WRITE AROUND THE BLOCK

By E. F. Watkins

We've all heard of "writer's block," and too many of us
have experienced it first-hand. It can occur in a short story
or a novel. It can stall us at the beginning or, more likely,
somewhere in the middle.

The idea that once seemed so fertile suddenly looks arid.
The train of inspiration that was chugging along happily
yesterday has hit a boulder and jumped the tracks. You may
decide your whole idea stinks, or that you have no talent. While
either of these things could be true, chances are your story
can be salvaged.

I don't recommend staring at a blank page (or computer
screen) for hours on end to punish yourself, or writing any old
thing just to keep your fingers moving. You could produce a lot
of useless drivel, unless you pause first to analyze your
problem.

Most of the time, I think we hit blocks because we don't
know our material well enough, either intellectually or
emotionally.

Look at your character, setting and action. Do you feel
out of your depth in any of these areas? Maybe you're writing
from the viewpoint of a cement mason, and you know very little

about that line of work. You have two choices--either research the subject further, or scrap that character for one with whom you can empathize more easily. The same goes for setting. If you've never been to the Pacific Northwest, either read up on the terrain or shift your scene closer to home.

Action may be trickier to research, especially for suspense writers. I don't suggest that you brain someone with a fireplace poker to accurately capture the killer's experience. You might, however, try hefting one and pantomiming the gesture. Just close your window blinds first, so your neighbors won't misinterpret and call the cops!

You can do "emotional" research, too. If you've already written a biographical sketch of this character, delve further and ask yourself exactly what he is thinking and feeling at this point. Have you ever felt anything similar? Pretend you're a "method actor" and draw from your own emotions, even for the arrogance or rage of your villain. What does your character hope to achieve in this scene, and why is that goal important to him?

Think of your reader's emotions, too. What would she like to see happen here? What might she be dreading? Are you going to satisfy her curiosity, or keep her dangling a while longer? What's the most surprising and exciting twist you can present that is still plausible and logical within the story?

Finally, what is the purpose of the scene in the larger context? How does it move the story forward? (If it doesn't, get rid of it, and your "block" may vanish, too!)

After you've answered these questions, if you still feel reluctant to write the scene, write <u>about</u> it. Make an outline or, if you're more right-brained (as I am), simply brainstorm on paper. Include any details you feel are important or colorful. You should end up with something like this:

"That morning, Pete gets an irate call from his boss, Joe. Joe is furious that Pete accidentally shipped 6,0000 widgets to South Africa instead of South Carolina. Pete makes excuses in vain. Joe calls Pete an 'incompetent numbskull' and fires him.

"Hanging up, Pete is devastated. He reflects that if he hadn't spent so much time on the job daydreaming about the next chapter of his novel, he would never have made such a stupid mistake. He hates selling widgets, anyway, but he needs the money. He cringes to think what his wife Shirley will say when she hears he lost his job. Then again, Pete thinks, now that he's unemployed, he'll have more time to write!

"Fired with new inspiration, he dashes to his computer and starts a new chapter, in which his protagonist murders a character closely modeled on Pete's ex-boss Joe..."

Your "outline" probably should be more detailed,

especially if you're incorporating new research. The more details you include, the further along it will take you. Ideally, it should bring you one baby-step short of the finished scene. Here, for example, we have only to fill in the actual words exchanged between Joe and Pete, the specific thoughts that go through Pete's mind, and any physical actions he takes--from pacing to hand-wringing to charging back to his keyboard with a vengeance.

So remember, the shortest distance between two points may be a straight line, but if you encounter a "block" in your path--write around it!

#