

Part One:

The Blocking Questionnaire: An Instrument for Assessing Writing Problems

THE PROBLEM about most information on writing blocks, as Daly¹ notes, is its basis in anecdotes. Daly's own work on writing apprehension stands as the prototype for assessing writing problems with empirical grounding.² In this section of the appendices I present a related effort at identifying inhibitions to writing.

The Blocking Questionnaire (BQ) was standardized, in its present form, on two groups of academicians, 100 graduate students and 100 faculty members across a variety of disciplines in large universities. Its items, selected via factor analysis and criterion-related judgments (about writers with clearly diagnosed writing problems and their responses to the BQ), sorted themselves into the same seven categories of blocking identified in earlier research.³

I continue to use the BQ as a device to help individualize the treatment programs structured for the professional writers (and non-writers) with whom I work. I share the BQ in hopes of learning how well it discriminates and helps other populations of troubled writers. In the form presented here, the BQ works well as a self-administered diagnostic for writers. Material following the questionnaire explains scoring, interpretation, and application of the results.

I strongly encourage you to "take" the BQ and to score your response patterns. I use the diagnostic categories throughout the manual to provide more individualized advice.

Blocking Questionnaire

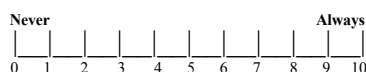
A. Checklist for Overt Signs of Blocking (COSB)

Robert Boice (copyright 1984, 1987)
State University of New York, Stony Brook

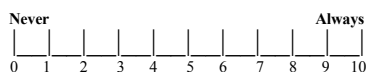
Please pause briefly with each item, imagine how you would probably act when faced with a tough and important writing assignment, and then check the portion of the scale that would best describe you:

(work apprehension)

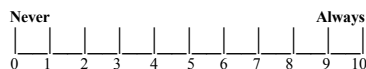
- Others would hear me complain: "I don't feel like doing this" (or words to that effect).



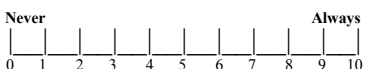
- Others would hear me complain about how difficult or fatiguing the writing will be.



- Others would hear me complain about the difficulties in generating useful, significant ideas for writing.



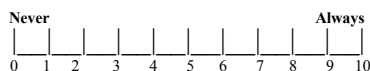
- Others would hear me complain about the realistic possibilities of my writing being criticized, even rejected.



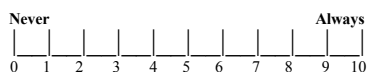
[Work Apprehension average score _____

(procrastination)

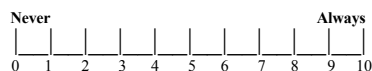
5. I would put off the writing as long as possible (until just before the deadline, if there is one).



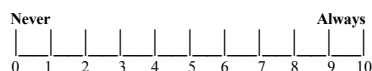
6. I would use delaying tactics such as working first on more “pressing” tasks, like house-cleaning or reading the newspaper.



7. I would, once ready to write, spend a lot of time daydreaming.



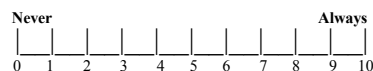
8. Others would hear me complain about the agency or people who made the writing task (and deadline) necessary.



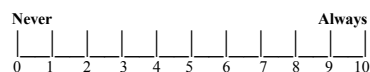
[Procastination average score _____

(writing apprehension)

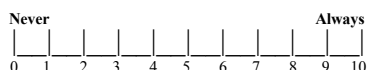
9. Others would hear me express nervousness about writing.



10. Others would notice that when I try to write, I fatigue, even “cramp,” easily.



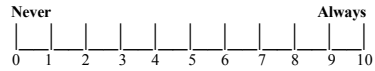
11. Others would hear my worries about not writing as well as my peers.



[Writing Apprehension average score _____

(dysphoria)

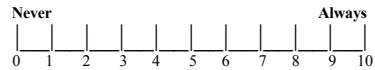
12. Others would see that, when faced with writing, I show signs of depression (e.g., sad expression, lethargy, complaints of feeling helpless).



