WHAT WE CAN LEARN ABOUT WRITING BLOCKS FROM COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH OUTPUT PROBLEMS, STRONG WRITING SKILLS, AND ATTENTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

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> "Language...is always failing and stumbling, breaking the writer's heart with its mere approximation to the thing in his mind."
>
> Alfred Kazin

Paula, a sophomore in college, has done exceptionally well in school except for her problem producing papers to meet her professors' deadlines. She has a paper due in English class tomorrow. She's done all the reading; she has a thesis and a wealth of ideas; multiple teachers have told her that she's an excellent writer. But she can't begin. As the evening wears on, she becomes more and more anxious. Finally around midnight, she bangs out an introduction. She starts on the next paragraph and slowly produces a whole page. She reads it over and realizes she's gone off topic; she deletes everything but the title. Occasionally in the past, Paula has been able to complete papers by waiting until the last minute and using the pressure to push herself, but this time it looks like there will be no paper for her professor come morning.

In our seventeen years of collective experience teaching at a small college that specializes in working with students with

learning differences, we have come across many "Paulas". These students have serious difficulties producing written work. They have trouble meeting deadlines. They may hand in copious notes, but no draft. They can often talk out all the information and the plan for the paper, yet they still produce little or no writing. If a paper finally gets completed and handed in, it is insightful, coherent, and articulate.

These students' teachers frequently call the problem an issue of "motivation," but on closer observation, one finds many of these troubled writers to be highly motivated. When they do get down to the task at hand, the writing process is still full of obstacles. Many of these students share a common diagnosis of Attentional Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). They are not alone. Studies show that students with AD/HD are a large and increasing population on college campuses today (Byron & Parker 341; Farrell 50) and that they face more academic problems than their peers without attentional disorders (DuPaul, Schaughency, Weyandt, Tripp, Kiesner, Kenj & Stanish; Heiligenstien, Guenther, Levy, Savino, & Fulwiler).

AD/HD is described in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual as developmentally inappropriate attention, impulsivity, and/or motor hyperactivity (DSM-IV). There has been much debate in recent years about the challenges to accurate diagnoses of AD/HD (Hammill; Kamphaus, Frick, & Lahey) and the frequent co-existence of AD/HD with other conditions, such as learning disabilities (Brown; Katz, Goldstein and Beers; Willcutt). Indeed the Centers for Disease Control, in their 1998 national survey, considered both learning disabilities and AD/HD as instances of "*learning disorders* that interfere with academic achievement and social development" (Pastor & Ruben, 12).

As professors at a college that exclusively serves students with learning disabilities and AD/HD we not only recognize, but are intimately involved in the debates about the varying degrees and combinations of AD/HD symptoms. Still, we often found ourselves confounded by our experiences of working with bright,

capable students that we knew to have an AD/HD diagnosis. Clearly, something in their thinking processes posed a formidable obstacle to their writing, but we could find little in the academic literature to help us understand the nature of this obstacle. As Dr. Thomas Brown, one of the leading thinkers in the field of AD/HD today, points out, despite the fact that 65% of AD/HD children suffer from a written expression learning disability, writing production is the "least well understood" area affected by AD/HD ("New Understandings"). It was our hope that this study might shed some light on this area.

It bears noting that many writers *without* the AD/HD diagnosis suffer from similar presentations and difficulties, and the complexity of their problems cannot be overstated. The problems facing AD/HD writers differ from other writers' problems mostly in degree and consistency. The many causes of writing blocks that exist for the general population are exacerbated by these students' attentional problems. Indeed the very criteria for the AD/HD diagnosis include difficulties in the following areas which are all important to the writing process: keeping track of details, sustaining attention (frequent shifts from one uncompleted activity to another), following through on plans, organizing tasks and activities, and maintaining control of materials necessary for tasks or activities (American Psychiatric Association).

Studying the points at which a system breaks down provides insight into how that system functions. Other researchers in the combined composition and learning disabilities fields have argued likewise. Kimber Barber-Fendly and Chris Hamel, in "A New Visibility: An Argument for Alternative Assistance Writing Programs for Students with Learning Disabilities," end their paper by stating, "When we struggle to discover new methods to assist student writers with LD, we will be essentially struggling to find new answers to help all student writers." By closely examining members of the AD/HD student population we might find breakdown points in the writing process that exist for others with writer's blocks[1] and begin the quest for remediation of difficulties

and increased understanding of the complexities of the composition process.

