

LC-DC Podcast Episode 7: Overcoming Writer's Block

Transcript

00:00:11 Ryan

Hello and welcome to the LCDC podcast. Advice for students, from students, brought to you by the Douglas College Learning Center. I'm your host, Ryan. It's February, which means it's time for our annual student writing contest. Once again, we'll be awarding almost \$1,000 in prize money, including the \$500 grand prize. Check out our website, library.douglascollege.ca forward slash learning center for details on how to enter.

00:00:43 Ryan

The contest is open to all Douglass students and the deadline is February 22nd. So get started on those submissions now. And if you're having trouble figuring out exactly what to write, well, you're in luck, because today's episode is all about overcoming writer's block. You'll hear from students, accomplished authors, and English learning specialists about what they do to overcome writer's block. Before we get to our guests, let's take a moment to respectfully acknowledge that our campuses are located on the unceded, traditional, and ancestral lands of the Coast Salish peoples, including the territories of the Katzie, Kwantlen, Kwikwetlem, Musqueam, Kakite, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh peoples. Now let's find out who we're learning from on today's episode.

00:01:37 Neehaa

Hey guys, I'm Neehaa, and I'm currently in my final year of my BBA degree in marketing. I currently work at the Douglas College Learning Center as a business and academic writing tutor, and I can help you with brainstorming theses all the way to business reports and audits. That's kind of what I do.

00:02:01 Antonio

Hi, I'm Antonio, One of the English language learning specialists at the Douglas College Learning Centre.

00:02:08 Quinn

Hi, my name's Quinn. I'm a double major at SFU, so history and sociology are the classes I'm taking, and I'm a peer tutor at the Douglas College Learning Centre. I've been here for three years.

00:02:20 Renee

My name is Renee Sarojini-Saklikar, and I am a relatively new creative writing faculty. So I instruct in various creative writing courses such as Introduction to Writing Children's Lit, Introduction to Poetry, Introduction to Speculative Fiction. Just a sample of what I do.

00:02:42 Ryan

Okay, so first question I have for you, Renee, is what is writer's block?

00:02:47 Renee

It is being stuck quite literally. It's like a block in your brain, in your body. And I think what I want to really talk about from my own experience as a published author is the body practice that can help you get unstuck. Everyone's different. Everyone experiences it differently.

00:03:06 Quinn

I'd describe writer's block as being when you still have ideas that you're generating about the material and where you want to go but just aren't able to articulate them into words.

00:03:17 Antonio

Writer's block occurs when you have to write something, be it assignment, prose, story or anything that has to do with writing. You stared at the blank page for minutes or hours, yet you got nothing to show for the time spent.

00:03:34 Neehaa

For me, writer's block is when you can't get words on the page. Maybe an idea is just stuck in your head and you need to flesh it out more. You do not have an idea. Something is blocking, kind of self-evident in the name.

00:03:55 Ryan

Yeah, writer's block. You're right. It is self-evident. Yeah. Well, what do you think causes it?

00:04:01 Neehaa

Oh, Lord. Improper planning. Waiting till the last minutes of the stress overwhelms you. I am guilty of that. But sometimes it's perfectionism. It is you're waiting for a groundbreaking idea or something that you think is the best, but it's stopping you from starting.

00:04:25 Antonio

The cause of this? There isn't a distinctive answer. It's something highly personal. To find the true cause of your writer's block, you need to pay attention to yourself as you engage in writing.

00:04:37 Ryan

What do you think causes it?

00:04:39 Renee

I think there's a range of things. So again, just diving into my experience, task anxiety, wanting the start to be as good as the end, over perfection. And in these days, certainly since the pandemic, the overwhelm. Often in students, what I see is, especially if there's a due date or a deadline, same with me, it kind of shuts you down. So you get stuck.

00:05:03 Quinn

I think that it's like overworking yourself. I find that like when I get writer's block, I've usually been spending too much time on schoolwork and not enough time like doing other things like whether it's like socializing with friends or family or even just like taking a few minutes to relax.

