

3 Ways to Get Writer's Block Out of Your Life Permanently

By Dan Kennedy

I guess I can call myself a "writer." No great American novel, Pulitzer, Edgar Allan Poe Award or anything like that. But 14 books published, a bluezillion articles, monthly newsletters, my products, a weekly political opinion column. My books have made *Inc.* Magazine's 100 Best Business Books List, Business Week Magazine's bestseller lists, the Library Journal's top ten list, Amazon bestseller lists. The editor at Forbes favorably compared my writing to a great literary author, Tom Wolfe. (Take that, my 7th grade English teacher!) And my royalties pay the vet bills for one or two of my racehorses. Regrettably nowhere near all of them.

But I am far better paid as a *copywriter*. We copywriters are looked upon with some disdain by 'real writers.' We have sold out our talents, to Write To Sell Things (ugh!), while Working For The Man (double-ugh!). There's little respect given by real writers for having written an ad and a web site selling breast enlargement pills that brought in ten million dollars last year, or the TV infomercial for a home-based business opportunity that aired more often than the Tonight Show each year. You'd get more respect as the author of porn scripts. We're like the late Rodney Dangerfield. We don't get any respect.

And if you're unlucky enough to have a brother who's a doctor, your momma probably lies to her friends about what you do. For me, the consolation is the bank balance and lifestyle and liberty it buys. If I needed consolation. Which I don't, but you might.

Anyway, I'm a resident of both planets. The one where the real writers reside, most of them angry-at-their-publishers, frustrated, and poor hanging out with their peers at the coffeehouse, a few with bestsellers. The other, where the ad men and their three martini lunches can be found, although the direct-response wizards like me work mostly in secret, undisclosed locations.

One thing they all have in common is desperate, night-sweats fear of and frequent occurrence of Writer's Block.

I have on my desk a square wood block with diagrams of the brain on it, labeled The Writer's Block, given to me back in 1974 by Roger Stern, who wrote and produced TV shows like 'McMillan and Wife' starring Rock Hudson, and co-created the popular game Mad Libs.

It sits there because it does *not* scare me. I do *not* share this affliction with the other writers.

As a practical matter, I can't. I have a mandate to be incredibly prolific at high speed under heavy deadline pressure. In fact, the main reason I earn so much more money as a copywriter part-time than 90% – including "names" – do full-time is that I produce a lot more a lot quicker.

Henry Kissinger once said, "There can be no crisis this week. My schedule is full." Similarly, for me, there can be no writer's block. Ever. And I know there won't. So the little block of wood has been my constant companion as a paper weight, moved

with me across country three times, stayed through two divorces, and I greet it cheerfully each morning. A writer visiting my office saw it, picked it up curiously and recoiled in terror, dropping it from his hand as if burned – he said, "Oh my God, how will I ever get this damned thing out of my mind!"

Today I'm going to give you three main ways to get writer's block out of your life permanently. This is important because you really can't afford to have it hanging around. So –

Writer's Block Killer #1: Never start with a blank slate

I'm amazed to hear of copywriters who sit down at the computer and hope for an idea. There are creative types who advocate blank slate-ism as the only legitimate creativity, to be admired and indulged in. Theatrical impresario Twyla Tharp comes to mind. Fine, so I won't have the admiration of purists. I'll take money instead. **The secret to a sure, fast start is a lot of raw material** amassed, piled up, pawed through and organized before you ever even think about writing, let alone sit down to write.

For any given project, I'll have raw material secured from the client, including his literature, transcripts of our meeting cut up into pieces and sorted by topic or idea, transcripts of his speeches or his staff's sales presentations similarly sliced and sorted. I'll have competitors' stuff, trade journals. Things pulled from my swipe files. Then there's my library of thousands of books I can wander through, find a few with promise for the project. My reference material, like lists of 500 headline templates.

To be entirely truthful, I don't need to rely on this as much as I once did, as my subconscious has its own vast archives and has been trained and conditioned to do preparatory work for me, often overnight, while I sleep, handing me the starting point, theme, big idea, etc. when I awake in the morning. But I once created four or five tables of raw material before writing. I still do it physically on a smaller scale.

Finally, I have my room full of crap. That's a technical term, and crap is different from stuff. Crap means objects – which might be used as grabbers, lumpy mail enclosures, photographed, as gifts with appointment, and so on. Often, a piece of crap found in this big pile of crap can provide the focus of the entire campaign, or at least the jumping off point.

If I find nothing handy, I'll make a trip to the Dollar Store near-by, or peruse my favorite vendors for this sort of thing, including OrientalTrading.com. I built an entire multi-media, multi-step campaign around a circus theme because I had an inflatable monkey in my crap room and a book about P.T. Barnum on my shelf. (The campaign made the client a million dollars). I've used Mardi Gras masks, Hot Wheels® cars, paper airplanes, small metal trash cans, and on and on.