Methodology

This study was designed to answer the question "What is happening cognitively for the student who has strong writing skills but suffers from writing blocks and AD/HD?" In order to answer this question, data were drawn from three areas: academic literature, qualitative interviews, and personal professional observations and reflections.

An extensive literature review that explored the fields of composition theory, AD/HD theory, and writer's block theory was conducted in the hopes that it might shed light on the writing blocks experienced by the group of students in question. This process highlighted the fact that there has been little intersection between the fields of composition, writers' block, and AD/HD to-date. Some of the data from the literature that was found will be presented throughout this article to support and extend the findings and recommendations.

The second source of data consisted of twelve in-depth interviews with students who met the following three criteria: high level writing skills (defined here as writing that demonstrates what is generally accepted as college-level critical thinking articulated in college-level vocabulary and syntax), an AD/HD diagnosis, and written output difficulties. Candidates were drawn from the student body at Landmark College, which exclusively serves students with learning disabilities and/or attentional disorders. After referral by their English instructors, each participant was interviewed for approximately two hours, using a protocol that included fifty-eight questions. Questions ranged in scope from identification, description, and history of the writing problem to discomfort level, strategies tried, and personal goals for writing.

The large body of data generated through interviews was analyzed using the qualitative analysis processes of unitizing and coding, designating emergent categories for organization of the

data, and exploring themes, patterns, and relationships between these categories (Erlandson; Guba & Lincoln; Marshall & Rossman). Each of these steps was completed and documented with the intent of identifying and describing (as opposed to quantifying) the writing experience of the participants. The researchers strove for internal validity by combining their independent investigations of the data, by inviting peer and student examination through campus-wide presentations and preliminary reports, and by receiving "member checks" from a quarter of the research participants (see Merriam, 1998, for further discussion of validity and reliability in case study research). These procedures isolated patterns, processes, commonalities, differences, and contradictions, which are represented in this report.

The third, and final, source of data for this article was the researchers' personal reflections upon years of experience teaching writing to students with attentional issues. Although the students' interviews and the theoretical literature make up the bulk of the data used, personal reflection played a role in the discussion of writer's blocks and AD/HD, particularly when it came to recommending strategies for intervention.

As do most qualitative researchers, we recognize that the strength of our study is in providing an in-depth look into the experiences of our research participants. Although limited in its generalizeablity, it is hoped that the findings presented here will spark continued discussion and research into the challenges faced by blocked writers, in general, and writers with attentional challenges, in particular.

Participant Profiles

The twelve students interviewed ranged in age from nineteen to twenty-seven; seven were female and five were male. None of these students had AD/HD as an exclusive diagnosis but, like the majority of students with AD/HD, had other co-morbid conditions such as non-verbal learning disorder, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, anxiety disorder, or depression.

Due to their psychoeducational profiles, most used medications for treatment of their disorders. These complications and variations among participants are significant, but not uncommon for students with AD/HD. Our attempt to capture the perspectives and challenges of these individual students is in no way representative of all students with AD/HD. Instead, it is meant to serve as a jumping off point for understanding the complexity of the writing process for many students with AD/HD.

A look at the research participants' educational histories can provide some background on their written output problems. Although two students said it wasn't until college that they realized that their writing problems were not just a time management or procrastination issue, the majority had recognized their difficulties by the time they hit the writing demands of high school. It was not atypical for these students to both withdraw from or fail classes *and* get "A's" both on papers and in writing classes. From early on they received labels ranging from "lazy," "disorganized," and "not trying" to "very creative" or "best writer in the class." Eleven out of twelve scored over 600 on their verbal SATs; seven scored over 700; and one student scored a perfect 800. This kind of showing of verbal (written) strengths clearly demonstrates that the breakdown points for these students are not likely to be "language-based."

But if the issues aren't "language based," what exactly are they? Students' descriptions of their own experiences are an important piece of the answer. Students were both insightful and passionate in describing the details of their writing challenges. In the process of reviewing the student interview data, the similarities in their answers were notable...as were the differences.

