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# Dissolving the Granite Complex

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For many people one of the most terrifying experiences in life is sitting down to a blank piece of paper. Before they get up again, they want that blank page full of facts, thoughts, opinions—all perfectly expressed. These writers, if they can get words to come at all, are almost compulsively driven by a need to put the words down flawlessly the first time. They behave as though they are hammering their words everlastingly into granite: the first word they find, the first sentence they cast, the first paragraph that haphazardly builds itself—these bits and pieces are chiseled into stone, largely because the writers are afraid. Their fear of writing has made them victims of the writing anxiety syndrome.

This syndrome (the “granite complex” or “writer’s block”) has probably affected all writers at some point. Actually, writing instructors spend much of their time simply coaxing inexperienced writers into overcoming their fear of writing. “Confidence building” it is called. Poll any group and you will likely find that most consider themselves inferior writers. Ask them why. They will tell you that writing just bedevils them: “Besides,” they say, “I’m math oriented. Wasn’t born with the writing gift.” If you pursue the question, you will find that these people are hostage to their own biographies; that is, enough people and enough experiences have conspired throughout their lives to convince them they cannot write well. They may also be convinced that you can do nothing to help them. Their very attitude, you see, is cast in granite.

Communication consultants, and writing teachers in general, know that the key to successful writing is attitude. No one can be forced to become a good writer; people simply must desire it. But their desire is often contaminated, sometimes suffocated, by fear. Even if you can convince people that with practice almost anyone can learn to write functional prose, you must get them to admit that *they*, these single individuals before you, can do it. Your clients *can* build their confidence, but only if you help them articulate their fears. Once identified, however, these fears can be mitigated.

The chief enemy in the *granite complex* is rigidity. The writer assumes a single attitude to all writing and is afraid to deviate from that attitude. Upon approaching the page, something like this unconsciously goes through the writer’s mind: “all writing is the same; all readers are the same; I am the same.” This ossification of self and context is what destroys the writer’s confidence. People who enjoy writing do not experience this attitude freeze. In fact, they experience quite the Opposite feeling.

For people who enjoy writing, the process is probing and exploratory. They see the blank page as a vehicle of discovery, an expendable sheet that is slave to the facts and ideas, not master of them. Words sometimes come fast and easy, sometimes slowly and hard; but words

on a page, they recognize, can be changed at any time, as can the sentences which they form, and the paragraphs built from the sentences. Flexibility, change, and growth; a playful, experimental attitude toward expression; the realization that writing must be viewed first as a tentative, groping process full of false starts, exciting twists and turns, even frustrating losses at times-these make up the successful writer's attitude.

One thing more: the playful attitude toward writing recognizes that all communication is settled precariously upon the shifting sands of self perception and the relation of self to others. In short, human personality has multiple faces and attitudes, various *personae* or masks, that shift and blend one into another. These multiple personalities are shaped by both internal and external forces. Briefly, then, a writer's *persona* will always be determined by the problem at hand, by the nature of the audience being addressed, and by the writer's momentary self perception. It would take a lengthy volume indeed to explore these three variables in depth. Instead, I should like to offer some writer-based questions that directly chip away at the *granite complex*. The questions concentrate on the writer, the reader, and the data.

If your clients use these questions to probe writing attitudes and contexts, you might find that in time the "problem writers" can overcome, or at least reduce, their fear of writing. They will be concentrating on writing as a process, a dynamic interaction between writer and reader. Even though their writing will eventually freeze into a product (the written page), they will find that focusing on the process will make writing more enjoyable-certainly less terrifying (1).

## **Writer's attitude**

Some primal law of survival in human nature, in nature itself, dictates that we take the path of least resistance. This underlying principle is sometimes the cause of the writer's block: evading work is simply easier than undertaking work. But since most of us are also victims of the Puritan ethic, we find it difficult to resolve the conflict between expectation and desire: put briefly, we experience guilt and thereby seek to rationalize our behavior. This process may be unconscious: we avoid acknowledging our need to defend the indefensible. But our minds will send us signals in the form of discomfort, fear, and anxiety.

At other times we are wholly conscious, uncomfortably so, of our shortcomings. We are distracted by various worries or personal concerns: we lack confidence in our mental prowess, in the conclusions we have derived, in our writing style itself. The following ten questions seek to probe these rather nasty little truths we all find difficult to admit:

1. Am I unconsciously evading work?
2. Am I not yet determined to begin?
3. Do I lack confidence in my reasoning ability?
4. Do I have other more important, more urgent business concerns that are distracting me?
5. Am I afraid of the results of my conclusions?
6. Am I afraid to make recommendations?
7. Is there something in my personal life that is distracting me?

8. Do I lack confidence in my writing style?
9. Do I lack confidence in my organizational abilities?
10. Does the situation make me nervous because a great deal of money, reputation, or power (mine/the company's) is at stake?

By facing the internal fear, by articulating the exact nature of the barrier, the writer may be able to neutralize the difficulty, and by so doing, proceed with an enlightened attitude and a lighter heart. The task may still be difficult, even overwhelming, but at least the writer has come to grips with some of the more terrifying personal aspects of the writing problem.