13. Others would see me panicking, unable to write, perhaps even acting dizzy and in danger of losing control.



14. Others would hear me devalue the writing assignment and/or my own writing ability.



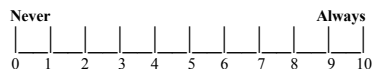
15. Others would observe me express suspiciousness about specific people who will deliberately discredit my writing.



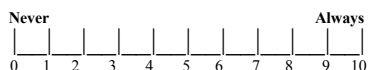
[Dysphoria average score _____

(impatience)

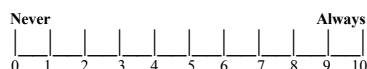
16. Others would hear me complain that, once under way, my writing is going too slowly... that I need to make up for lost time.



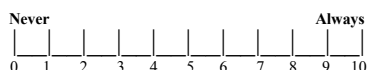
17. Others would hear me express disappointment in not producing good copy easily and quickly.



18. Others would observe that when I do write, I work with few breaks or rest periods, in intense and hurried fashion.



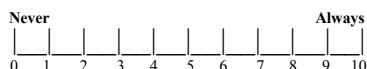
19. Others would observe that I resist taking the extra time to carry out post-writing tasks such as revising, getting informal reviews from friends, proofreading carefully.



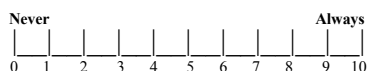
[Impatience average score _____

(perfectionism)

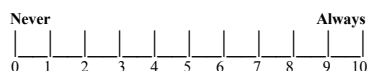
20. Others would observe me doing regular editing (e.g., stopping to correct misspellings) during the first draft.



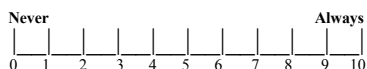
21. Others would observe me having a hard time finishing a manuscript because I persist in making refinements.



22. Others would hear me worrying that I may have overlooked important literature, or committed some incredible oversight, in writing.



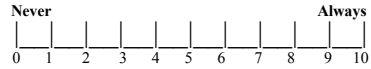
23. Others would see me struggle to include too much information in my manuscript.



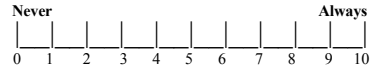
[Perfectionist average score _____

(rules)

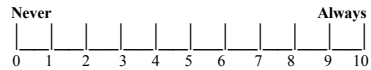
24. Others would hear my Negativism about outlining and/or observe that I don't outline before writing (or that if I do, I then ignore the outline).



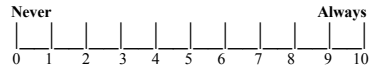
25. Others would observe that I rarely write a completely revised version of my first draft.



26. Others would observe my preference for not writing until I have a substantial period of free time available.



27. Others would hear my belief that writers work best alone, without imposing on or depending on others.



[Rules average score _____

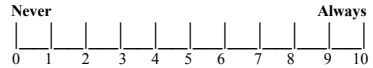
[Overall Average Score Based on the 7 COSB Section Scores

B. Checklist of Cognitions/Emotions in Blocking (CCB)

Please pause with each item and imagine that a) you are faced with a tough and important writing task, b) you are getting ready to write, c) you are alone, and d) you are talking to yourself as you prepare to write and that you occasionally stop while writing and engage in further self-talk about the writing task. Please use this scenario to check the most appropriate place on the scale in terms of what you would probably say to yourself. And, finally, please realize that each example of a self-statement is only approximate; it applies to you even if you would state it a bit differently.

(work apprehension) (likelihood I would say something like this to myself)

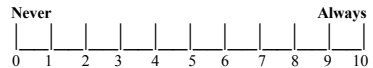
1. "I don't feel like writing." "I don't want to do this."



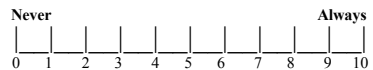
2. "This is going to be exhausting, tiring." "Writing wears me out."