A great one of these returned with me from a Disney vacation: great big "Goofy® erasers" imprinted with 'for people who make goofy mistakes.' This led to this opening for a sales letter – its structure classic Gary Halbert, incidentally:

"As you can see, I've attached a GIANT ERASER with this letter, for people who make goofy mistakes. Why have I

done such a thing? And spent the postage money to send

you such a heavy thing?

Because I believe you've made a very big, "goofy" mistake, that you still have a chance to correct – but you must hurry.

Please read my letter and the enclosed booklet titled 'While You Said No, These 37 Doctors Said Yes – And Look How Many Millions Of Dollars They've Made'. I promise: you've never seen anything like their experiences! Reading their reports may save you from a very costly mistake."

This came together instantly, thanks to the object triggering the copy right out of my subconscious. That "instantly" is important. It got a 28-page sales letter started and finished in under 4 hours. While most blank slaters would still be waiting for a muse.

Writer's Block Killer #2: Write

I mostly write long copy. Long, multi-page letters; long audio scripts; book-length direct-mail packages; complex web sites. I learned long ago not to worry about beginning at the beginning or, for that matter, in any organized manner at all. I listen to copywriters claiming they always get the headline first or figure out the 'hook' first or do the order form first and work backwards – to which I say "b.s." They're either liars or slower than mud oozing uphill.

When I traveled incessantly for my speaking career – for more than 10 years, delivering over 50 speeches a year, I lived on hotel room service. I taught myself to, usually, eat the hot food first, the salad last, 'cuz the hot stuff was already growing cold by the time it made it to my room. What difference? It all has to be eaten. It's all getting into the gut at approximately the same time. An old client of mine always ate his dessert first. He said you just never knew when you might kick off, and which would you rather leave behind uneaten, the green beans or the chocolate cake? Well, the same thing's true with the copy. It all has to get done, so what does it matter what order it gets done in? If you have scheduled yourself to write for Project #12 from 8:00 to 10:00 A.M., by gum, start writing at 8:00 A.M. Write *whatever*, figure out where it fits later. *Write*.

This does not, incidentally, defy the 28 steps laid out in my book *The Ultimate Sales Letter*. Only steps 16 through 28 need be done in order, the earlier ones in any order – it's just that they all need done. Even the 10 Commandments don't need to be done in numerical order.

Writer's Block Killer #3: Condition Your Mind To Know When It's Time To Pour Out Writing

There is magic to routine and environment. Your mind needs to know: now is the time. I *can* write just about anywhere, but my mind is completely conditioned to shift into writing high gear the minute I enter my primary workplace, select a work stack, click a file open on the computer, first thing in the morning. From bed to shower to coffee to keyboard. Same routine, same time, same place, same bat-channel. It *knows*.

I *can* write under adverse circumstances – say sitting in the center strip of a freeway at rush hour while waiting for a tow truck. But my mind is completely conditioned to shift into writing high gear the minute I enter my primary workplace, absent distractions, proper resources immediately at hand; populated with what I call 'psychological triggers' including a very prominent, in-my-face clock. No phone or inbound calls. Computer not connected to the internet, so nothing coming in and

nothing to meander off to see.

Writer's Block needs space in which to work. You have to give it that space. If it tries coming in and there's no room, it leaves.

Writer's Block needs you to give it an opportunity to distract you and paralyze you. If you give it no opportunity, it is stymied.

The business aspects of this are profound. Making money as a copywriter is a complex thing. It involves self-promotion, marketing, selling, client management, expanding of assignments, setting and presenting compensation requirements, negotiating contracts; it involves actually being able to arrive at copy that performs its intended function. You are both manufacturer's rep and machine operator in the manufacturing plant. To provide adequate time for the rep role, your manufacturing operation must run smoothly and efficiently with no time lost to equipment break-downs, labor strikes, absenteeism or tardiness.

Also, part of a copywriter's reputation is made of the meeting of deadlines and keeping of commitments or failure thereof. Over the years, I routinely had clients arrive at my door, they and I agreeing the world famous copywriter who'd stiffed them was a better copywriter than I – if and when he ever got in the mood to work. But genius copy still in the mind of the genius is not nearly as valuable as copy finished on time and in use, even if from the mind of not-quite-such-a-genius. Over time, this genius copywriter's reputation for utter unreliability cost him dearly. And, frankly, made me money.

Finally, if you are going to be of high value to high value clients, you will not be doing isolated, simple jobs, onesy-twosy. You'll be working on complex multi-media, multi-step campaigns that involve a great deal of work. If you are slow, you'll be simply unable to meet these demands and profit from these opportunities.

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American Writers & Artists Institute

220 George Bush Blvd, Suite D

Delray Beach, FL 33444

(561) 278-5557 or (866) 879-2924