THE SITUATIONAL ASPECT OF WRITER'S BLOCK

By Susan X Day, TAA #414

Third in a Series

Susie Day received her bachelor's and master's degrees in English from Illinois State University (1971, 1973), has been an instructor and lecturer there since 1973, has written or co-authored twelve college textbooks in the field of English, and has nevertheless managed to lead an exciting and varied life. Susie is now studying to be a psychotherapist; her thesis research concerns writer's block. With a colleague in psychology, she is currently writing a text on psychology of women.

The first two articles in this series (*TAA Report* July and October 1992) concerned emotional and cognitive factors that contribute to writer's block. In this final article, I will take up a factor that affects us all as writers of long, complex, and mainly self-paced projects: our current situation.

Psychologist Kurt Lewin, in the 1950s, directed attention to the fact that an individual is always behaving *within* an environment, and the two may be inseparable. Lewin called the total environment the *field*, and his approach is called field theory. The writing task itself is part of our environment. For example, consider the difference between writing a business letter and writing the opening of a chapter in a textbook. Watching you at one of these jobs, we might conclude that you are a fluent, fast, and confident writer, while if we viewed you in the other situation, you would look like a struggling, anxious, or even avoidant writer. We could not accurately label you as either type without knowing the situation. And which task evokes which behavior is an entirely individual matter.

Your larger situation also affects your writing behavior. Lynn Z. Bloom observed and interviewed two blocked dissertation writers over periods of two and four years. One completed her dissertation, and the other has not.

Sarah, who finally finished her dissertation with the help of counseling, was in a typical situation: after finishing her course work at an excellent school, she got a teaching appointment at another university and intended to write her dissertation while teaching. However, her conscientiousness (class preparation, paper grading, and committee involvement) in her new job not only swallowed her time but earned her opportunities to get administrative experience that she felt she should not turn down, which took more time.

The demands of her work site were imminent, while the dissertation work languished with both pressures and rewards remote. The work she did do was "procrastination in the name of preparation" (Bloom's words), as she collected materials and reorganized her paper endlessly. With counseling and a newly formed dissertation support group on her work campus, she was able to complete her project.

The demands of other work, especially teaching, are mixed blessings for textbook writers. While we get much of our inspiration about what belongs in a text from our teaching, at the same time the job puts us in a situation where the writing keeps getting pushed to the bottom of the "To Do" list, with other tasks more pressing. Many of us never get around to publishing until our teaching loads decrease with seniority--and then we risk losing contact with the very students who comprise our audience. In my own area, for example, very few authors of freshman composition texts are actually still teaching English 101. They have moved on to teach courses in which the paper load is lighter, and they have time to write.

Another situational constraint on a teacher who would like to write textbooks is the school's attitudes toward the accomplishment. Luckily, at Illinois State University's English Department, textbooks are regarded as legitimate scholarly pursuits and count in our ratings as both teachers and scholars. However, many departments are not this enlightened. Thus, a professor seeking promotion and tenure will be encouraged to channel energy into more esoteric projects.

Like Sarah, textbook writers often suffer from their distance from advisors and supporters, especially when they don't have co-authors. The isolated situation is discouraging. Decisions that might be made in an hour of brainstorming with a peer become lengthy struggles when we are alone. Our relations with our editors are complicated by distance, the press of their other projects, and the disconcerting turnovers in the publishing industry. One of the major benefits of TAA is the easing of our isolation.

Even with the problems of exile, dissertation writers usually finish their projects in cases where job retention or betterment depends upon it. Without this exigency, they usually don't finish. Exigency rarely motivates textbook writers: how many of your colleagues say that they "always wanted to write a textbook, but never got around to it"? Their jobs clearly didn't hinge on that book. We choose our priorities based on immediate pressures.

Many people are unable or unwilling to choose their priorities freely. Lynn Z. Bloom's second case study falls into this group: Bloom titles the narrative "Ellen: A Study in Contextual Interference." Ellen had

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two children during her nine years in graduate school; her family pattern assigned her the caretaking of the children and the household. In the family's small apartment, there was no space where she could leave her materials out between writing sessions, and her husband, the breadwinner, did not see Ellen's work as a high priority. She also had no training in how to pursue an extended research project, and her advisor assumed that his graduate students knew how. Bloom writes, "To resolve Ellen's writing problems would require a marriage therapist in addition to a writing specialist."

The duties of a wife and mother are major contextual barriers to women's writing, a problem eloquently described in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Sara Ruddick and Pamela Daniel's *Working It Out* (1977) and Tillie Olsen's *Silences* (1965). *Silences* includes the duties of sister and daughter, as well, as Olsen gives examples like Dorothy Wordsworth and Alice James, who devoted themselves to the comfort of the brilliant men in their families.

Olsen gives an impressive list of female writers who never married, those who married unusually late in life, and those who began writing after the age of forty. Women are socialized to place others' needs before their own, and the privacy, concentration, and egocentrism necessary to complete a long writing project are dearly bought.

Both men and women may find themselves in situations where spouses, family members, or significant others sabotage their efforts to write. Many times, the completion of a book signals a power shift in an established relationship, and this shift is not always welcome. Sometimes, less knowledgeable family members belittle or misunderstand the efforts of writers. My mother, for example, asked me on November 29 whether I was finished writing a book I had signed a contract for on November 6! She was clearly dubious when I said that the manuscript delivery date for that book was in *1994*. The amount of time from inception to book-in-hand seems suspiciously long to non-textbook writers.

Similarly, anthologists often see their labors underestimated by people whose opinions affect them. "You didn't really *write* that book" is a all-too-familiar subtext, suggesting that our main tool is rubber cement. Since we are prone to see ourselves as others see us, being surrounded by people who minimize our work can cause discouragement and blockage.

Situations change with the completion of a book, and the natural fear of the unknown may cause a writer (consciously or unconsciously) to linger over the project. When we finish, we are faced with devising new projects, fixing the storm windows, taking up guitar again, re-evaluating a relationship--whatever we have claimed to put on hold while we wrote. This phenomenon has been labeled "fear of success," but that concept is widely questioned now by people like psychologist Michael Hyland, who sees "success avoidance as a compromise between achievement and other goals."

The best prescription for contextual barriers to writing productivity, I believe, is connection with other people who share similar situations. I have depended for 15 years on the support and stimulation my co-authors, Betty McMahan and Bob Funk, provide. Textbook Authors Association supplies its members with a broader group of co-authors who can help each other, and I encourage you to make use of this network.