

3 Ways to Shake Off Writer's Block

How to ignore the intimidation of a blank slate.

BY KATHLEEN FORDYCE

You've agreed to give a speech either at work, at a social occasion or at your club meeting. Now comes the hard part—getting started.

As a professional writer, I often have people come to me for help with writing. Despite their great ideas and depth of knowledge, they feel unable to start.

Anton Vanterpool, DTM, of Alexandria, Virginia, is an information technology specialist with the United States Army. A Toastmaster for more than 25 years, he struggles with writer's block.

“Get something down on that paper. Get those fingers moving on that keyboard. Good is better than nothing.”

— Joan Detz, author of *How to Write & Give a Speech*

“For me, it's having a lot of ideas that I want to put out there but I can only put out three or so at most,” he says.

Tamara Guirado, a writing teacher and coach in New Orleans, Louisiana, believes that starting is usually the hardest part of any creative endeavor. “The blank page is intimidating because our writing monster (i.e., the ego) steps in and tells us a bunch of false stories about our abilities, our worth and our ideas,” she says. “The monster is so loud that we can't hear our creative voice. The fact is, we have a fire hose full of creative force at all times; we just aren't always aware of it because this giant monster is stepping on the hose.”

The next time you get stuck when trying to write a speech, consider these tips:

1 Start with a list.

At this point, don't worry about crafting the perfect opening, and don't stress over transitions or get overwhelmed by details. Simply start by listing your ideas. Don't censor yourself.

Joan Detz, a speaking coach and author of *How to Write & Give a Speech*, agrees. “Get something down on that paper,” she says. “Get those fingers moving on that keyboard. Good is better than nothing.”

Toyinda Wilson-Long, a new Toastmaster in West Lafayette, Indiana, thinks of it in terms of a brain dump. “Even if I just start by writing words down, I go back and try to think from there,” she says.

2 Imagine you are talking to your best friend.

It is tempting when preparing your speech to include big words or jargon to try to sound smart when speaking in front of a group. But this often leads to a bulky, flat and memorized speech that ultimately is less engaging and more difficult to deliver.

Instead, during the brainstorming process, imagine you will be delivering your speech to a group of friends. This helps you get your creative juices flowing (because who struggles when sharing ideas with close friends?), and helps you develop your own authentic voice. The end result will be a more compelling, relatable and conversational speech.

Still stuck? Call a friend and talk about the main messages you hope to convey in your speech, and take notes.

3 Brainstorm for 10 minutes.

Don't spend hours stressing over a speech. I find it more productive to work in short, timed spurts because it forces me to focus. Write out your ideas. Once you have them on paper, it becomes easier to see themes and organize your speech. After 10 minutes, see what you have. If you

are still struggling, take a break and come back to it later.

“If I find that if I am not feeling the flow, I go do something else for a while,” says Laura Hepler, ACB, ALB, from Washington state. “Sometimes you just need to clear your head.”

Detz, the speaking coach and author, points out one difference between a professional and a non-professional speechwriter: The professional starts no matter what. “We do not expect it to be perfect when we type those initial words or sentences,” she says. “We will perfect it during the process but we know that we cannot just sit there.”

Now, start writing. ■

KATHLEEN FORDYCE is a freelance writer in New York. Follow her on Twitter @KathleenFordyce or visit www.LiveLaughWrite.com.

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Still struggling with writing your speech? Author and speech coach Joan Detz offers these quick, timed exercises to get your creative juices flowing:

- Search for quotations that are related to the key words in your speech. (5–10 minutes)
- Look up synonyms for your key words in a thesaurus. (2 minutes)
- Email a close friend and ask for their uncensored thoughts on your topic. Use them as a sounding board. (2 minutes)
- Go to the nearest window and look at the farthest point, where the sky meets the horizon. “It's very calming; it's very tranquil and can often just free up your mind,” says Detz.