Common Themes for Students with Attentional Difficulties

Academic Writing is Frequently Painful and Anxiety Producing

In his book *Understanding Writing Blocks* (2001), Cornell University professor Keith Hjortshoj acknowledges that blocked writers in general frequently take pleasure in writing (Hjortshoj 8). We found similarly that all of the participants in this study acknowledged often taking pleasure in some types of writing. They reported feeling "flow" in their freewriting and emailing, and 75% reported self-initiated journal-keeping. Some write poetry for their own personal enjoyment. Unfortunately this pleasure does not carry over to academic writing, a domain in which students reported recurring pain and anxiety.

Perhaps the best, certainly the most vivid, descriptors of the pain and anxiety that these students experience can be found in the metaphors that they used to describe their writing problem. For some, the problem presented itself as an undoable maze, ("It's like trying to do a crazy jigsaw puzzle.") For others it was more of an impossible physical feat, ("It's like trying to push a boulder uphill. The boulder keeps rolling down on top of me.") Some found it comparable to "raking leaves when it's really windy"; others experienced it more as pure pain ("Like pouring lemon juice on a paper cut.")

Contrary to what the casual observer might conclude, writing was *very* important to the participants in this study and each had attempted numerous strategies to deal with their difficulties. Among the more successful strategies noted by students were using templates and color-coding, starting with quotes or free-writing, one-to-one work with teachers, pressure, diet cokes, and late nights. Interestingly, the most common answer to questions about whether or not particular strategies were useful in helping them to write was "it depends." This oft repeated response is indicative of the challenges that these students face. It is not that they don't care about their writing or that they haven't thought of

or tried multiple strategies; rather it is that they have not been able to count consistently on any of their strategies working.

Although some students recognized that their writing problems were closely tied to their "creativity" or other positive aspects of themselves, all had strong desires for things to be different. They wanted their writing to be "less painful," "more consistent," and "quicker." They hoped that while they were struggling with their writing they would experience "spontaneous inspiration' or "an epiphany." Despite these strong desires for change, students spoke of feeling powerless to alter their dilemma. This hopelessness is illustrated succinctly in the following student description of the writing process: "It's like being in a dream where you're doing everything right but it's not working!"

Expectations of Self are High, Increasing Frustrations with Written Output

Not only do these students care deeply about their writing, but they hold themselves to very high standards. As one student described it, "That's part of the problem. I care so much about my writing, I won't just write anything." When queried about whose expectations they were trying to meet, their professors' or their own, most students claimed that their own expectations were high enough that if they managed to please themselves, they knew they had done good work. Unfortunately, "pleasing themselves" is a rare occurrence.

It might be assumed that a discomfort with one's lack of writing skill is among the most common obstacles to writing, but this was clearly not the case with this group, whose answers consistently affirmed that they believed in their own writing skills. The participants in this study were very aware that they are capable of producing excellent work, but this awareness did nothing to quiet their persistent, critical inner voices or to calm the fears that their writing wouldn't demonstrate their subject knowledge or writing abilities. Indeed, ten out of twelve students interviewed commented that writing was one of their strengths

and that this fact *increased* their frustrations with output difficulties.

It is a tempting oversimplification to label these students' high expectations "perfectionism" and to suggest that by just "letting go" their productivity problems would be solved. The data from this study contradict this notion and point instead to the large number of ideas in these students' minds, the number and complexity of which frequently act as obstacles to their capturing thought in writing.

Topic, Word, Thesis Selection and Revision Decisions Are Particularly Problematic

When presented with a list of traditional writing steps and asked to elaborate on each, all but one of the twelve found topic selection problematic. The following comments are representative of these eleven students' thoughts: "There are two billion things to choose from," "I want to do everything," and "I'm worried about commitment, that I might find a better topic later." It is interesting to note that *none* of the students reported a lack of ideas or "generation" as an area of difficulty,

Similarly, all the students reported difficulty when it came to particular word choices. Students' reports of floundering with word choice were both humorous and poignant. One said she'd been "banned from the thesaurus." Another called himself a "thesaurus junkie." And a third said she'd been known to "get lost for three hours in the thesaurus looking for the perfect word." The belief that there are an "infinite" number of choices they could make, as well as the belief that there is one "perfect word," was common and in some cases paralyzing.

