Revista Interamericana de Psicología/Interamerican Journal of Psychology
2002, Vol. .36, No. 1 & 2, pp.. 63-79



# *Overcoming Researcher's Block Symptoms: Creative Strategies for Research*

**Elizabeth Valarino**[1]
**Guillermo Yáber O**
*Universidad Simón Bolívar, Venezuela*

**Abstract**

Among the symptoms of the All But Research (ABR) syndrome, are researcher's block for thinking, creating or writing. These occur when writing up a research project, thesis, dissertation or faculty-promotion report over long periods of time. In this article we analyze researcher's block symptoms and describe specific intervention activities to overcome them. We delineate the Research Project Management System which includes techniques to increase the flow of ideas and verbal fluency using creative processes. These techniques are combined with strategies for planning, systematic practice, time and tasks management, continuous supervision and personal and group consultation. Its application with students and faculty showed an increase in research productivity both in terms of products and processes.

**Compendio**

Entre los síntomas del síndrome Todo Menos Investigación (TMI), encontramos el bloqueo del investigador/a para pensar, crear y escribir. Este surge cuando elaboramos proyectos de investigación que requieren largos períodos de tiempo, como las tesis, las disertaciones y los trabajos de ascenso. En este artículo analizamos los síntomas de los bloqueos y especificamos las estrategias para superarlos. Describimos el Sistema de Gerencia de Proyectos, que utiliza técnicas creativas para incrementar el flujo de ideas y la fluencia verbal, combinadas con estrategias de planificación, práctica sistemática, manejo del tiempo y tareas, supervisión continua y asesoría personal y de grupo. La aplicación de este sistema con estudiantes y profesores/as, mostró un incremento de productividad en la investigación tanto en términos de productos como del proceso.

**Key words: Creativity; Writers' block; ABR syndrome; Research**
**Palabras clave: Creatividad; Bloqueo del escritor o escritora; Síndrome TMI; Investigación**

[1] Correspondence and requests for reprints should be sent to Elizabeth Valarino, Apartado 47052, Caracas, 1041-A. Venezuela. e-mail: evalarino@usb.ve, evalarino@cantv.

Research conducted in several Venezuelan universities revealed that only 12% of students who entered master's and doctoral programs finished thesis and dissertation requirements after the first nine years and only 0.5% of students finished in the expected time frame established by academic regulations (Valarino, 1996; Valarino, Cemborain, & Cemborain,1996). Studies in other countries like the U.S.A., Mexico, Canada and Uruguay corroborate this general pattern with theses and dissertation supervision (Dillon & Malott, 1981; García, 1987; García & Garmendia, 1989; Malott, 1995; Malott, Garmendia & Griesser, 1989; Parsons, 1995; Salas & Gómez, 1995). Faculty share the same experience. In Brasil, Colombia, México, and Venezuela, faculty members need to carry out research and write on a regular basis, yet very few do so (Klubitscho, 1986; Valarino, Meneses, Yáber, & Pujol, 1996). This need is strengthened in Venezuelan universities were faculty members must write a written research report to be promoted. Consequently, they remain at the lowest levels of the university hierarchy and few research papers are produced (Valarino & Yáber, 1995b).

This problem, the result of multiple factors, has been defined as the TMI (*Todo Menos Investigación*) syndrome or "All But Research Syndrome" (ABR):

> ABR is the group of problems, impediments, obstacles, attitudes, feelings and inadequate behaviors, skills deficiencies or lack of knowledge, faced by students, faculty and professionals, when they approach the task of designing, planning, developing, writing, supervising, and publishing research or long-term project reports (Valarino, 1994, p. 153; Author's translation).

The main symptoms associated with the researcher include: (a) difficulties structuring time for tasks and their completion; (b) procrastination; (c) isolation; (d) focus on external control; (e) low academic self-esteem; (f) weak personality; and (g) difficulty thinking, creating and writing (Valarino,1997a).

Researcher's block is constituted by a group of impediments and feelings that inhibit free and fluent expression of ideas on

paper or with a word processor. Some of the most powerful reasons for this "silence" are the following: (a) fear of criticism, (b) fear of failure, (c) perfectionism, (d) procrastination, (e) neuroticism, (d) adherence to rigid and non-functional rules, (e) inefficient working habits, (f) impatience, (g) inadequate cognitions and self-verbalizations, (h) lack of "drive" (i) aversion to writing, (j) deficiency of skills, and (k) inhibition in creating and producing original ideas (Boice, 1993; Oliver, 1982; Rose, 1980; Valarino, 2000).

