

A CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK

BY: MICHELLE P. HEATHERTON

"So, how's your paper coming along?" Mom asks as she walks into my room to tell me that she's going to the store.

"Oh, it's like laying an egg, or passing a kidney stone. Take your pick," I answer in an exasperated tone.

"Do you think it would help if you got away from it for a while?"

"I would take a break if I felt like I accomplished something, but so far, I've only written two sentences--and they don't even sound good."

Mom's facial expression reveals the empathy that she feels for me in my frustrating predicament.

"I wish I could help you out in some way," she says.

"I just have to keep at it until I get it right," I reply. "Otherwise, it'll drive me crazy. I'm already getting insomnia over it."

Mom sighs. She hates to see me like this; but she knows that once I complete the project, I'll be temporarily relieved and fairly satisfied with what I've put down on paper.

But how do I get to that point? What's the formula? I truly don't know how I ever manage to get there. With lots of perseverance and perspiration, I suppose. The "finished" product always seems somewhat surreal. Of course, sometimes--depending on the subject matter, the alignment of the planets, the ability to concentrate, cognitive responses, and hormonal levels--it's quite easy (relatively speaking) to reach the point where I can say, "I'm done, and it sounds good." But, at other times, the process is absolutely torturous. What I'm referring to is writer's block--that dreaded affliction which manifests itself differently in each writer. Some individuals claim that they're actually unable to write, or simply don't want to write at all. Others can get some words and sentences written, but they inevitably end up with a lackluster product that is completely unsatisfactory.

On certain occasions, I suffer from the latter version of writer's block. I get some words typed onto the computer screen, but they're about as smooth as my Firebird driving over a potholed road. That says it all, doesn't it?

At other times, I can be merrily typing along, and suddenly, I get stuck. Several factors contribute to this abrupt interruption in the writing process, such as: the inability to find the perfect word, awkward syntax, unfamiliar subject matter, wandering thoughts, the distraction of other people's conversations, house noise, and the telephone.

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As I'm working on my summaries for a presentation in Rhetoric, my aunt calls to leave a message for my mom; she begins squawking over the answering machine:

"Paddy, honey, I just wanted to tell you that I wasn't able to call last week because I had the flu, and I was pukin' for two days, and then I got this terrible cough, and I lost my voice for a couple of days...

It's too bad she got her voice back so soon, I think to myself.

"...but when I felt better, I went to the post office on Saturday, and I was gonna check my box, but this son-of-a-bitch that was there told me that he had already locked up for the day, and I said, 'It's not three o'clock yet,' and he said that it was, and so, on Monday, I went back down to that damn post office and told the supervisor about him..."

She yammers on like this for about five minutes and finally requests that my mom call her back in the evening.

This call reminds me of a play that I've been wanting to write about my eccentric relatives coming to my house for dinner. These discursive thoughts only contribute to the impatience and frustration that I'm experiencing as I try to write about the *Progymnasmata* in a clear and concise manner.

"The *Progymnasmata* was a series of increasingly challenging exercises in theme writing," I type.

No, that sentence doesn't say enough.

"In this article, Donald Lemen Clark describes the *Progymnasmata*, a series of increasingly challenging exercises in theme writing, that was written by Aphthonius, a Greek teacher of grammar and rhetoric ..."

Forget it--too long.

I start to focus on the sound of the heat swishing through the air vents. My parents and I

agree that we should have had a slower fan installed in the electric furnace. The air blows constantly; if you concentrate on it for any extended period of time, you can detect a distinct tone. I wonder what note that would be on the piano. It sounds like B-flat.

Okay, I have to prevent my mind from wandering so I can focus on this summary.

"In this article, Donald Lemen Clark contends that John Milton probably used the Aphthonius version of the *Progymnasmata* in his studies at St. Paul's School," I write.

That won't work. The first sentence should explain what the *Progymnasmata* was.

I continue to stare at the blinking cursor on my computer screen as I try to compose an informative, thorough, and succinct sentence.

To ease the strain on my eyes, I look up at the ceiling tiles and begin to count them. I know there are 13 tiles across the width of this particular room and 12 tiles lengthwise. So, why am I counting them again? I do this every time I get stumped when I'm writing.

Now, I have to go to the bathroom. I convince myself that if I go to the bathroom and get a drink of water, then I'll be able to finish these abstracts.

When I come out of the bathroom, my dad is walking through the hallway.

"What are you doing, Dad?" I ask.

"I'm gonna clean the cars."

"I'll make a deal with you. I'll clean the cars, and you can write these summaries for me." (I'm joking, of course.)

"I don't have any writing talent," Dad answers.

My dad subscribes to what I call the "Rumpelstiltskin Theory of the Writing Process." Just as Rumpelstiltskin turned straw into gold; I can magically convert words into stories, essays, articles and scholarly papers because I supposedly have some sort of writing talent. Dad claims that he knows writing is hard work, but I still think he believes that something mystical is involved in the process.

I sigh as I sit back down in front of my glaring computer screen. The cursor's still blinking, keeping time with the seconds that are passing.

On the dogwood outside of my window, a blue jay hops from limb to limb and chases a few sparrows out of the tree. I watch him for a couple of minutes, and then he flies away. Remembering that I'm losing bone mass from sitting too long, I force myself to write another first sentence.

"John Milton's knowledge of rhetorical discourse is evident in the organization and arrangement of his creative work."

Actually, that's a pretty good concluding sentence, but it won't work for an introduction.

I wonder if John Milton ever experienced writer's block. I'm sure he did, but his daughters probably helped him through it. When he became blind, he supposedly dictated his thoughts and ideas to his daughters, and they wrote everything down for him. In any event, this composing aloud most likely assisted him with any form of writing difficulties that he may have encountered.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. has his own unique strategy for dealing with the condition. In an article that I read, he admitted that he often makes prank phone calls in the middle of the night when he can't write. While his wife is sleeping, he tries to locate old girlfriends by calling Directory Assistance in various cities. For some reason, these shenanigans help him work through writer's block.

Socrates believed that it all came down to divine inspiration. In other words, if the gods didn't give you the creative "spark," then you couldn't compose. Writers simply had to wait and be patient until some kind of inspiration took control of their minds. Of course, they could always conveniently invoke the Muses in situations like these.

Okay, Muse, I need some help here before I pick off all of my nail polish.

For some reason, I decide to begin with the original sentence that I developed an hour ago. After all, every single fact doesn't have to be included in the first sentence; this isn't newswriting.

"The *Progymnasrnata* was a series of increasingly challenging exercises in theme writing. In order to prepare these compositions, the students had to learn about a wide variety of subjects, such as history, philosophy, literature, and government; they used these topics to formulate their arguments. The most popular version of the *Progyrnnasrnata* was written in the fourth century B.C. by Aphthonius, a Greek teacher of grammar and rhetoric."

Bingo! This first paragraph of the abstract appears to be a winner. The rest of the summary seems to fall into place; however, three more summaries remain to be written.

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After two hours of diligent writing, I finally complete the four pages of abstracts. Whew! My eyes are burning and my knees are stiff, but I'm finished--at last. As I read over the paragraphs, they seem to flow pretty well, and, most importantly, they make sense.

This time, all of the anguish resulted in a successful product. For the time being, at least, I could celebrate because I conquered writer's block. I persistently chipped away at it until I was able to write freely again.

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