In addition to difficulty with selecting both a general topic and specific words, three quarters of the students reported that creating and sticking with a thesis was a breakdown point for them. Although students spoke of needing "the big picture" before being able to produce writing, they also reported that their topics tended to change and "grow."

Selectivity issues also impact the revision and editing processes. Though several said they tried not to, all the students agreed that they revise and edit "as they go." The inefficiency of this method supports Peter Elbow's theory that composition is most efficient when the generating/creating step is separated from the revision/critical step (Elbow). Some students mentioned that they were wary that their revisions might yield another whole set of ideas. They often found it necessary to turn off their monitors while they composed in order to avoid making constant changes and corrections. This issue of "selectivity," whether it was choosing a topic, a word, or a thesis, was a recurring theme for the students interviewed. Selectivity will be revisited later in the article, as it proved to be one of the most significant findings.

Procrastination and Distraction are Major Obstacles to Writing Production

The word "procrastination" came up repeatedly in student interviews. Students consistently reported that they started papers "too late," "at the last minute," "at midnight the night before they're due," or in some cases "even after it's due." Most of the students claimed that without the pressure of tomorrow's deadline looming over them, they would not be able to produce. Despite the fact that they may have had earlier success with this strategy, their "one shot" attempts to write papers became less successful as their assignments became larger and more complex. Three students said they "never" hand in papers on time now, and one student had fourteen overdue papers at the time of the interview.

Typical of students with attentional issues, the participants in this study were confronted with a myriad of distractions when faced with the task at hand. Students reported engaging in a variety of activities while "procrastinating": socializing, talking on the phone, cleaning, organizing, conducting more research, playing computer games, surfing the internet, sleeping, driving around, and playing with "Word options." Participants claimed that "big life issues" are distracting, interruptions are distracting,

and their own thoughts are distracting. One student said he "seeks distractions."

Watching these students while they "work" at their computers is a reminder of just how many distractions the computer has to offer. Consistently changing fonts and format while composing and getting sidetracked by Instant Messenger are just two of the many technology-related distractions. The internet, with its endless possibilities for tangents, can pull students far from the writing task at hand. For this particular group, the technology distractions can be so disruptive that they must revert to strategies such as handwriting drafts and turning their monitors off in order to maintain some semblance of focus.

Firm Deadlines and "Talking it Out" Help to Facilitate Writing Production

When it came to what students found helpful in increasing their writing production, there was great variability both within individual participant's answers and among the group as a whole. The two factors that seemed to be consistently helpful in facilitating writing were some amount of external pressure and the opportunity to "talk out" ideas before or during writing.

Three quarters of the students responded adamantly that they "definitely" or "absolutely" needed external pressure in order to produce writing, and only one claimed this was not at all the case. Although students responded differently to the pressures of graded writing, all the interviewees felt that deadlines were an important external pressure. These students knew if their papers would be accepted late or not, and many mentioned that they waited until their time and choices were limited before production began. This result is consistent with the emphasis that writer's block theorists have placed on the usefulness of firm deadlines (Hjortshoj 139).

Similarly, the students interviewed found "talking it out" to be a consistently helpful strategy for producing writing, although their explanations as to why this was so varied greatly. Some found the speed of talking appealing, whereas others needed to be

able to gesture in order to think. Several students found the essay structure to be "alien to natural language," so preferred the less structured, less formal option of talking. Whereas some participants preferred speaking because "there are less expectations," others felt that talking created "more pressure to get it out" and that this was important. The fact that "speaking is not documented and not evaluated" was yet another reason given for preferring to "talk it out." It was not surprising that participants found "talking out" ideas to be a useful strategy since most all of the students found speaking much easier and more comfortable than writing.