00:05:21 Ryan

Oh, that's interesting. So I guess it's kind of like a signal to us to kind of slow down, take a break, take a step back.

00:05:30 Quinn

Yeah, that's how I would look at it. That's generally what I would do if I have writer's block. Like I usually, since I have the ideas in my head about where I want to go with it, I'll usually try and bullet point like was thinking about blah, blah, blah, but then taking a step away from it, whether it's like just spending an hour, I don't know, like watching TV or looking at social media or something, and then coming back and seeing if I'm looking at it with

refreshed eyes and seeing if I can like turn that like little bullet point that I was thinking about into an actual usable paragraph.

00:06:09 Renee

In my years of writing and teaching, I've really come to see, particularly writer's block, as something that occurs in your body. And because it's like a pain, actually, that writers can get, I've learned to listen to it. And I guess that's something I really wanted to share today. Learn to pay attention rather than run away. When we get anxious about writer's block, especially with a due date, we tend to just run away. Now, movement is good if you're stuck, but what I have learned is to pay attention as to why I am being blocked.

00:06:46 Ryan

What do you usually find when you pay attention?

00:06:50 Renee

Often it's the things I talked about, and often it is wanting the beginning to be perfect, wanting to not really go through a process of step by step because of time, that anxious feeling, I can't. So taking time to breathe, to walk around, do yoga, go outside, not sit in front of a screen. Just move and come back. And timed exercises. So what my body is saying is take a break, but come back.

00:07:22 Ryan

Quinn, how do you feel when you get writer's block?

00:07:25 Quinn

It would be some combination of like tired, because I've probably been working on it for quite a bit before getting stuck. I would be stressed if depending on like if there's a deadline coming up or it might be like angry that I can't figure out a way to put these ideas onto paper. So some combination of those feelings depending on the circumstance usually.

00:07:50 Ryan

Neehaa, how does it feel when you get writer's block?

00:07:54 Neehaa

I cry. I mean, I say that half jokingly. It's just really overwhelming. But that is when you have a paper due or you need to think and be a student and perform a job. And when you feel like your brain is not on board, it feels very stressful. I'm sure everyone can relate.

00:08:21 Ryan

Yeah, I bet too. And the crying part, I'm sure.

00:08:26 Neehaa

It's just overwhelming.

00:08:27 Ryan

It is overwhelming. And sometimes you feel like even if you don't cry, you feel like crying and maybe crying is a good thing. Get it all out of the system, right?

00:08:35 Neehaa

Honestly, it is. Like, I have anxiety. And sometimes you just need to get through those feelings before you look for a solution. And you just need to get those tears out, say that, yes, I am stressed. Okay, where am I going now? Let's brainstorm, get these ideas on the paper and go from there.

00:08:53 Ryan

Yeah, that's, I guess that's a good start to our next topic, which is how we overcome writer's block. So Neehaa, how do you overcome writer's block?

00:09:05 Neehaa

Outlining is a huge part in my writing process, pre-writing is about 80% of the work I do. That means jotting down notes on paper, on my phone, voice notes. I have an Excel sheet of the sources and quotes and doing all that organizing, all that thinking of topics and ideas helps your brain really like ruminate on things that you will talk about when you're doing the actual writing. But if you don't have, like if you haven't done the thinking beforehand, writer's block is going to hit you hard because you don't know what to talk about. So my main thing is get an outline done.

00:09:57 Neehaa

For writers, there's the term like planners and pantsers. So you're going by the seat of your pants. Don't do that. I know it's so tempting, but at least be thinking about what you want to write about. Write down, like brainstorm, be constantly brainstorming for any essays that you've got coming up or big pieces of writing, because you can like pull on these threads when you have writer's block to help you create a plan and follow through with it.

00:10:32 Ryan

I've never heard this term before, but I would definitely categorize myself as a pantser.