## **Reader**

If the writer has determined that the problem is not wholly self-generated, then maybe the reader is the cause. Fear or dislike of, or lack of respect for, the reader may jaundice the approach and trigger a negative response so violent in the writer as to impair the writing process itself. The following five questions will help the writer determine the relationship to the reader:

1. Am I unsure of who my audience is?
2. Has the reader made the request clear to me?
3. Am I afraid of my reader?
4. Do I dislike my reader?
5. Do I have no respect for my reader?

Questions 2 and 3 will be the most difficult to handle, because they demand that the writer face some hard facts about self and others. If the request has not been made clear and if the writer is afraid of the person requesting the task, then the writer has to drum up the courage to engage in a confrontation. Your job as consultant is to emphasize how important it is for the writer to understand clearly the task at hand. No written communication can be successful unless the writer clearly apprehends the purpose of the communication. Stress to your client that more harm will come from "guessing" purpose than will come from a tactful request for task clarification. You may have to devote a good deal of your consulting time to this very problem, a most difficult problem because you will be dealing with self-concepts and with the need to be assertive in situations where the overwhelming impulse may be to withdraw.

## **Data**

With some writers, a block forms because of their perception of the problem they seek to solve. Yet they may not be consciously aware of this block. Whenever they think of the writing project, they experience a certain uneasiness, perhaps even anxiety, but are not sure exactly why. The first thing writers must do is confront the possibility that they may not be equal to the task. Perhaps their professional expertise lies in areas other than those dictated by the problem. Perhaps they have rushed the research or are unsure of the conclusions they have drawn from the data. Worst of all: perhaps after weeks or months of research, after pressure from superiors,

after confronting rising expectations from all concerned, the writer finds there is really nothing new to contribute, yet everyone is expecting some kind of brilliant *tour de force*.

Needless to say, any of these problems could induce paralysis. Give your clients the following list of eight questions; tell them to use the questions as a checklist the next time they experience a writing barrier. Explain that if they answer these questions honestly, they will be well on their way to dissolving the granite block:

1. Does the task seem overwhelming in its scope and complexity?
2. Am I confused by the data?
3. Have I more research to do?
4. Have I rushed my research?
5. Do I believe in the conclusions I have drawn from my data?
6. Am I clear about what should be emphasized or de-emphasized?
7. Are my interpretations of the data tenuous?
8. Do I really have nothing to say, yet feel that I should report something because it is expected?

Answering these questions will force the writer to be honest about the data to be communicated.

## **Solutions**

As a communication consultant, you've undertaken only half your responsibility by clarifying the problems your client may face. The other half is to deliver solutions. With different people, of course, there will be different solutions. Where to begin presents a problem. For example, should one proceed by first examining the writer's attitude toward data? Or would it be better to question first the attitude toward self? Most likely the writer will have to work through all three categories until the solution is found; the order is not so important, however, as that the questioning procedure be complete. The following six-point schema is one I have found useful in consulting and in-house writing seminars. It sets out an effective approach to dissolving the granite barrier:

1. Conduct an honest self-assessment.
2. Conduct an honest reader-assessment.
  - 2.1 Ask these questions:  
Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?
  - 2.2 Perform Task Clarification Interviews (insist on clear direction and seek continual feedback from the reader, if possible).
3. Handle data effectively.
  - 3.1 Brainstorm/Free write (random creativity).

- 3.2 Organize and criticize.
  - 3.3 Collect data (according to priority or urgency).
  - 3.4 Interpret or narrate data: Loop-Writing Process.
  - 3.5 Conclude/summarize.
  - 3.6 Recommend (when appropriate).
4. Edit (revise).
  5. Proofread.
  6. Seek outside review (have another person read it; outside review can occur at any point in the writing process).

Points two and three in this schema need some clarification. Probably the most important thing in point two is that the writer conduct an honest and vigorous task clarification interview. One of the most pervasive problems with assigned writing is that many writers just do not understand what is being asked of them. "Does Mr. Jones want a complete analysis of the entire problem? Am I to research the whole Eastern market for this survey? Does Ms. Johnson want the demographic projections for District 5 as well as District 6?" Many times the questions seem almost endless. Yet it is the writer's responsibility to ask the task originator about the desired research scope and methodology, and also to clarify the format and formal elements required in the final draft. To perform the writing task well, the writer must seek continual feedback from the task originator, whenever possible. A feedback loop must be engaged, whereby the writer receives relevant updating whenever necessary. Of course, one must not become a pest in this process; good judgment must be used, but whenever legitimate doubt occurs, the writer has the right, indeed the responsibility, to check with the task originator.

Point three may well be the point where the first writing blocks become apparent. To prevent these from the outset, writers should construct various psychological safety-nets. One of the best safety nets is simply to get something down on paper. Brainstorming sessions usually open up clogged channels because the critical faculty is completely suspended. Ideas are generated without giving any attention to their worth. In twenty-minute or half-hour sessions a writer can brainstorm much that will be useful ultimately in both ideas and organizational approaches. Closely allied to brainstorming is the process of free writing.

