing in their hands; therefore, let them hear your voice!

Call to Action:

This is your survival kit.

Be diligent; keep this list nearby, and try these strategies. Be prepared to select a remedy when you encounter your next writing emergency.

Therefore, you must become intimately familiar with the strategies in a non-stressful situation. Study them before you need them.