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Writer's Block: seeking the Muse when caffeine fails

by Freddie Theodoulou, Science Editor



People often ask me where I get my ideas for *The Biochemist*. Sometimes they are hard to come by so I always write down even a ghost of an idea as soon as one presents itself, no matter how apparently preposterous. This often happens at Society meetings and frequently with a little wine-derived inspiration. 'What's in a name?'

(February 2012) for example was conceived in a pub on Lamb's Conduit Street after Theme Panel Jamboree. The upshot of this strategy is that my handbag is often littered with napkins, scraps of paper, train tickets and dinner menus with near-illegible scribbles. Sometimes they turn out to be useful, e.g. 'Childhood memories of Dutch elm disease; how crises inform science policy' (April 2014), some are nonsensical in the cold light of day and some appear downright sinister: "Be more proactive on obituaries".

However, when writer's block strikes, sometimes alcohol or caffeine is not enough and other measures are called for. Maybe it's a grant application, maybe it's a paper or a review but I suspect we've all fought to put pen to paper at one time or another. Struggling under pressure to finish *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, JK Rowling once mentioned that she fantasized about breaking her arm to avoid having to write to the publisher's deadline. I've never found myself driven to such desperate extremes, but I do admit to an ever-expanding list of mildly bizarre displacement activities. I might suddenly decide that I need to learn more about terpene metabolism or memorize the rules for *Rock, Paper, Scissors, Lizard, Spock* (which turn out to have quite an interesting mathematical basis, incidentally). Once I spent a couple of pleasant hours trying to write a scientific pastiche of Henry V's St Crispin's Day speech (hang, on, didn't that become last December's Editorial?). More commonly, domestic and work chores appear remarkably appealing when the Muse goes AWOL: cleaning the house, archiving emails, writing a *Pathways to Impact* statement, even updating the Research Outcomes database seem like fun and pressing things to do. Sadly, none of these approaches solves the fundamental problem; the article still has to be written (unless of course the required text in question actually is a *Pathways to Impact* statement. ...). However, in my case at least, they either distract the conscious mind for long enough for background processes to get to work, or simply constrict the deadline and stimulate an even more concerted effort. So here, for your use and amusement, are my (unpatented) tips for dealing with writer's block:

- Go for a walk
- Make a cup of tea (stop after five, otherwise this one becomes counter-productive)
- Try to get something, anything on to paper and then worry away at it later until it becomes acceptable
- Think about the shame/horror/catastrophic consequences of not finishing the piece of work, hoping to be galvanized into action. Then go and make another cup of tea.
- Write an editorial about writer's block

Happy writing! ■