

Will-power

The commonest, and at times the most disabling, problem to afflict the student essay-writer has nothing to do with the niceties of prose style or the use of the apostrophe. It is the problem of actually getting the words down on paper. You may find it comforting to reflect that this is not simply a student problem but one that faces all writers everywhere, including great ones. In your case, however, the problem is made both simpler and more urgent by the fact that student essays have to be written to deadlines. This means that you cannot afford to write like James Joyce, squeezing out *Finnegans Wake* a page at a time; still less can you afford to write like Coleridge, who had the grandest ambitions but seldom managed to get down to it at all. Instead you must model yourself on Dickens or the young Kipling (or, indeed, despite the impression given by Stoppard's comic screenplay, Shakespeare) and adopt, as they had to, the professional attitude that meeting deadlines efficiently is an essential part of the job.

The thing which is most likely to prevent you from meeting deadlines efficiently is the cultivation in yourself of a case of false writer's block. Real writer's block is a very rare condition, affecting perhaps one student in a thousand. The patient, with no matter what exercise of will-power, is simply unable to put words of an academic kind down on paper. This condition, which can cause great distress to the sufferer, is in fact a symptom, not an ailment in itself. It can be caused by problems ranging from a mistaken choice of university course to medical or family troubles, and the cure for it is to tackle the causal problem directly. False writer's block is another matter entirely, and all too common.

The patient begins by feeling reluctant to write an essay. This reluctance, which really stems from that mixture of perfectionism

and sloth which could be described as human nature, is instead attributed by the patient to writer's block (much as sufferers from the common cold dignify their ailment by telling themselves they have flu). Sympathetic attention from a tutor appears to confirm the diagnosis, and the patient finds the next essay even harder to write. If you have allowed yourself to get into this condition it can be quite hard to get yourself out of it again, but some of the following ideas may help.

All solid bodies have a property which scientists call inertia. This means that when things are stationary they want to remain stationary, and when they are moving they want to continue to move. It follows that it takes far more effort to start something moving, when its inertia is acting against you, than it does to keep it moving, when its inertia is on your side. Inertia affects the essay-writer in two different ways. It is harder to write the opening paragraph than it is to write the rest of the essay, and it is harder to make yourself sit down at your desk than it is to keep on sitting there.

The difficulty of writing the opening paragraph can sometimes be overcome by pretending that the essay is a letter. You choose a sympathetic correspondent, write at the top of the page, 'Dear Mum / Professor Finkelbaum / Judi Dench, I thought you might be interested in some ideas I have had about syntax and subterfuge in the late novels of Henry James', and then launch straight into the subject. When the essay is finished, you trim down the opening sentence to leave you with a suitable title (or add a new one if necessary).

The difficulty of making yourself sit down at your desk is sensibly lessened if you write as much of your essay as possible at a single sitting. Getting up for a short break means having to get started all over again, and for many reluctant writers that short break can last for the rest of the day. If you can arrange for a house-mate, or the person in the next study-bedroom, to bring you in some coffee an hour or so after you start writing, it helps to pin you to your chair. Make sure you do the same for them if they need it. Some people also find that writing to music helps. This works best if you turn the sound down really low, so that you have a virtually subliminal rhythm keeping you going without breaking your concentration. If you are composing your essay at the keyboard, you will need to take a five to ten minute break every hour to rest your eyes and wrists and stretch your back, but don't let this turn into an excuse to go off and start doing something else. Developing a seven minute exercise

routine, whether it is yoga or just walking up and down the room, is a good way of fending off temptation.

Some people find that writing at night gives them a good stretch of time free from distractions, but you should only write late at night if you are sure your nervous system can stand it. Messing about all day and then desperately starting work after midnight when all you want to do is sleep is a sure way of reinforcing false writer's block. The healthy option, if you are really pressed for time and can summon up the discipline, is to rise at five, as professional writers always claim they do (and sometimes really have to). Take it from me, once you are actually up and awake there is nothing to do at 5 a.m. *but* work. You will need an alarm clock. And a good big mug of tea or coffee. (And, if you share a bedroom with them, an understanding room-mate or partner.)

The difficulty of getting started often expresses itself in what are known as displacement activities: the writer gets started on something else instead. This can be fatal, especially if the something else is reading a book. It is possible to read the whole of *A Suitable Boy*¹ while not getting on with writing an essay on *Mansfield Park*. However, this is a psychological mechanism which can sometimes be put into reverse, so that you start writing your essay in order not to get on with the washing up. A more subtle form of displacement activity is to spin out the researching of your essay to unnecessary lengths. Reading one more book about Jane Austen can also be a way of not getting on with writing an essay on *Mansfield Park*.

Finally, it is worth remembering that, though feeling miserable can stop you from working, working, when once you have got started, can often stop you from feeling miserable.