Writer’s Block

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Writer's Block is a common occurrence during the writing process. During the writing up process of his PhD, a friend sat and watched the cat on the garden wall for three days; another sat in bed (it was warm) and knitted for five days. The litany went "When I finish this row, I'll start writing". Click, click, turn. When I finish this row I'll start writing". Click, click, turn. "When I finish this row I'll start writing". Etcetera. At least she had a jumper at the end of it.

Overcoming writer's block is possible by following various steps, the first of which is not to angst about it. Just as worrying about not sleeping ensures you will not sleep, worrying about writer's block ensures that the words won't flow. Just as relaxing about being awake at 3 am (and using the time to ensure a few moments dreaming about your new life after thesis completion) will allow you to go back to sleep, so relaxing about the block and following the suggested steps will allow the words to flow.

The second step is, as we have suggested in other articles, to identify a specific time of the day for writing (the time when you are efficient) and make a pact that you will write X times a week, or write 1000 words a day. But writer's block can prevent the pact being kept.

Unblocking may require the third step. Start by identifying the take home message. For a journal article or conference presentation, ‘your take-home message’ must be relatively simple. In the sciences, a journal article might be based on a chapter of your thesis. If this is the model you are using, then your take home message is the conclusion, which should add to knowledge.

Your conclusion comes from establishing your story. This should start with a clear statement of the research question you plan to answer. Then arrange your tables and figures to make a coherent tale. Use a large table, and try out the 'story' on your supervisor. Once you have established the story, and the conclusions, write down the conclusions as bullet points and make sure that you have numbered the tables and figures appropriately before you stack them up. For each table and figure, consider what is the main point you are making from it. Write it down. This will allow you to record the logic of your story, leading to your bullet point conclusions. Congratulations - you have started writing.

Then start describing what your results tell you. Each table or graph should contribute to your story; if it doesn't, throw it out of the story, however long it took you to get the data. (Note that a lack of significant difference in a result may be an important point to include in the text to stop other people following down a fruitless track, but you can make it with words and the statement 'data not presented'.) What are the main points you need to make from each table and figure? Stick to the significant differences and trends, leading to your bullet point conclusions.

Next, consider your results within the context of the literature. Discuss what they mean and how they compare with data in the literature. Can you find anything in the literature that supports your data - are they the right order of magnitude? Do they follow a trend that has been reported already? Do they differ, and if so how and why? What are the implications of your results? Write them down. Do this for every table and figure.

Once your story is clear in your mind, you can address the materials and methods section. For each piece of data presented, describe the materials and the methods used for data collection.

From your conclusions, structure your introduction from the 4-6 key papers that you used to identify the gap in knowledge which you have filled with your research. Why was your research necessary? Write it down.
For your thesis overall, your take home message will be something that you have added to knowledge. It will be what you know that nobody else in the world knows (except your devoted supervisors). Then 'all' you have to do is explain how you know it. Hold 'what you know' in your mind all the time you are creating your thesis skeleton and writing up. It will help direct your word flow. Furthermore, the methods for writing suggested here will assist in directing the flow of words efficiently and effectively, even if you don't have writer's block.