

*It may be when we no longer know what to do,
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go,
we have begun our real journey.
(Wendell Berry¹)*

WRITING AS A MEANS TO UN-BLOCK YOUR THINKING

Writing is not only about putting something on paper that you can hand in; it can help with your thinking process as well, especially when you're stuck.

A. SO YOU THINK YOU'RE STUCK...

We've all been there: sitting in front of an empty screen (or paper), with your head in your hands or your hands on the keys – and simply not knowing what to write; what to do to change that...

I. WHY?

Why do you feel like that at all? The answer is easy, isn't it: because you don't know enough, because you're not fit to write a thesis... Really? No, not at all. And realising what's behind a situation like that is probably the most important step out of it! There are three main reasons for feeling stuck while writing a thesis, and none of them should discourage you:

- *plain fear*: you're afraid that you might be going the wrong way; that you've overlooked something important; that you're not in line with rules, conventions or just other people's expectations; that you're writing something you're not "supposed" to write; that your thoughts are not clever enough or even too stupid; that *you* are too stupid, not at all qualified for the position you find yourself in, that you're never going to be a scholar... – and that some day (soon) somebody will finally notice that...

¹ as cited in "Coming to our senses" by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005), Introduction, p. 1

- *the urge to say too much (!) at the same time* (and not knowing where to start and how to get all these thoughts of yours in line and on paper)
- *doubt*: you're not at all sure things are what they appear to be

II. HOW CHANGE THAT?

Congratulations, first of all! If any of these reasons apply to you, you're on your way to becoming a real scholar! Why's that? Well, it's pretty obvious concerning having too much to say; but it's equally true for the other two: for the heart of academic thinking is doubt, being critical about what you know for sure and what you don't. So if any personality streak disqualified one as an academic, it would be being too sure about oneself – and *that* you're not.

Therefore you don't need to get rid of these thoughts; but you need to get around the blockage they create in your thinking.

- Be aware that whatever you write now is going to be changed at least once before you hand in your thesis, probably a lot more often than that. So what the heck if these thoughts are too "small", stupid or whatever – only writing them down gives you a chance to reflect on them, to discuss them, to alter them, or decide to delete them later. No need to be perfect now, no reason to judge your thoughts before they even appear in writing.
- Even if what you hand in is proven to be wrong later, having written it down will be a contribution to academic discourse: since we all stand on the shoulders of those that came before us, that's why we can look further – and especially the thoughts we disagree with take us further, for we have to argue against them.
- Being blocked means that you're thinking after all, even if it takes some time for these new thoughts of yours to come to life. So accept times like these as a part of the process – and don't be worried about them.²
- Write against your writing problem by writing about it! Seriously: if you write down why it is exactly that you feel stuck; if you try to describe your problem as precisely and in words as plain as possible, just as if you were watching yourself, quite often that is enough to unravel what appeared like a Gordian knot before.
- How did you get here? What is it you need to do next? Generally try to break down your task more finely the closer you get to doing it.

² Otto Kruse, the main authority on problems like these with academic writing in German, even cites Flower & Hayes speaking of "pregnant breaks"! (Keine Angst vor dem leeren Blatt, 12th ed. 2007, chapter 8, p. 242)

- Try imagining the person you're actually addressing, with a doctoral thesis mostly your supervisor: write as if telling them what you're doing.
- Transfer your skills from other contexts (*any* area that you feel confident or successful in). Think back on times when your writing went well: what was it that made it work? Do that – and don't do what didn't work for you.³

B. AND EVEN WHEN YOU'RE NOT STUCK...

Whether you're stuck or not, there are some things you can do to help with your task:

- "Free writing" is a creative writing method that can be applied to situations of academic writing as well, e. g. when starting your day: just write for 5 minutes on whatever comes into your mind: smells, sights, sounds, ideas... if nothing comes into your mind, write about this. This is only about the process of writing, not about the outcome, so don't try to do "well"!⁴
- Recapitulate your task and put it down in keywords.
- Re-read the paragraph or chapter you did last before going on.
- Take a look at your outline⁵ and figure out how the topic you're working on fits in, how it is to lead from where to where.
- Do a brainstorming session and collect keywords for what you want to write on in your next chapter.
- Try to do things differently for a change – for example try writing by hand, which forces down your speed and will change your thinking because of that.⁶
- Before you call it a day, especially when going for a longer break, try starting on your next chapter or topic: write down what it is you will have to do; this will help you a lot to get started again.⁷

And don't think you're the only academic struggling with writing: actually most people do, including professors and outstanding experts in their fields!⁸ So just keep going...

³ see Bill O'Hanlon, "Write is a verb", chapter 6, pages 104/105, 122

⁴ see "Kreatives wissenschaftliches Schreiben – Tipps und Tricks gegen Schreibblockaden" by Brigitte Pyerin (2001), chapter 4.2.1

⁵ see paper on "Structure and lay-out"

⁶ Otto Kruse, *Keine Angst vor dem leeren Blatt*, 12th ed. 2007, chapter 2, p. 59

⁷ Otto Kruse, *Keine Angst vor dem leeren Blatt*, 12th ed. 2007, chapter 8, p. 245

⁸ see "Lust und Last des wissenschaftlichen Schreibens", Wolf-Dieter Narr/Joachim Stary (ed.), 2nd ed. 2001; if you're really into academic writing, you might want to take a look at "The writing scholar – studies in academic discourse", vol. 3 of the *Written Communication Annual*, edited by Walter Nash (1990)