Patterns of Divergence for Students with Attentional Difficulties

As outlined in the previous section, the participants in this study shared many common themes regarding their writing challenges. They tended to experience extreme discomfort with academic writing, to hold high expectations for their own writing, and to have problems with topic, word, and thesis selection. They shared some collective road blocks to, and facilitators of, their writing production. Of equal importance to understanding the challenges that these students face, and the interventions that might be useful, are the ways in which these students differ. There were four clear points of difference in students' interviews: differences in the types of academic writing students found challenging, differences in the role of organization in their writing processes, differences in the impact of various teaching strategies, and differences in the environments that help with writing production.

Differences in Types of Academic Writing That Students Find Challenging

When asked which kinds of writing assignments were easiest, students responded with surprising and varied answers. Although one might anticipate that assignments based on personal

experience or opinion would be easier than those dependent upon outside resources, for some students exactly the opposite is true. When it came to "easiest," students responded by naming narrative papers, creative papers, personal opinion papers, analysis papers, response papers, research papers, and summaries. For "hardest" papers, the following list was received: argument papers, analysis papers, synthesis papers, and research papers. The fact that there was such little consensus on the types of academic writing that presented the greatest challenges is interesting. Upon further exploration, the divergent opinions about summary writing and essay tests yielded the most information about why these students found particular types of writing challenging.

When queried about summary writing, half of the students said that this type of writing was "easy" or "easier than other kinds of papers" and that they had no trouble picking out main points. The other half said they were "bad," "horrible," or "awful" at writing summaries. This second group reported wanting to "include everything" and felt that in texts "every sentence makes a point." One student aptly depicted the problem by describing how he writes eight page summaries of two page articles! Clearly for some students, but not all, selecting for saliency is a challenge.

Because essay tests are very specific and highly judged pieces of writing, one might expect the students under study to find this style of writing difficult, but their responses to queries about essay tests were both surprising and significant. Although half of the students reported that essay tests were the "hardest" form of writing, due to the pressure involved, the other half said they were successful at taking essay tests. Those that found a "flow" on essay tests attributed this to a number of things: knowledge of the material, the specificity of the questions, and lower expectations for writing, organization, and "formality." Several students said that the added time pressure helps them to produce. Of particular relevance is the fact that the students tended towards either summary writing or essay test-taking, but not both. This

tendency has implications for remediation that will be discussed later.

Differences in the Role of Organization in Students' Writing Processes

Although a typical intervention strategy for this group of students might be to emphasize an organizational step in the writing process, students reported very mixed reactions to this strategy. Although some of the students reported forgetting to take an organizational step, half said they didn't use an organizational step because it "restricted them too much" or "was of no help." For the other half of the group using a step, such as an outline, was what kept them on track.

Differences in the Impact of Various Teaching Strategies

When asked about what teaching methods have been useful in their writing, students provided a list of wide-ranging answers including one-on-one work with the same person, the use of models or examples, enforced micro-uniting, class discussions, specific feedback, and firm deadlines. Although some felt that being graded on early steps in a multi-stepped writing process would be helpful, others said that they would resist such a structure. Some students felt that grades were very important as success indicators and motivation forces, while others felt that they were poor indicators of their understanding and therefore of no importance. The one student who mentioned "encouragement" as a useful teaching tool was contradicted by another student who found it helpful to have an "intimidating teacher with a no-excuse policy." In short, beyond the previously mentioned strategies of "firm deadlines" and "talking it out," there was very little consensus about which teaching strategies students found useful.

Differences in the Environments that Help with Writing Production

Identifying specific times when, and places where, writing production is most likely provided more examples of individual preferences for this group of students. Some said daytime was best, some said evening, and others could only work late at night. Some students reported that their medications helped with their writing; others said medication hindered it. Timing their work around their medications was a strategy used by some, but others felt that they weren't organized enough to use this method. Most of the students mentioned "comfort" as important to their process, although what they found "comfortable" varied from absolute quiet and isolation to working with and around others. When it came to writing under direct supervision of an instructor, there were those who can "only write in structured supervised environments," and those who likened writing in class to having "someone watching me go to the bathroom." Although providing remediation at the "point of performance" is advocated by AD/HD scholars (Barkley, 251), student interviews point to the need to consider individual histories when determining which writing environment might be conducive to each student's writing.

Further Discussion

The data generated throughout this project, coupled with our personal experiences of teaching college students with attentional issues, point to selectivity as the primary issue impeding the writing production of students with attentional difficulties. A discussion of selectivity, and the ways in which it is confounded by internal contradictions, is presented here.