3. "I have no ideas for writing."



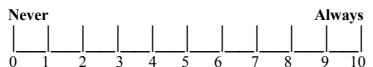
4. "Even if I do a good job, the person (or persons) who evaluates my writing may criticize it for some picky reason."



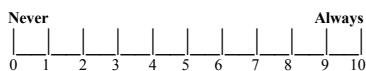
[Work apprehension average score _____

(procrastination)

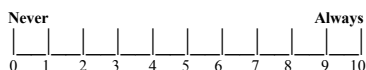
5. "I work best when I wait until the last minute." "I've always managed to get papers done under pressure."



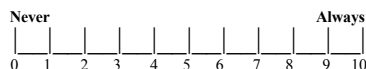
6. "I'll wait until I'm feeling more like writing." "I'll feel more like writing if I do something else first."



7. "If I just relax and think, good ideas for writing may come to me."



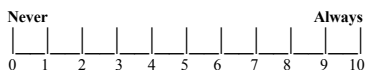
8. "I wish I hadn't agreed to write this paper," and/or "I feel annoyed with 'X' for forcing me to do this."



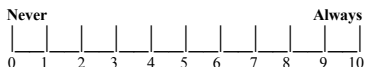
[Procrastination average score _____

(writing apprehension)

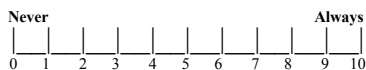
9. "I feel nervous about starting."



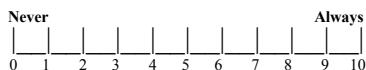
10. "I'm already exhausted and I'm only beginning," and/or "My wrist is so tight and cramped that it's hard to write."



11. "I'll bet that 'X' won't like this." "He/she may even laugh at my writing." "I'll feel like a fool."



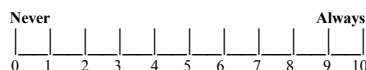
12. "I probably won't do as good a job at writing as my peers would." "I just don't match up to what others can do."



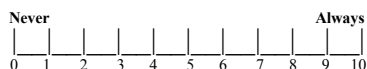
[Writing apprehension average score _____

(dysphoria)

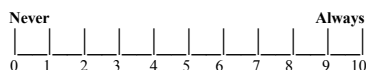
13. "I feel depressed." "This makes me feel so sad I could cry." "This makes me feel really helpless."



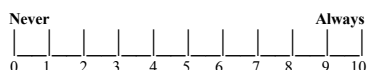
14. "I am panicking." "I may be losing control." "I may not be able to catch my breath." "I'm going to be too sick to write."



15. "This is a stupid writing assignment." "Most published writing is pointless." "I have nothing original or worthwhile to say." "I'm never going to be a good writer."



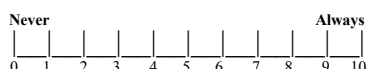
16. "No matter how well I do, there are a few people who will deliberately discredit my writing."



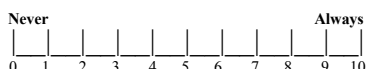
[Dysphoria average score _____

(impatience)

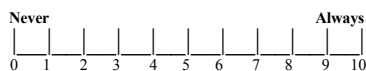
17. "I'm not working fast enough." "I've got too much to do and too little time." "I need to make up for lost time."



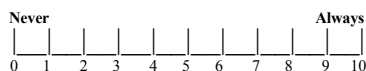
18. "If I were working efficiently, writing would come more easily, in more finished form."



19. "Once I get started, I like to keep working as long as I can." "If I stop for a break, I might lose my train of thought."



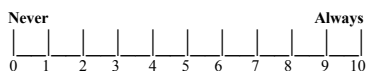
20. "I'd like to revise (or show my manuscript to friends, or proof more carefully) when I'm finished, but I'm too busy."