00:10:37 Neehaa

Yeah, it's more if you're like novel writing, they usually mention like people who have like a detailed, meticulous outline versus just kind of winging it.

00:10:48 Ryan

So I guess your approach to writer's block is to kind of cut it off before it happens with planning and outlining and brainstorming and doing all that pre-writing work in advance, which is preventative and it prevents writer's block from happening when you sit down to actually start putting the sentences together.

00:11:10 Neehaa

Exactly. And it's never like, oh, I'm going to pre-write now. It's just an ongoing process. If I'm watching YouTube, maybe I will watch a video related to a topic that I'll need to discuss. I might look up sources and generally gather my ideas over the course of a month. And so again, at the back of your head, you're making these connections. It sounds bogus, but trust me, that happens.

00:11:44 Ryan

Sounds like when we get writer's block, we just should stop staring at the blank document in our screen and get up, move around, do something else.

00:11:54 Renee

Yes. Also, though, figuring out small steps for how to come back. There's famous writers and actors. Sam Shepard has always said, you know, he writes screenplays and he said, you can walk away, but the problem is still going to be there when you come back. So I

think it's a twofold thing. And I have two little tips: shift your state, which we're talking about, and scrub your space. It used to be that meant literally you'd take a box or a bag and put everything that was distracting you, all the other tasks, and create a folder or something where you could just put everything away. And now you can do that digitally.

00:12:29 Renee

You know, you turn off your notifications, get away from your social media, shut everything down, put a folder for all the other to-dos, and have a scrubbed space, like a blank document, and then get up, go for a walk, do some yoga, hydrate, go outside, get some natural light, and then come back. So set your timer. I'm really a big believer in creating a writing practice in small units.

00:12:56 Ryan

What do those small units look like? Is that like 30 minutes, an hour?

00:13:00 Renee

Definitely not, way smaller. So I really think this is sometimes where we can go awry when we're stuck. We think, okay, I've got to do this in an hour. And you know, you think I'm going to do all these things in an hour. It doesn't usually work that way. Chunk it down – 5 minutes, 10 minutes, 15, ideal is 20, but start with 5 minutes.

00:13:20 Renee

And then the key is do something, anything. You don't have to be perfect. It shouldn't be perfect. If it's one word, that's fine. If it's a bunch of gobbledygook, that's fine.

00:13:31 Renee

Here's another tip from a book that I love called Resonance. It's on essays on the craft and life of writing. And it's edited by Andrew Chesum and Laura Farina. And I hope the library has a copy. And what Andrew in there does, he splits screens. And so all the anxiety, all the self-talk, the inner talk, I'm terrible at this, I can't do it, he writes it out. So he's actually in the body practicing writing. And then he sets a timer, you know, because you can get a little too deep with all that stuff. And when like 5 minutes has stopped and he's done his pre-writing, his meta-actualizing of what's wrong, then he just, he doesn't have to do anything. He just flips to the next screen and the document is there waiting for him. And because he's in the body, in the act of writing, it can really work, you know?

00:14:23 Renee

Yeah, I actually have an experience. I think one of the questions you had for me, and I was a bit shy about saying was, have I actually had some really bad experiences? Oh yeah, many. But one I'd like to share is I'm coming out with a beautiful new book, it's an epic fantasy in verse, in April, and it blends poetry with novel. And I was really stuck in all kinds of things because I'm blending two different genres. And for a long time, several of the characters in the plot lines were eluding me. And what I did were these practices. And so I wrote about how I don't understand this character. I wrote all the things I didn't get about my character. And just doing that got me so excited about the character that then I switched to the next screen and started writing. And it wasn't perfect, it was messy, it didn't solve everything right away. I didn't have the manuscript done in that hour, but I had a start that excited me so I could come back.