Selectivity

Difficulty with selectivity, or the ability to choose by preference from a number of options, was a recurring theme throughout this project. What should my topic be? What is my thesis? What are the subcategories? What is the sequence? What

writing process step should I take? What word is the best? When is the work done? Given the inherent complexities of the composition process, students frequently found the magnitude of choices paralyzing. The literature in the fields of composition theory, AD/HD theory, and writer's block theory each have a contribution to make to our understanding of why selectivity, an issue that can block any writer, poses a particularly formidable challenge to the students in this project.

Most composition theorists believe an efficient writing process is recursive and flexible and calls for a writer to change tasks frequently, to go back and forth between generating, organizing, and evaluating. Not only must writers make countless, recurring decisions on process, but they are repeatedly faced with the simultaneous selection of content. Writing block experts suggest that the more strategies the writer possesses, the better (Rose *Writer's Block* 92) but, in some ways, the opposite seems to hold true for these writers with attentional issues. Being aware of numerous strategies and possessing large amounts of background knowledge and vocabulary only make selectivity more difficult. This inability to make the necessary choices then translates into an inability to produce writing.

Because both composition theorists (Hayes "A New Framework for Understanding" 8) and learning disability theorists (Brown "New Understandings") recognize the importance of the working memory, it is tempting to cite this as the likely breakdown point for the participants in this study. But these students have such excellent retrieval skills that when they finally compose, they can frequently call up all of their sources as well as their writing skills at once. Perhaps it is not so much a deficiency in the working memory that interferes with these students' writing, but a higher than average demand that is being made on the memory when the time comes to select and organize the huge quantity of material stored in their heads.

Keith Hjortshoj suggests that many blocked writers have "too many ideas, and too much information" (9). Although he doesn't mention AD/HD by name, his description of the blocked writer

reflects what we've come to know about the AD/HD mind, that those with this diagnosis are both blessed and cursed with very inclusive and creative thinking processes. Given the large storehouse of vocabulary that they possess and the continuous generation of new materials and ideas, it is no wonder that, even with externalized structures and supervision, these students have difficulty selecting and then committing their complex thinking to paper.

Internal Contradictions

Selecting from among the many possible alternatives in the writing process is difficult for all writers, but this study revealed that the issue of selectivity was further compounded for these participants. During the data analysis phase of this project, it was noted that, on some particular topics, students tended to contradict themselves. Upon further exploration, what emerged was a set of internal contradictions that were voiced by a number of participants (see figure 1).

Internal Contradictions for Student with Attentional Issues

"I need the big picture to begin."	"I don't understand the big picture until I'm writing."
"I need a high level of interest in my subject in order to write."	"If I'm passionate about my topics, I'm too overwhelmed to write."
"I need structured assignments."	"I can't write unless I have a lot of flexibility."
"Deadlines are helpful."	"I resist deadlines."
"My writing problems are just the way writing is."	"Everyone else can write more easily than I can."
"I'm really good at writing."	"I'm a lousy writer."
"I love writing."	"I hate writing."
"My writing problem is hell."	"My writing problem is part of my creativity."

Figure 1: Internal Contradictions for Students with Attentional Issues

Mike Rose, in his book *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension*, lists six reasons for writer's block, among them a tendency towards conflicting assumptions (4). The research participants'

oft-repeated internal contradictions, and the writing tensions that these seemed to create, highlight the significant impact of these conflicting assumptions and point us towards possible ways to address these students' writing challenges.

Recommendations for Writing Instructors

Turning once again to Mike Rose's book *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension*, we are reminded of the social-contextual, affective, and cognitive complexities involved in blocked writing. With that reminder comes a warning against oversimplification of the problem (3). Although clearly no magic "fix" can solve the complex writing challenges of academically capable students with attentional issues, instructors can do things to help lessen the pain and improve writing production for this struggling group. Because there are a number of common themes to the challenges that these students face, we offer ten general recommendations. These recommendations should prove helpful for most students with attentional issues whose presenting problem is writing production. Following these general recommendations are suggestions for individualized remediation based upon the divergent patterns that emerged from this study. All of the recommendations offered incorporate the principle that college students with attentional issues are best served by practices that increase their self-knowledge and self-advocacy. In addition, it is important to remember that recommendations that can assist teachers working with AD/HD students might also assist them in their work with *any* blocked writer.