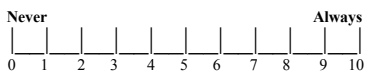
Impatience average score _____

(perfectionism)

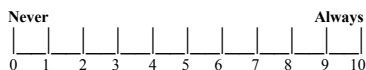
21. "I'm not comfortable going on with my first draft unless I stop to correct errors."



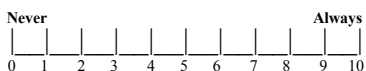
22. "No matter how long I've worked on a paper I like to keep revising and perfecting, even after I suspect the paper is 'good enough.'"



23. "What if I've overlooked something, missed a reference?" "What if someone else has already written a similar paper that I don't know about?"



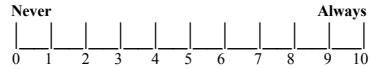
24. "Once I've gone to the trouble to read an article, I can't stand to leave it out of my review section."



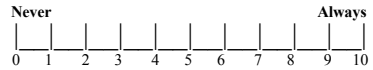
[Perfectionism average score _____

(rules)

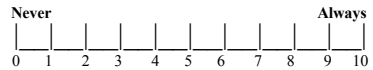
25. "I hate to outline." "I don't need outlines."



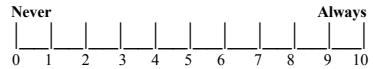
26. "I like to wait until I have an inspiration or a clear idea of what I'm going to say."



27. "I can't write unless I can set aside a large period of time when I have nothing else to do."



28. "I like to write in private, without having to rely on help from others."



[Rules average score _____

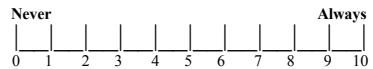
[Overall Average CCB Score

C. Survey of Social Skills in Writing (SSSW)

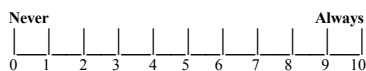
Please check the extent with which you would engage in the following activities when engaged in a tough and important writing task. (Please note that on this questionnaire, the scoring labels alternate.)

(work apprehension)

1. I would begin by thinking of ways to involve other people as helpers as coauthors, as sources for ideas and inspiration, etc.



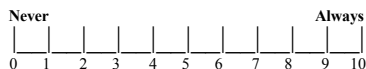
2. I would write for myself instead of a specific, imagined audience, at least initially.



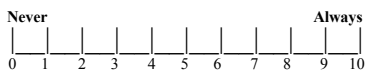
[Work apprehension average score _____

(procrastination)

3. I like to set up a schedule, to work around other people who are writing.



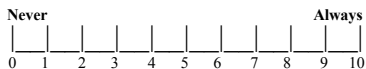
4. I tend to resent people who try to help me with my writing, especially if they're pushy.



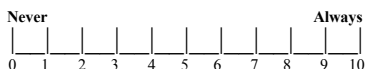
Procastination average score _____

(writing apprehension)

5. I think it's best not to discuss my writing problems with others.



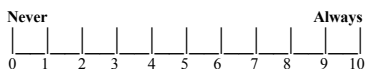
6. I believe that my writing problems are unique to me—that few if any other people suffer in similar ways.



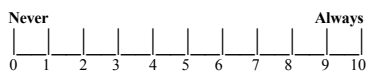
[Writing apprehension average score _____

(dysphoria)

7. My friends take an active interest in my writing and feel free to offer support and criticism.



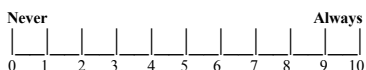
8. I tend to see criticisms of my writing as personal attacks.



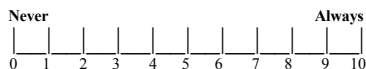
[Dysphoria average score _____

(impatience)

9. I try to place as much importance on post-writing tasks (e.g., casual reviews by friends, revising and resubmitting) as on the original writing.



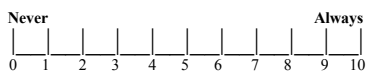
10. I resist the temptation to ask for opinions, etc., before submitting a paper because I'm simply too busy.