00:15:15 Renee

And I think that's the real thing. If you get into your body, pause to figure out why am I stuck? And then try and unstuck using these methods. Nine times out of 10, if you can just get yourself writing. Here's a couple other tips I've picked up from students. You know, maybe it's texting a friend. Maybe it's writing an e-mail to yourself. Maybe it's talking into your phone, but then you do want to do the next step where you copy the transcript, send it to yourself, and then start editing. Embrace messy, embrace process.

00:15:51 Antonio

Is it perfectionism, fear, distraction, or simply not sure what to write? You will need to find out what stayed your pen as you set out to write, and only then you can overcome the writer's block.

00:16:05 Quinn

I think with writer's block, the issues, rather than like having ideas, it's just like being able to find a way to put them into words, but I'd like to still keep that idea in case it is useful, or maybe I'll come back to it and say, Well, that doesn't really make much sense, and then I'll come out with a new way to approach the topic.

00:16:25 Ryan

Right. So for anyone who experiences writer's block, you would recommend usually stepping away from it. First of all, making a few notes and then stepping away from it and taking a break.

00:16:38 Quinn

Yeah, that would be my general recommendation. That's what's always worked for me. I guess everybody has their own things that work for them and don't. But if you haven't tried that method before, I would suggest trying it and seeing how it goes. Once you find a method that works for you, just stick with that for dealing with writer's block.

00:16:56 Ryan

Cool. Do you have any other advice for students or anyone dealing with writer's block?

00:17:04 Antonio

I guess just remembering that it's something everybody experiences as a writer, that like you're not alone in suffering. It doesn't make you like dumb or anything like that to have writer's block. It's just like something everybody will stumble on. And then like remembering that it might be a signal that maybe you're overworking on it or are too focused on this one assignment. Like sometimes even for me, just stepping away can be like, I'm having writer's block on this essay, I'll like do something for another course that's more interesting and then come back to it.

00:17:41 Neehaa

Just remember how crappy it felt a couple hours before the deadline and you're stressed and nervous and your heart is pounding. It's not a good feeling. And it's just you have to level with yourself that you don't want to experience that again. And honestly, it's hard to start earlier, but sometimes you just need to be an adult. And it sounds a bit harsh to say, but we all get there eventually. And it's just not good for your mental health and stress levels. So just don't do this to yourself would be my biggest advice. And like it's easy for me to say, but trust me, I'm still, it's hard to break off procrastination and all those bad habits, but you're gonna feel better when you're not worried and stressed out and have an assignment submitted a day before it's due.

00:18:36 Ryan

Do you have any other advice for students? Anything we didn't cover? Anything you've tried that hasn't worked?

00:18:42 Renee

What a wonderful question, and I want to say everyone's different. Take what works for you, and sometimes what works on one project won't work on another. Really listen to yourself. But what hasn't worked for me is too much talking about being stuck. Writers are great at going to a cafe and just sitting and, you know, kvetching about how bad everything is in their writing. And that can be very useful for some people. It hasn't worked for me. The best thing I can do is get writing, even if it's just writing a word from the alphabet over and over. I've had students do that who are profoundly stuck. It's okay. What's the first letter of your name? Now write it. And just getting them writing. And then that we do that for like 30 seconds, obviously not that long. And then two minutes. Write about what you had for breakfast. And then five minutes, you know?

00:19:32 Renee

So I think one of the things, maybe find a buddy that will write with you and do what we're doing right now. But the thing is, shift your state, scrub your space, and get writing, whatever it is.

00:19:51 Ryan

That's it for today's show. Thanks for listening. The Douglas College Learning Center provides free one-on-one peer tutoring to students. You can book an appointment or find out more information at our website, library.douglascollege.ca/learningcentre. And if you want some help working on your submission for the writing contest, just select writing contest from the drop-down menu when booking your appointment.

00:20:17 Ryan

Check out Renee's latest work, *The Heart of This Journey Bears All Patterns, An Epic Fantasy in Verse* at thotjbap.com. All this and more can be found in the episode show notes on our website. So check those out for more resources. Good luck and happy writing. For those about to learn, we salute you.