General Recommendations

1. Address Contradictions

Reviewing with students the list of internal contradictions that are presented in this article can help them identify their own contradictions and the ways in which these may be impeding their writing processes. By sharing the parable of the donkey that starved due to an inability to make a choice between two bales of

hay, we can help students to recognize, and hopefully move out of, their "stuck" places.

2. Work with Metaphors

As Keith Hjortshoj notes, the metaphors writers use to describe their blocks point to the dynamic nature of their problems (9). Exploring student metaphors externalizes students' internal problems, allowing us to begin to play with possible "solutions." An example is the student who said that trying to write was like trying to get the huge mass of material that was in her head through a skinny coffee stirrer. Over the course of the semester we worked on expanding the coffee stirrer (stretching the language "muscles" by freewriting), lining up the mass of material to ease its flow (using organizational templates), and then crowding her head with even more thoughts, so that increased pressure might force expression.

3. Review Students' Personal Goals for the Assignment

In their paper "On the Nature of Planning in Writing," John Hayes and Jane Gradwohl Nash suggest that "in ill-defined tasks, specifying the goal is often the most important function of planning" (54). Student goals are not always in alignment with instructor goals and can range from "timeliness" to "a longer paper," from "getting a particular grade" to "completing an assignment independently." Having students document and frequently reference their goals for each assignment clarifies what the purpose of this *particular* assignment is and how success can be measured.

4. Identify the Current Decision Needing to be Made

An important step for any blocked writer is to look at what specific process or content decision has to be made in order to move forward. By narrowing the scope, an instructor can help to limit the range of possible choices. This strategy increases the possibility of movement for students whose selectivity issues can easily stall them out.

5. Encourage Disclaimers

The use of a "disclaimer" that reminds both the writer and reader that the path taken is only one of many is extremely useful for writers who are paralyzed by the many choices that they are confronted with in the writing process. A disclaimer might acknowledge the choices not selected or the contradictions that are present. It might point out that the original intent of the writer has shifted or that the study of the matter at hand has led to a change of mind. Naming the road *not* taken can be a powerful tool in gaining momentum in the writing process.

6. Help Students Balance the Internal Negative Critic

Encourage students to post acknowledgements of their writing ability in order to balance their internal negative critics. These "acknowledgments," which can be in the form of a previously well-executed writing assignment or a positive comment from you or another instructor, can help students develop the one characteristic that productive writers hold in common: persistence (Hjortshoj 44).

7. Establish a Firm Deadline Policy

Establishing a "no-late papers accepted" policy can be reassuring and motivating to students who need external pressure in order to produce. A variation on the "no late papers" theme is accepting unfinished papers for partial credit and allowing students to revise at a later date. Knowing they have to hand in something on the due date often provides sufficient pressure to insure production.

8. Encourage "Talking Out" of Ideas

Encouraging students to "talk out" their ideas with a friend, a tutor, or even themselves can help to break the logjam in their writing process. If we know *why* speaking is more comfortable than writing for a given student, we can also apply that knowledge to finding useful writing strategies. For example, if an immediate

audience is useful, a student might be encouraged to email every page to an instructor as it is composed.

9. Provide Specific and Unambiguous Assignments

The complexity of the writing process suggests the need for very clear assignments. Particularly for those who are struggling with selectivity issues, unambiguous assignments can lessen the number of difficult choices a student writer has to make.

10. Encourage Student Metacognition

The more students understand about, and can advocate for, their own learning needs the greater their success will be both in your class and in the future. Particularly for students who are best served by individualized remediation, being able to clearly articulate which strategies do or do not work for them can be key to getting useful support and services in the future. Using a "Writing Blocks Self-Inventory" (see appendix 1) is one way to increase students' self-knowledge.