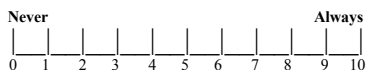
[Impatience average score _____

(perfectionism)

11. I find it easy to suppose that others, even friends, will think less of me if they see an example of my poor or erroneous writing.



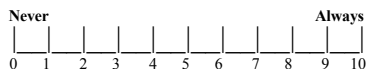
12. I tend to believe that my writing must be more thoroughgoing and polished than that of my peers.



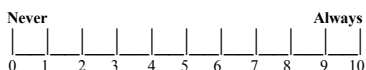
[Perfectionism average score _____

(rules)

13. I tend to suspect that most people have little to say and, thus, might be better off not writing.



14. I tend to believe that other, less experienced writers, can be helpful collaborators in my own writing projects.



[Rules average score _____

Overall Average SSSW Score

Scoring

Proceed from the most general to the most specific scoring while considering what the scores mean.

Begin by adding up scores in each of the seven component sections of each of the three questionnaires. Where, for example, a component section on rules (CCB) has four questions, the average score is determined by . . .

- a. adding the total (the maximum = 40) and
- b. dividing the total by 4 (the maximum = 10)

Then, add the component scores *within* a questionnaire (e.g., CCB) and compute the overall average for that questionnaire (or modality). All questionnaires have seven components, so the average score = the total score divided by seven.

Overall blocking score. Enter the average scores for each questionnaire (i.e., modality) here:

COSB

CCB

SSSW

And then enter the average of the three scores here:

Overall
Blocking Mean
Score

Interpretation

Overall scores provide a general index of how serious blocking tendencies and problems are relative to other academicians. Preliminary tests with these questionnaires suggest this guide to interpretation:

Score

Interpretation

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| 0 - 2.5..... | minor problems typical of people already writing productively (i.e., not blocked) |
| 2.6 - 4.5..... | moderate problems usually more associated with inefficient and somewhat painful writing than with more disruptive blocks |
| 4.6 - 7.0..... | serious problems; often predictive of disruptive blocks that recur |
| 7.1 - 10.0..... | blocking often associated with chronic psychological problems such as depression and writing phobias |

An unusually high score cautions against quick and easy solutions; it suggests that other, perhaps psychological, problems may need attention. It also warns about probabilities of relapses occurring, even when unblocking seems well under way. If your score is unusually low (and *if* you've been forthright in answering), it can mean that you may be able to move more quickly through initial strategies of unblocking to stages emphasizing painless and successful writing.

But first, you can profit in learning more about specific factors that contribute to your blocking.

Questionnaire scores. Next are modalities of blocking. You've already taken a look at the extent to which you evidence blocking on each of the three questionnaires. Reenter your scores from the preceding section here in terms of . . .

1. your overt behavior (COSB average score)
2. your cognitive and emotional responses
(CCB average score).....
3. your social behavior (SSSW average score).....

The point of this reanalysis is simple. It checks to see if you express blocking equally in the three modalities. Here's how to interpret your kind of imbalance, if any:

1. **Relatively high score on COSB:** This third most common form of imbalance suggests something positive; you may be unusually good about letting others know you're blocking. But, on the other hand, you may not be fully in touch with internal aspects of blocking such as your self-talk and your feelings.
2. **Relatively high score on CCB:** This second most common form of imbalance has its pluses, notably the possibility that you are already aware of internal events that help block you. It also suggests that you may need to be more open in complaining about blocks.
3. **Relatively high score on SSSW:** This far and away most common form of imbalance points out an ignored factor in blocking. Many blockers are too private about their writing, too reluctant to impose on friends for help with writing, and too unsociable in establishing professional connections that help ensure success in writ-

ing. A disproportionately high score here, then, means that your blocking may be especially affected in this common way.