Free writing also allows the writer to be creative without being critical. As its name implies, free writing is writing literally free from constraint: the writer just writes madly for anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes. This somewhat associational technique often allows the writer to tap the subconscious, where much that is good has been incubating. Because free writing emphasizes writing process rather than product, it is a good way to overcome a writing block. Free writing is akin to calisthenics; it is a limbering-up process that helps the writer move psychologically, physically and intellectually into firmly grasping inchoate thoughts through rough-and-ready articulation. The process, like priming a pump, opens up blocked channels and encourages a verbal flow (2). Of course, free writing, like brainstorming, results in little that is useful as a final product. What both procedures do, however, is give the writer confidence, a firm place from which to start. After this, the writer organizes and then carefully develops the material.

Once a rudimentary form is given to the work, the writer is free to proceed in comfortable steps toward completion of the writing task. One interesting way to combine the creative (writing production) stage with the critical (organizing) stage has been developed by Peter Elbow. Really a guided or controlled free writing, Elbow's Loop-Writing Process sets up thirteen steps writers can use to help give form and substance to the work at hand (3). Here are five of the thirteen steps.

1. Write down first thoughts for at least 15 minutes.
2. Examine biases (This helps to clarify and strengthen ideas; it may also generate new ideas and focus objectives.)
3. Write an instant version (Without doing research, and by knowing very little about the subject, the writer will be able to relieve anxiety by getting down at least one version from which the writing can be developed and revised.)
4. Set up a dialogue (By creating an imagined argument, the writer can anticipate reader objections, and can clarify issues and focus premises. This step promotes the whole process of reasoning.)
5. Vary the audience (For example, in explaining a technical process, the writer may find whole new avenues of approach by pretending to write for a fifth grader rather than for a Ph.D. in physics.)

Elbow has 8 more variations that can be used, but these five are probably the most useful for writers of practical prose. What is most beneficial about Elbow's Loop Process is that it sets up a situation of controlled freedom; the loop is a feedback device that allows the writer to proceed faithfully toward the writing goal without needlessly wandering from it.

Actually, any method that allows the writer to progress is of value, even rather mechanical or superficial "tricks." For example, I have had great luck sending "blocked" clients to the Dictaphone or the cassette recorder. Many times they can talk through a problem they cannot write through; dictation frees them from the paper that impedes their articulation. Other tricks clients have found useful are these: compose directly from a typewriter; write large on huge yellow legal pads (spaciousness opens up the creative powers for some writers); write all scrunched up on tiny pieces of paper (squeezed writing taps into a kind of hoarding instinct that stirs the juices for other writers); take a nip of wine or spirits (the Edgar Allan Poe effect); walk around the block or lift weights (anything strenuous will start an adrenaline flow); wear your lucky baseball cap (the Oscar Madison syndrome); reorganize and neaten up your desk (the Felix Unger syndrome); review the material and sleep on it (incubation worked wonders for Einstein, Coleridge, and others); play some classical music. As you can see, this list could go on forever. The important thing is that the writer figure out what most effectively sets the creative flow in motion.

Thus, you see, the granite barrier need not block your client's way, especially if you spend a good deal of time explaining each aspect of this six-point schema, noting particularly how much attention is paid to attitude and to writing as a process. Note that editing, the final critical examination of the product, comes late in the process. People with writing barriers usually start editing the moment they construct their first sentence. Intensive early editing is the first sign that

the writer is carving the communication into a very expensive piece of granite. Don't allow that. Get your writers to see the danger in being chained to granite. Get them to believe that, in very large part, writing success comes about only if they have the correct attitude. The correct attitude is usually nothing less than being honest, courageous, and playful.

## Notes

1. The last decade or so has seen increasing attention paid to writing as process rather than product; emphasis has been put on encouraging writers to recognize that a piece of writing “happens” in various ways. One of the seminal works in rhetoric theory is *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* by Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970). This book uses the tagmemic linguistic approach and presents the heuristic matrix to help focus the writer's ability for invention through problem-solving. Linda Flower's *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1981), applies the heuristic (strategy-based) approach to writing, paying special attention to definition of the writing goal and the audience. Some especially good insights into pre-writing can be found in Jim Corder's *Contemporary Writing* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1979) and in Greg and Elizabeth Cowan's *Writing* (New York: Wiley, 1980). Two books with very useful ideas on ways to help writers overcome their anxieties are by Peter Elbow. *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford, 1973) focuses on ways to melt writing blocks through invention. Perhaps more valuable for business communication professionals is Elbow's *Writing with Power* (New York: Oxford, 1981), for here he pays special attention to the writing process in practical writing as well as creative writing.

2. Ken Macrorie, *Telling Writing*, 2nd edition (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden, 1980) and J. Brown, *et al.*, *Free Writing! A Group Approach* (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden, 1977) offer many insights into the advantages of free writing as a tool to get people to open up their creative processes by concentrating on personal experience.

3. Peter Elbow, *Writing With Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp.59-77.