OVERCOMING WRITER'S BLOCK

Your desk is covered with pieces of information that you want to put into your business plan. You've had your coffee. Your phone is off the hook. But you spend the next 15 minutes staring out the window . . . unable to get going.

YOU'RE NOT ALONE. Most people experience some form of writer's block when faced with a particularly important or large-scale job.

Why? All writers—whether they are conscious of it or not—go through five stages when they write: pre-writing, writing, revising, editing and proofreading. Problems arise when the writer tries to do all of the steps at once. Here's a look at each of them:

PRE-WRITING This is the stage where you decide what you're going to say. You may write or review your notes, assemble facts, organize your thoughts, establish your goals or draft an outline. The more you have to say, the more important this stage is. Generally, the more time you spend on this step, the less time you will spend in the revising stage.

WRITING After you know in broad terms what you need to say, you can start saying it. This is the stage where you just get your thoughts down on paper. Resist the temptation to try to say everything perfectly. Don't correct grammar or punctuation. Don't stop after every sentence to critique yourself. Just keep going.

REVISING When you're done, you can start revising for clarity. Rework your sentences until you are sure that your reader will understand them. Then take a break from the project. At the very least, return a phone call or stand up and stretch. In the next stage, you'll need to switch gears dramatically, and it will be much easier if you bring a fresh perspective.

EDITING This is the most crucial—and most difficult—stage of the writing process. At this point, you should take a very objective look at your business plan and ask yourself:

- Does it say what it should say?
- Is it convincing?
- Do I need to include more information? Less?
- Have I supported all of my most important statements?
- Is it well organized?
- Is it readable?
- Is the tone appropriate? Is the style appropriate?

PROOFREADING All that is left now is to look for typographical errors, minor grammatical errors, and to make sure that the business plan is spaced correctly on the page. It helps if someone else can take a look. Keep in mind that minor errors could undermine the impact of the whole business plan.

The most important lessons of this approach are: Don't correct yourself while you write, and don't wait for "the perfect opening sentence" to come to you.

Speaking from my own experience as a professional writer (who hates to write), this process approach makes a lot of sense. I consciously go through the steps about 90 percent of the time. I taught this method of writing at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and about 75 percent of my students said that it saved them time and was especially helpful when they had tight deadlines.

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