The task of writing is rarely accompanied by supervision or a helping process. Very little has been done to assist those who fail to write fluently because it is believed that writing fluently is an expresion of practical intelligence that cannot be taught. Thus, faculty and tutors expect students to know how to write.

Blocking may frequently surface when the task is developed over a long period of time, as in the case of research writing. When facing critical situations and frustration, inevitably, defense mechanisms are activated to alleviate anxiety. The most inefficient one, however, is blocking. Writers stop writing yet the state of anxiety continues. Blocking may occur because ideas do not come to mind, or are unclear; the writer does not know how to express ideas or lacks the necessary writing skills. At the same time, blocks are used to justify procrastination. Skinner (1981) proposed that writing blocks are products of extinction and suppression; people generally manage the writing process under the most aversive conditions, such as deadlines, tiredness, and pressure.

Boice (1993) analyzes writing blocks according to the "Four Components Model" (IRSS Model), consisting of: (a) involvement, (b) regime (task management), (c) social networking, and (d) self-management. In his view, writing blocks are due to "a failure of involvement in writing as an act of discovery, a failure of regimen" (p. 44), a failure to become organized, and a failure to be consistent . He affirms that blocking is also caused by a failure to manage negativism and pessimism that occurred when the student was learning to write in school. Finally, writing blocks may result because writing is a solitary effort, where criticism and rejection occur after the process is

concluded and the product is exposed to evaluation by others. One of the most important studies carried out with more than 5,000 examples of testimonials indicated six cognitive components of blocking: (a) task apprehension, (b) procrastination, (c) impatience, (d) perfectionism, (e) anxiety, and (f) rigid rules (Boice, 1985).

Boice and Johnson (1984) conducted a study with 685 faculty at New York State University. Most participants (71%) reported the use of non-systematic methods and waste of time as important restrictions to write. Fifty seven percent wrote moderately (two to ten hours per week), 60% wrote in several places, 82% did it at different times of the day; and 63% did it due to external pressures. In relation to how they wrote, 34% isolated themselves; 21% wrote depending on mood, and 20% when inspired. Moreover, 57% reported that they wrote several drafts. Initial anxiety was not a problem for 37% of the sample. With regard to faculty publications, in the three years preceding this study, 37% published three to six articles, 18% seven to eight, and 24% had more than ten. A correlational study with this sample found that the best predictor of writing was time spent on the task; time devoted to writing. Many behaviors commonly associated with writing did not correlate with productivity. An important conclusion derived from these results is that faculty members have failed to develop appropriate writing habits and do not search for optimal conditions for this task. In academic environments, in addition, there are few systematic ways of learning how to write. It is a skill usually learned by trial and error or by consulting specialized books. The main variables associated with writers´s block manifest themselves in the previously mentioned symptoms.

## RESEARCH-WRITER'S BLOCK SYMPTOMS

### *Fear of Criticism*

Fear of criticism is an unpleasant emotion that inhibits writing behavior (Boice, 1993; Burka & Yuen, 1992). It is thought that blocking is due to the expectation of recurring criticism from authority figures: the research tutor or supervisor, academic

authorities and editorial committees. Acceptance of criticism may be painful, and people tend to exaggerate "expected" punishment. This fear inhibits writing without giving the writer the opportunity to demonstrate such behavior. Negative expectations exercise internal pressures and trigger problems, as for instance, procrastination and lack of motivation to write and submit reports for publication.

*Fear of Failure*

Fear of failure is another unpleasant emotion that prevents people from writing (Boice, 1993). The perception of self-efficacy resulting from early experiences related to the fear of writing is important. People tend to be over-demanding in their goals and behave impatiently. Fear of failure could originate during childhood with teachers or models that failed to facilitate learning to write, confidence in the writing process, and acquisition of useful writing rules. Fear to write is reality based. Writing is risky. Manuscripts can be rejected, specially in academic, literary, and editorial circles. At universities, authors' fear of failure are based on the possibility of public display of lack of abilities and errors and, consequently, of rejection. Fear of failure of those who want to publish their research studies is related to criticisms and intimidations of blocking agents, such as reviewers of manuscripts.

