EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF WRITER'S BLOCK

By Susan X Day, TAA #414

First of 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-authorted 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.

Though textbook writers are obviously not completely crippled by writer's block, most of us have experienced some form of writing anxiety during some of our projects. We do get our work done, but we also may appreciate the acuity of Zachary Leader when he states that "misery is at least as important an index or distinguishing feature of writer's block as silence." My thesis research for my graduate degree in psychology involves observing how people go about long, complex, and mainly self-paced writing projects (like textbooks). My current human subjects are graduate students writing theses and dissertations. As textbook authors engaged in somewhat similar pursuits, you may find my research interesting and helpful.

In broad reading on the subject, I have found the terms *writing anxiety*, *writer's block*, *writing apprehension* used in many different and inconsistent ways. Some people say that *writing anxiety* is a state in which some writing is produced, but painfully, and *writer's block* involves no writing being produced at all. Others say that *writing anxiety* refers to an emotion, and *writer's block* is a mental state. Still others insist that *writing anxiety* is a deep intrapsychic conflict, while *writing apprehension* is its milder form. Finally, others say that *writer's block* does not exist at all! Each school of thinkers is perfectly sure of its correctness, and for obvious reasons I refuse to be drawn further into the issue. I use the terminology that seems most natural to the discussion at hand.

I believe that writer's block involves a mixture of emotional, cognitive, and situational aspects. For this series in *TAA*, I will divide my discussion into these three categories. You will see how they overlap and influence one another (after all, is an attitude a belief or a feeling?) but this traditional and convenient classification will serve. If you are like the many writers I have spoken with on this topic, you will probably see something of yourself in all of the categories.

Emotion and the Writing Process

Anyone who has written for evaluation or performance knows that emotion is involved, although much of the research has focused on the cognitive angle, which I will discuss next time. George Mandler, in *Mind and Body: Psychology of Emotion and Stress*, explains the interweaving of thought and emotion. An emotion has two parts, physiological (an upswing in the autonomic nervous system) and cognitive (the mind's interpretation or labeling of the physical agitation). The same body signs (rapid pulse and breathing, butterflies in the stomach, etc.) can be interpreted in different ways by different people, or even different ways by the same person. Some researchers will even contend that *all* emotions actually *feel* the same way in the body, and the variations are just in how we label them. An interesting theory, but not one to be casually put forth at family picnics unless everyone already suspects you're eccentric.

Mandler believes that one source of a nervous system upswing is the interruption of a plan or planned behavior--the interruptions activate the nervous system. The writing process is full of interruptions--decisions about words and style, thoughts about the audience, children's demands for Poptarts, changes in plan, reassessments--and is thus full of emotions. If you are a writer who labels this upswing as anxiety or frustration, you will see it as destructive to your writing process. If you can label it as excitement--which feels the same way--you can see it as constructive.

I usually feel excited when I write. At the end of a good long session, my shirt is usually tugged out of shape, and my hair is standing on end from running my hands through it. My husband looks at me and says, "Going well, huh?"

Researchers have taught people to manipulate their interpretations of nervous system activity in order to find the agitation enabling. For example, sports contestants can learn to use their pregame agitation as "gearing up" instead of "getting jittery," and anxious test takers are taught to do the same before an exam. When I speak in public, I try to label my prespeech feeling as being thrilled rather than afraid.

Learning theorist Albert Bandura noted that "People vary in their judgmental sets." He found that people who tended to see their nervous arousal as coming from personal weaknesses were more likely to doubt their abilities than people "who regard their arousal as a common transitory reaction that even the most competent people experience." Again, how people interpret their feelings influences their self-confidence, and writers can learn to experience nervous

continued

system upswings as normal or even exciting.

Writing expert Reed Larson also asserted that emotions could be either disruptive or facilitative. He studied juniors in high school who were writing six- to nine-week library research projects and identified two bright, articulate students whose anxiety kept them from writing as well as they could: "they became overwhelmed and lost control of their work; and the writing project turned into a nightmare of worry, frustration, and internal anger." Sound familiar?

In analyzing these failed projects, Larson came to the conclusion that the writing problems stemmed from overarousal, anxiety. Anxiety interferes with short term memory, where we hold disparate pieces of information that we are trying to work with all at once--an ability critical for writing complex pieces like research papers and textbooks. Overarousal can also block a writer who sees too many possibilities and cannot juggle them efficiently enough to choose a course of action.

Other students in Larson's study suffered from the opposite of anxiety: boredom, or underarousal. This happened when they saw the task as holding no challenge or excitement, and the papers they turned out were mechanical and uninteresting. In textbook writing, I have experienced the boredom block: it's hard to see challenge or excitement in presenting material like the five basic comma rules, especially in your fourth or fifth book, and I frequently find myself avoiding these boring but basic sections. All of us who write in the fields where we must present the same background material over and over understandably experience underarousal.

Yet what happens when our writing task invites us to go out on a limb, where our position is not so safe? A different kind of emotional block may result. Writing expert Maxine Hairston says that "what one puts on a piece of paper becomes the self, that we expose what we are by writing." Think of the difference between asking someone to read over an essay you've written and asking someone to check your math homework problems. We don't feel that the homework problems reflect our worth as people, our creativity, intelligence, and personality, whereas we suspect our writing sample does.

Some writing block is a reluctance to undergo such exposure. Writers can unconsciously protect themselves from this frightening experience by simply not producing anything to be judged. Some writers internalize a harsh judge (unfortunately, frequently a discouraging early English teacher) to the point that they themselves generate negative criticism as they try to write, a practice that hampers their mental manipulation of difficult materials--proving that they can't do it and engendering a cycle of apprehension and blockage.

Relieving emotional writer's block includes what therapist Robert Boice calls "overcoming fears of one's own excitement and energy" and giving up that harsh internal judge. Relief also involves understanding ourselves and the sources of our writing problems, seeing ours as normal rather than pathological, and mentally planning what we will do when we next run into writing anxiety.

Next time: The Cognitive Aspect of Writer's Block.

PUBLISHERS OBTAIN INJUNCTION IN MICHIGAN SUIT

Michigan Document Services has been ordered to stop infringing the copyrights of several publishers who are plaintiffs in a lawsuit in U. S. District Court. The judge, Barbara Hackett, issued a preliminary injunction, effective immediately, to that effect. She noted that the case contained clear misappropriation of copyright and that owner, James Smith, "simply closed his eyes to a substantial responsibility that is his."

Plaintiffs in the suit (*TAA Report*, Jan., 1992) are Princeton University Press, St. Martin's Press and Macmillan/Free Press). The suit was coordinated by the Association of American Publishers. Said Charles Ellis, newly elected chair of AAP, who is also president of John Wiley & Sons, "AAP's member publishers are committed to making high quality educational materials available at reasonable cost. We continue to press for copyright compliance not only in the interest of authors and publishers, but also in support of those copy shops who are producing college course anthologies and other materials in accordance with the copyright law."