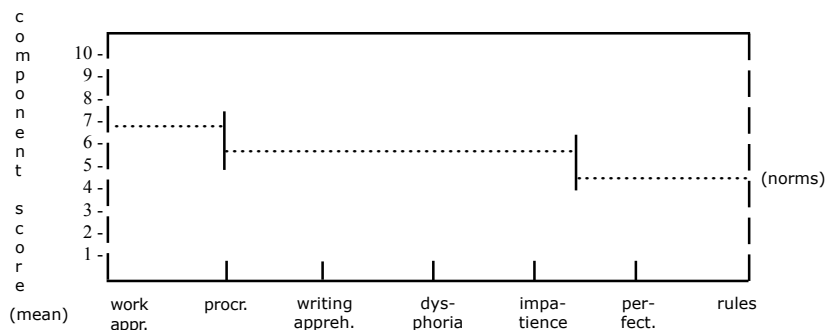
Component scores. Finally, you can identify specific components in your blocking by summing scores across the three questionnaires and entering their means/averages here:

1. work apprehension
2. procrastination
3. writing apprehension
4. dysphoria
5. impatience
6. perfectionism.....
7. rules

If you've calculated correctly, the entered scores should fall in a range of 0 - 10. Preliminary samples of professionals seeking help for blocking and related writing problems produced these norms:

item(s)	median score
#1	6.8
#2-6	5.5
#7	4.4

So, if your score falls below the median, or norm, of other blockers, you score below average for that blocking component. A profile chart makes the task easier. Simply reenter your component scores here:



Then connect the points with a line to provide a profile of your scores.

This profile can be an important basis of comparison in the long run. Ideally, your profile then should be lower and more uniform. If it isn't, perhaps critical changes in behaving, thinking, feeling, and socializing as a writer need to be made.

Then, as now, it will help to know something about the nature of the components, of how each acts to block, and what high scores mean.

Application

1. **Work apprehension:** This most popular accompaniment of blocking necessitates a reminder of something writers have all heard elsewhere: correlation doesn't prove causation. In fact, work apprehension is also typical among people who already write with apparent ease. Most people, even unblocked people, like to complain about writing and suppose that it is unnaturally hard work.

If work apprehension doesn't really help identify blockers, why pay attention to it? Because it probably does in fact contribute to blocking by making writing seem so difficult and unreasonable. And because a goal in helping blocked (and unblocked) writers is to get them to the point where writing is painless, even enjoyable—the ultimate criterion of unblocking.

You can live with a high work apprehension score. It alone prob-

ably won't keep you blocked. But, you don't need to.

2. **Procrastination:** This is a vital factor in blocking. It blocks in ways already familiar, by putting off writing so that it either a) doesn't get done at all, or b) gets delayed until the writing cannot be done well or comfortably. Procrastination also works in more subtle and undermining ways. Procrastinators seek help for their "bad habits," they're good at enlisting the aid of concerned others, but then they tend to reject or undermine that help.

This means that a high score in procrastination requires special efforts to work at two levels—first, at managing your time more effectively; second, at monitoring temptations to feel you're being forced to do something you don't want to do.

When I work directly with procrastinators, I say something like this:

- "Look, I know you're uncomfortable. You're probably feeling that I'm taking too much control, that you're not sure you want to do this. But let's be sure we're in touch with something else: First, all we're talking about is changing your habits related to writing, not your whole lifestyle. Second, what we're doing relates to the very thing you've already admitted you want help with—not getting enough writing done."

3. **Writing apprehension:** A high score here means that nervousness and fearfulness get in the way of writing. Writing apprehension blocks just as surely and as commonly as does procrastination. It works via fears of failure and public embarrassment, and with less identifiable sources of anxiety that can even produce panic.

Writing apprehension, despite its pervasive role in blocking, offers excellent prospects for improvement. Consider its parallel to a more familiar form of apprehension, public speaking anxiety. In both cases, sufferers benefit mainly from exposure—getting in there and discovering that it's not as bad as imagined—and from developing the confidence associated with learning ways of transforming anxiety into enthusiastic, competent performances.