*Perfectionism*

Perfectionists set unreachable, unrealistic goals and have great expectations of originality and significance, along with a vaguely planned project (Boice, 1993; Burka & Yuen, 1992). They select, for example, research topics that can hardly be carried out in two years, where errors are not allowed, and where they have great doubts about being able to reach the level they or their supervisors desire. Additionally, they dedicate too much time to improve their writings without submitting them for evaluation.

*Procrastination*

Procrastination, delaying the initiation of a task, is strongly associated with writing blocks and with uncompleted research

studies (Ellis & Knaus, 1977). Many people, to a greater or lesser extent, including writers and researches, suffer and struggle with procrastination to different degrees. Procrastination is related to: (a) lack of or little trust; (b) feeling overloaded; (c) distortion of time perception; (d) incapacity to produce timely results; (e) lack of structure and work habits; (f) circumventing tasks; (g) thinking about or doing other things before beginning to write ("the lion's dance"); (h) blaming; (i) over-ambitious goals; (j) rationalization; (k) illusory hopes; and (l) fatigue, among others. Finishing a dissertation, thesis or research report is conceived within a lengthy context (four to six years); thus, the perceived impact of delays in writing seems insignificant. This situation favors systematic procrastination.

*Neuroticism*

Writing has been popularly linked with a personality disorder. It is unclear if the writing task is unhealthy as it causes blocking or because it attracts unhealthy (Boice, 1993; Ellis & Knaus, 1977), unsociable, neurotic and atypical people. Nevertheless, writing is associated with long working sessions in the midst of social isolation, total immersion, irritability and altered mental states, reflected in dreaming, depression, maniacal states, and in personal and family negligence (Holden, 1987). However, there is no data showing that faculty or students working on their research studies are so problematic that they cannot write their reports.

*Addiction to Rigid and Non-Functional Rules*

In addition to the dysfunctional characteristics already described, some writers bind themselves to impractical writing rules (Boice, 1993; Rose, 1980; Valarino, 2000). Examples of these include: "I have to have a lot of time to write;" "to elaborate a draft is not very practical," "I must wait for inspiration or the appearance of the muses to begin writing;" "all writing should be original;" and "writing can not be learned." These rules are strongly internalized by the writer and impede opening up to new ideas as well as to decreasing fluency when writing.

*Bad Working Habits*

Faculty and students spend long periods of time studying, preparing classes, and reading. Obviously they are able to remain on task for long periods of time. However, when the task is writing research reports, they show less perseverance. They procrastinate more frequently when writing than when they engage in any other academic task. The lack of appropriate writing habits favors inertia (Pardo, 1991; Valarino, 2000).

*Impatience*

Some researchers want to produce the final version of a report in a single writing session. Such individuals fail to understand that long-term projects-- dissertations, theses, faculty promotion research studies, or research reports --require multiple drafts and daily writing in short periods of time, without the pressure of unrealistic aspirations of finishing in one day (Valarino, 2000).

*Inadequate Cognitions and Self-Verbalizations*

Inadequate cognitions and self-verbalizations contribute to the development of anxiety and, consequently, block writing. Writers may tend to underestimate their own abilities, task importance and the writing environment; subsequently, they may think that their productivity will decrease. This situation reveals low self-esteem. These individuals have learned to generate negative thoughts and find it difficult to exchange them for more positive ones. When facing crisis situations, it is difficult for such writers to deal with uncertainties and negative feelings. They neither explore if such feelings have been generalized to other areas of their lives, nor how their self-esteem has been compromised. When these individuals fail to keep their research, academic, and professional purposes and objectives in focus, they stop working for their academic goals (Valarino, 2000).

*Lack of "Drive" for Writing*

Some people complain about not having the initial "drive" to write. For them, the "drive" to write is equated with spontaneity and inspiration; the belief is that both elements are difficult to achieve in a planned way. Additionally, many writers report that

without external pressure they are unable to write, while others affirm that they lack the habit of writing regularly. Absence of "drive" to write is also related to low motivation and productivity during the writing task (Valarino, 2000).

