

1-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Heller, Janet (1997) "Overcoming Writer's Block," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 20.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol16/iss1/20>

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OVERCOMING WRITER'S BLOCK

Janet Heller

One of my most shocking discoveries as a college teacher has been that intelligent students who participate frequently in class may have developed such severe writer's block that they consistently turn assignments in late or cannot complete take-home papers.

Rhonda was enrolled in my classical literature class during the fall of 1994. She was always prepared for class discussion and gave perceptive answers to my questions about the dramas and epics that we were studying. I was amazed when she was the only student in the section who did not turn in the first take-home paper, a comparison of Sophocles' *Antigone* and Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. She made an appointment with me to discuss her problems with writing the paper.

Rhonda told me, "I've never liked writing. I don't have the genes to write well. You're a poet, so writing is easy for you. How can you understand what I'm going through?"

I explained that writing is not easy for anyone and told her that I had revised one of my dissertation chapters four times before it pleased my thesis advisors—and then I got it published! While it is true that one needs "genes" to write like Shakespeare, I emphasized that most writing assignments simply require advanced planning, hard work, and perseverance. I tried to make writing sound like fun, telling Rhonda that once the ideas start to flow, it feels like flying. I worked with her on grammar and outlining skills. I encouraged her to come to my office for help on any assignment.

Slowly, her writing ability and her self-confidence improved. I told Rhonda that I was proud of her. She tackled an extra-credit question on the final examination and wrote her best essay of the semester. While I wanted to give her a "B" for the term, I had to lower the final grade to a "C+" because of the late papers.

A year later, I was surprised to find Rhonda in my early American writers class. I found myself gritting my teeth at the prospect of more late papers. However, Rhonda surprised me—and perhaps herself, too. That semester, she turned in all of her papers on time. When she had trouble with one assignment, she came to me with her rough draft, well in advance of the due date. Unlike most students, Rhonda had a complete draft of her research paper ready for the required appointment with me. Again, her writing slowly improved. I told her how pleased I was, and she told me that I was a good teacher. Our mutual respect for one another made the course enjoyable for both of us. Rhonda's research paper earned an "A-," and that was her final grade, too.

What have I learned from my work with Rhonda? Teachers need to intervene early in the semester if they detect a writing block. Individual conferences may be the most effective tool: teachers can establish a better rapport with the student and

dispel any misconceptions about the writing process, such as that one needs special genes to write a take-home paper. I often tell my classes that I have had problems with my own writing, such as wordiness and weak thesis statements. This helps students who are poor writers to understand that they are not "weird." Many women students have told me that teachers rarely praise them. This is a shame because positive reinforcement can work wonders for students with low self-esteem.

I do not claim that all students can move from a "C-" to an "A-" as Rhonda did. But a teacher's patience, encouragement, and praise can help most pupils to overcome writer's block.