4. **Dysphoria:** A high score here means that problems of well-being are contributing to blocking. Writers are the best judges of how situational or how chronic the problem is. When it's chronic, with severe depression or suspiciousness that others are deliberately undermining their attempts, writers should seek professional help.

In my experience, simple dysphoria usually improves dramatically when writing is regular and successful and when the writer feels more competent. But, I've never seen a case of chronic depression or of debilitating problems such as phobias or suspiciousness that didn't necessitate direct, thorough going contact with a mental health professional.

5. *Impatience:* This blocking component resembles work apprehension (except that it is less common): Writers can live with it; many successful writers do. But writers don't need to.

Impatience helps block via a sense of urgency: not enough prewriting gets done (e.g., note taking, reflection, conceptual outlining) to permit the preparation that good writing demands; not enough rewriting or proofing is done to convey the writing in polished, error-free form; not enough writing gets done in comfortable, non-fatiguing fashion.

In severe form, impatience disrupts writing by making writers obsess about being hopelessly behind, feeling incapable of working fast enough or well enough to even bother trying. It does something else equally problematic: it turns into annoyance with the perceived slowness, even incompetence, of others who aren't so caught up in hurrying. People who might have helped—editors, colleagues, spouses—eventually try to avoid impatient writers because criticism, however well-intentioned, gets perceived as envy or persecution. Prognosis for working with impatience is mixed. Improvement, in my experience, depends in part on a willingness to learn new habits of writing (e.g., working in regular, but moderate sessions), of tolerating temporary incompleteness and slow but steady productivity, and of interacting constructively with audiences including significant others and editors. Still, some writers, perhaps because they are constitutionally A-types,⁴ show moderate change in impatience while excelling at all other aspects of a writing program.

6. *Perfectionism:* Internal critics provide most of the demand for maladaptive perfectionism. Its source, like most internal voices that tell us what to do for our own good, can be traced to authority figures, especially teachers and mentors.

Perfectionism blocks when it occurs too early in the writing process, while the writer is preparing or still generating preliminary drafts. Perfectionism, with some limits, works to advantage in refining the

last draft and in proofreading. Used prior to that, however, it disrupts momentum (e.g., when stopping to check accuracy), it demands too much to be managed reasonably, and it disheartens by reminding writers that they should strive for originality, greatness, perfection (of course), and similarly irrational goals while beginning a project.

The prognosis, here again, is mixed. A few writers, in my experience, refuse to abandon their maladaptive styles of perfectionism, supposing that doing so is tantamount to abandoning civilized standards of excellence. In this regard, perfectionism resembles shyness⁵ in that its possessors tend to be nice people who are closet elitists.

Perfectionists can learn to laugh at their perfectionism and to put it in its proper place—toward the end of the writing process. They do so, at least in the short run, by confronting their internal critic and by writing around him or her.

7. Rules: This relatively uncommon component can be just as troublesome as any other. As its name implies, it involves rigid ways of dealing with writing, ways difficult to abandon until shown maladaptive. Rules interfere with efficient, painless writing when they incorporate an unfailing refusal to, say, outline. And they interrupt when their rigidity conflicts with the inherent demands of writing for flexible, recursive approaches.⁶

Maladaptive rules, in my experience, offer the best prognosis of the seven blocking components. Once demonstrated to be inefficient and unnecessary, they are eventually abandoned by all but a few writers.

Notes

¹Daly, J. A. (1985). Writing apprehension. In M. Rose (Ed.), *When a writer can't write*. New York: Guilford.

²Daly, J. A., & Miller, M. D. (1975). The empirical development of an instrument to measure writing apprehension. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 9, 242-249.

³Boice, R. (1985). Cognitive components of blocking. *Written Communication*, 2, 91-104.

⁴Friedman, M., & Rosenman, R. H. (1974). *Type A behavior and your heart*. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest.

⁵Zimbardo, P. G. (1977). *Shyness*. New York: Jove/HBJ.

⁶Rose, M. (1984). *Writer's block: The cognitive dimension*. Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