*Aversion to Write*

Aversion to the writing process can extend, in some cases, to aversion toward carrying out research and publishing research reports (Valarino,1994). It is one of the reasons many students finish their course work but not their thesis or dissertations. It can be based on the belief that it is necessary to have special abilities to write well; or on previous experiences of rejection of their written work.

*Deficiency of Writing Skills*

Writing is hardly a mechanical skill, like transcribing to a machine or a word processor. It demands focusing on tasks that require, sometimes, the loss of self-control to allow the free flow of ideas. Writing skills are different from the skills needed to listen or to speak. The writer must differentiate between main and secondary ideas, precision and ambiguity, repetition and conciseness, elegance, and of course, creativity and originality. On the other hand, few venues exist where writing skills are taught. Many believe that writers are born and not "made." Although there are many workshops and books about writing, it is disturbing to find that writing-skill classes and workshops to teach abilities to improve levels of thought, are not offered regularly in our universities, which would yield unsuspected benefits for writing (Valarino, 2000).

*Difficulties in Creating and Being Original*

Creativity has been defined in several ways (Guilford, 1950; Holden, 1987). It has been considered a capacity or an aptitude to solve problems or to create products. It has also been defined as a process that can be learned and developed. Some characteristics of creativity include: (a) the relationship and novel linking of parts, elements, processes or attributes, and (b) a product that reflects originality, change, and novelty. Some of the

factors that have been used to analyze creativity are: (a) fluency (number of ideas, elements, or words created in a certain period of time); (b) flexibility (number of different categories created to solve a problem); (c) originality (novelty or unique character of the thing created); and (d) elaboration (level of detail of the thing created). These factors are present during the research process and are also part of the evaluation criteria of a dissertation, thesis, research report, or a faculty promotion research study.

Originality is one of the components of creativity and, at the same time, one of the requirements for dissertations, theses, and research studies. Universities demand original contributions to the existing body of knowledge. However, there is little agreement on what constitutes an original contribution. Originality has been measured through novelty. It is exhibited in a problem or topic definition, in its focus and development, in the methodology used to solve it, is its technical conception, discoveries, utility or necessity, scientific and contemporary relevance, explanations of relationships with theory, and suggestions of new related problems or of the subject to be investigated (Valarino, 1994).

Originality is also related to problem definition, problem focusing, and generation of a wide variety of possible solutions. In research, hypotheses are the first attempt to find possible solutions. Originality is demonstrated when the researcher develops relationships, integrates different parts in a whole, relates several ideas, formulates conclusions and develops new topics for future research (Valarino, 1994)

The research topic is one of the components of scientific research and dissertations where originality is required. There is great fear and anxiety among researchers that the research topic fails to meet this requirement or that other persons might copy it. Fear and anxiety decrease their identification with the project. Many students have to "fish" around for an original topic for their dissertation and thesis without the experience and, additionally, have to work with faculty who do not help. For all these reasons research writers´ self-concept as related to creativity is one of vulnerability, especially if they lack strategies to remove blocks for creative writing.

Despite all these problems, very few academic programs help research writers to deal with writing blocks or strategies for developing creative writing skills. Teaching research methodology includes objectives linked to the acquisition of knowledge, methodological skills and applications of the scientific method, with special emphasis on the analysis of statistical data, but do not include strategies to overcome writing blocks or creative writing skills.

Blocking can be controlled. Almost all researchers have experienced it. A short break may help to eliminate obstacles to write, but it must not be too long, because it could affect the motivation to write; brief periods of rest may allow for energy and creativity to resurface. When negative self-fulfillment prophecies about work are recalled, it is important to remember that the thesis or dissertation is only the first of a series of projects that individuals are expected to create throughout their professional life span. During crisis periods, researchers could consult with advisers or therapists to express problems that burden them. However, therapeutic help is only required if anxiety and related symptoms are very intense. Treatments or strategies to overcome blockage and to favor research writing are also applicable to other stages of the creation process of a research project; these strategies are related to the development of thinking abilities.

Teaching about research, in which hemispheric integration strategies are applied, can be categorized as significant learning or learning through discovery. Recently, this new paradigm has been used in both primary and secondary education. However, in higher education, especially at the graduate level, traditional, logical, and analytic teaching is still used. In general, activities are only related to lineal and logical thought characteristic of left-hemispheric processing (Valarino, 2000). This type of thought is used in traditional seminars and tutorial meetings, when problems, results and statistical data are sequentially and logically analyzed.

