
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

How to cure writer's block



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NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript

Alice

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Alice...

Neil

And I'm Neil. Have you ever written any poetry, Alice?

Alice

No. Have you?

Neil

Oh yes. I've got a sheaf of poems from my youth.

Alice

A **sheaf** of something means a bundle of things, particularly paper. What about now? Are you still writing?

Neil

No, my creative juices have dried up.

Alice

What a shame! I would have liked to hear some of your poems! **Creative juices** means a flow of ideas and the subject of today's show is creativity and **writer's block** – which means not being able to write because of a psychological problem.

Neil

So not like tennis elbow or golfer's knee, then.

Alice

No, Neil, because a psychological problem refers to the mind not the body. And whilst some people view writer's block as nonsense others believe it is a serious psychological condition that can get better with treatment.

Neil

Well, I have a question for you, Alice. How does author of the Da Vinci Code, Dan Brown, deal with writer's block? Does he...

- a) hang upside down from the ceiling in gravity boots?
- b) clean his 6-bedroom house from top to bottom with a toothbrush?
- Or c) run a half-marathon listening to opera music by Richard Wagner?

Alice

I think it's c) run a half-marathon listening to Wagner. Exercise and music might get your creative juices flowing again.

Neil

Well, we'll find out whether you got the right answer later on in the show. But first, Alice, can you tell us where the term writer's block comes from?

Alice

Well, the term was **coined** – or invented – in 1950 by a Viennese psychoanalyst Edmund Bergler. Let's listen to Zachary Leader, Professor of English Literature at Roehampton University talking about the psychoanalytic theory of writer's block.

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Zachary Leader, Professor of English Literature at Roehampton University

Before writers were blocked the other metaphors that were used were things like 'drying up'... or 'being frozen' or 'stuck in a rut' and so forth. And the difference between being blocked and drying up is that in the case of blockage the problem is externalised and objectified – it's not yourself that's the problem – it's something that's outside you like an obstacle or an impediment – something that you could really cut away, and as a consequence a cure like a growth or a foreign body.

Neil

So writer's block is a metaphor for an obstacle – something external rather than internal inside of you – that's preventing you from working. Doesn't that sound like an excuse for not doing anything, Alice? 'It's not my fault – this impediment thing is getting in the way'.

Alice

Yes. Well, **impediment** is another word for obstacle. But how do you cut away a foreign body that isn't actually there?

Neil

I suppose psychoanalysts have an answer for that. But seriously, I think writers probably do have a hard time. You can sit down at your desk every morning at 9 o'clock to write but that doesn't mean you're going to think of things to say. Though we're never stuck for words, are we?

Alice

Not usually, Neil, no. But did you know that the Ancient Greeks had **Muses** – or goddesses of creativity – to help them?

Neil

So... Beyoncé isn't a real muse? I've heard people say, you know, 'Beyoncé is my muse; she's such a great singer, songwriter, dancer, role model!'

Alice

Well, these days, 'muse' can refer to anyone who inspires an artist, writer, or musician. But in Ancient Greece, there were nine Muses – and depending on what type of creative thing you did – philosophy, poetry, science and so on – you **invoked** – or called upon – that particular Muse to inspire you.

Neil

I call upon you, oh Alice, to enlighten us with more information about the Greek Muses.

Alice

Alright then. So let's listen to Angie Hobbs instead. She's Professor of the Public Understanding of Philosophy, University of Sheffield here in the UK – and here she is now, talking about what the Greek Muses symbolized.

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Angie Hobbs, Professor of the Public Understanding of Philosophy, University of Sheffield

We've seen that the Muses were connected to running water, to springs, to fountains, fluidity. So if you're musing, you are letting your mind wander, you're opening yourself up to new influences and new ideas, and not thinking in too structured a way.

Neil

Musing, letting your mind wander, thinking in a fluid, unstructured way – that all sounds very pleasant – maybe I should have another go at writing.

Alice

Well, according to research, some people are better at mind wandering and opening themselves up to new ideas than others. Their minds work differently – they have more dopamine in the thalamus region of the brain.

Neil

The **thalamus** controls consciousness, sleep and the senses and **dopamine** is the feel-good chemical in the brain. Is that right?

Alice

Yes, and having more dopamine in the thalamus enables some people to see the world in a different way – and they express this creatively – through science, music, the arts. Now, before you start musing on how much dopamine you have in your brain, Neil, perhaps you can tell us the answer to today's quiz question?

Neil

I asked: How does author of the *Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown, deal with writer's block? Does he...

a) hang upside down from the ceiling in gravity boots?

b) clean his 6-bedroom house from top to bottom with a toothbrush?

Or c) run a half-marathon listening to opera music by Richard Wagner?

Alice

And I said c) run a half-marathon listening to opera music by Richard Wagner.

Neil

And you were wrong, Alice! The answer is a) hang upside down from the ceiling in gravity boots.

Alice

Really?

Neil

Yes. I expect all that increased blood flow to the brain is helpful in clearing writer's block.

Alice

Yes. Good plan. OK, here are the words we learned today.

creative juices

writer's block

coined

impediment

Muses

invoked

thalamus

dopamine

Neil

So, Alice, shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely...

Alice

That's not your poem, Neil – It's Shakespeare's! Well, and that's the end of today's 6 Minute English.

Neil

OK, I'm off to lie on the sofa and evoke my muse. Please join us again soon!

Both

Bye!

Vocabulary

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a flow of ideas

writer's block

not being able to write because of a psychological problem

coined

invented

impediment

obstacle

Muses

Goddesses of creativity

invoked

called upon

thalamus

An area of the brain that controls consciousness, sleep and the senses

dopamine

The chemical in the brain that makes you feel good