Blocks to thinking, creating and writing include multiple

factors, and therefore, must not be treated as the result of an isolated factor. There are, however, many strategies to develop creativity and fluency in writers. All these strategies can be applied to the process of creating, elaborating and writing research (Logan & Logan 1980; Valarino, 1997a). Examples included are: (a) brainstorming; (b) sinectics, metaphor or analogy; (c) bionics; (d) automatism; (e) visualization; (f) fantasy; (g) humor; (h) reminiscent language techniques; (i) multisensorial learning and neurolinguistics; (j) music and speed learning; (k) meditation; (l) questioning; (m) planning and acquisition of continuous work habits; (n) skills management and social support; (o) rhetoric; and (p) self-help groups, among others. In our seminar we use humor; participants have to make jokes if they do not bring the assigned tasks. We have used metaphors to help participants write the titles of their projects and analogies to compare research problems. We use brainstorming to generate research ideas, to analyze relationships between variables as well as for analyzing results. We have also used certain music from the Baroque period (1650-1750), to overcome writing blocks, facilitate automatic writing, generate research ideas, create metaphors and for stress-reduction. Visualization has been used to help students create images to anticipate research results, to develop icons and symbols for graphic representation and to imagine success with their research project.

## A PROJECT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR RESEARCH WRITING

A System of Project Management for Research Writing was designed (García, Malott & Brethower, 1988; Valarino & Yáber, 1995a,b; 1996) using a system perspective focused on human development. It integrates cognitive and creative strategies as well as personal advice and is directed to people who participate in the elaboration and supervision of long-term projects, like research in academia. The main objective of the system is to increase researchers' productivity in terms of research products. Additional benefits include individual, organizational, and social development.

The system is scheduled as a weekly seminar, during a trimester

or a semester, directed by two faculty members whose work is to provide consultation, behavior management, supervision and assistance to record task accomplishment. In addition, a creative group provides task-support and electronic mail technology for activity control and distance-consultation (Valarino, 1996, Valarino & Yaber, 1995a). Two types of seminars have been developed, one for graduate students, and the other for faculty members from different departments who are developing research projects or writing scientific reports for publication. These experiences were conducted at the Universidad Simón Bolivar and the Universidad Central de Venezuela in Caracas, Venezuela.

Nine seminars delivered to graduate students were an integral part of their academic program. Students came from the psychology, mechanical engineering, management, telecommunications and education graduate programs, among others. They included topic selection, problem formulation and a theoretical research framework. The majority of students had not previously selected a topic, yet they were knowledgeable and had thought out possible topics in different areas. They were trained in the system and applied techniques to develop creativity, such as brainstorming, creative visualization, analogies and metaphors, bionics, neurolinguistics, inadequate cognition changing, among others. The group formulated ideas and solutions in a non-threatening and trusting atmosphere. Humor was stimulated among group members as a tool to unblock group creativity and promote task development. Writing blocks were analyzed and creative solutions were proposed. Furthermore, in individual sessions, music was used to stimulate creative thinking and visualization as well as automatic writing. This experience was conducted with the students sitting in front of a word processor where they could write drafts of their research topics.

Research tasks were supervised. Tasks were divided into small parts with a high probability of being completed within one week. Each task or activity had to yield an observable product, such as a written page, an outline, a summary of a reading, or a list of ideas; each task was assigned a grade based on time for completion. Electronic mail served to keep close communication between adviser and group members, thus creating a continuous

and total support system. Criticism and perfectionistic behaviors were reduced to a minimum, which increased writing productivity and creativity. Participants very rarely failed to complete assigned tasks. The creative power of the group to find solutions to problems appearing throughout this process and to develop products, was noticeable. The most important result --besides newly learned skills related to writing and a high degree of satisfaction with the process --was the students' capacity to establish several research topics and develop the first part of the thesis project. (Valarino, 2000; Valarino & Yáber, 1995b). For example, we ran one seminar with 10 graduate students of the Masters' program in mechanical engineering during a trimester. Productivy was measured by the percentage of accomplished objectives, weekly time spent on the project, number of pages written each week and the total number of written pages for each project. The group attained between 87 and 100% of the planned objectives each week. They spent between 13 and 21 hours each week on their projects. Final reports ranged from 14 to 90 pages. Each final page required an average of six hours.

The Faculty´s seminar was developed using the same basic structure. Faculty met once a week. The diversity of their disciplines, research topics, and diverse stages in the project elaboration provided great stimulation to the group. Seminar advisors were incorporated as active members by participating with their projects. This situation favored process development and served to model appropriate research behaviors and creative leadership. Since 1995 we had delivered 6 seminars for the faculty. For example one seminar with 8 participants lasted 17 weeks (Meneses, Valarino & Yaber, 1998a). Productivy was measured using the following perfomance measures: percentage of accomplished objectives, weekly time spent on the project, number of pages written each week and the total number of written pages for each project. The group attained between 63 and 84% of the planned objectives. They spent between 39 and 134 hours on their projects. Final reports ranged from 5 to 76 pages. Each final page required an average of 1.96 hours. The synergy of the group was the biggest motivation to stay during the 17 weeks even when group members had other demanding tasks.

Overall results suggest the System's effectiveness for helping students and faculty in their scientific writing and the culmination of research projects on time (Meneses, Valarino & Yaber, 1998b; Valarino, 2000; Valarino & Yaber; 1995a).

## CONCLUSIONS

Writing blocks among researchers are a problem caused by multiple factors. To solve this problem more research, resources and energies are necessary. Difficulties in thinking, creating and writing, and obstacles associated with these activities, are the most important symptoms that force researchers to quit research projects. The absence of programs to develop skills to prevent these problems is evident. There is a need to develop research policies to generate success and clarify responsibilities of people involved in the research process. Members of academic organizations should consider their responsibility in causing blocking symptoms in their faculty and students due to outdated research processes and policies. Higher education institutions are called to create mechanisms to help diagnose symptoms providing information about the problem, and to aid their personnel in dealing with it. Symptoms need to be viewed as problems to be solved, challenges to be confronted and situations to be improved. Reform efforts should be based on strategies to change goal perceptions.

Academic institutions can train research tutors and supervisors in the acquisition of specific skills required to teach how to investigate and write research reports, and how to provide a research project management system using a group with a system perspective, and individual consultation processes. Research skills include experiential learning, lateral and analogic thinking , besides skills related to logical-linear thinking and the use of the scientific method and statistics. These skills can be taught in academic institutions. Results show that when such a project is considered and carried out successfully, productivity increases and the processes of creating research projects improves: Facilitators' that model the writing process are highly motivating to faculty and students in the program. These creative teaching strategies must be considered when research projects are

developed in academic institutions.

Interventions are more efficient and results are longer-lasting when several approaches are combined. It is advisable to begin with short writing goals and then to advance through them, making continuous revisions of written products. Writing will improve if isolation is substituted for a more social activity as are support groups.

The aquisition of writing habits in a systematic way contributes to improvement of writing productivity. Some recommendations are: (a) initiate work with small and easy weekly objectives; (b) write drafts; (c) use word processors; (d) complete a section and then move to the next one; (e) check and re-write drafts; (f) write intensively between two and four hours per week; (g) write in a workspace with adequate conditions; (h) ask frequently for comments about drafts; (i) accept and think about criticism; (j) take risks and learn from mistakes; (k) act like successful writers or researchers; (l) learn new writing and creativity techniques; (m) ask for a supervisor to help manage research tasks, with a contingency system that stimulates internal personal control; (n) learn to control impatience and procrastination through time and task structuring; (o) check and register writing time to improve time-work perception; and (p) participate in a writing support group to make this experience a social activity where trust, creativity and independence are stimulated.

To prevent writing blocks, we suggest the promotion of systematic programs to teach research development and writing skills. The belief that research development and writing skills are acquired automatically through traditional processes of teaching at universities, should be discarded. If the basic principle is understood—that new ideas are merely the result of combinations of old elements—we can conclude that the human mind follows an operative technique that can be learned and controlled, and that its effective use is a matter of practice, just like the effective use of any tool. Since this formula is so simple, many fail to believe it is possible to learn to control the creative process (Valarino, 2000). Creativity requires systematic hard work and the complete use of all mental and physical support systems to start and end successfully.

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