Individualized Recommendations

Although the symptoms of written output problems may be similar in nature (late or missing assignments), the in-depth interviews conducted for this study revealed that strategies for remediation must be individually tailored to each writer's strengths and weaknesses. By using a shortened version of the interview protocol used for this study, writing instructors can glean significant information about their struggling students and the strategies most likely to help them (see appendix 2). Likewise, a review of a particular student's handling of both essay tests and summary writing can reveal a great deal about a student's learning style and can be used in choosing strategies for remediation (see figure 2).

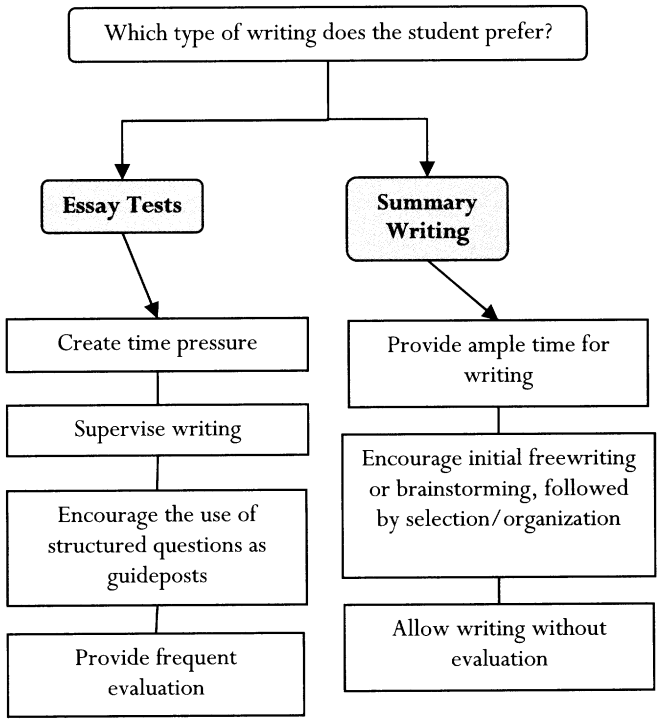

Figure 2: Teaching suggestions based on students' writing strengths.

Despite the collective and individual difficulties that student writers with attentional issues experience, we need to remember that variations in writing process and production are common for writers in general. As E.B. White said, "Delay is natural to a writer. He is like a surfer – he bides his time. Waits for the perfect wave on which to ride in" (Murray 219). As writing instructors, we have the very difficult task of trying to determine when our struggling students are waiting for their yet-to-arrive wave and when they are missing the waves that are crashing around them. Only through understanding our individual students can we begin to make this determination.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study can help identify the obstacles to writing for capable students with attentional issues and help determine how best we can address these obstacles in our writing classes. There is, however, much room for further exploration. Of particular interest to us was the frequency with which the students interviewed mentioned health issues and habits in discussing their writing challenges. Exploring the impact of exercise, sleep, diet, and medication and other substances on the writing process clearly deserves further study. It would also prove useful to investigate the potential benefits of writing coaches, trained professionals who specialize in helping writers through obstacles in the writing process. Given the high percentage of participants in this study that favored strategies of "talking their writing out," our last recommendation for further study would be to explore the efficacy of voice recognition software for this group of struggling students.

Conclusions

This study points out the degree to which many students with attentional difficulties and written output problems care tremendously about their written work. Although the difficulties that they experience cannot be erased, they can be eased. As instructors, we can play an active role in easing these students' difficulties by closely examining their strengths, difficulties, and individual goals, and providing guidance and instruction that acknowledge the complexity of their problems.

Attentional abilities are a spectrum with an infinite number of gradations. The areas of difficulty that exist for students with an AD/HD diagnosis are familiar to many struggling writers, especially writers who are passionate about their work, and writers with expansive, creative minds. It is our belief and hope that strategies that prove useful to the students in this study may also help other blocked writers as they struggle with the near universal challenges of the composition process.

Writing blocks often come from trying to fit grand ideas into tight, pre-made structures. It has been our observation that it is the combination of strong capabilities with expansive creative thinking patterns that seems to make some students' attentional difficulties more susceptible to writing obstacles. In our role as writing instructors it is important to remind ourselves that the "quality" of a piece of student writing may be less important than the fact that something new has been discovered in the process of composition. We have no doubt that easing the productivity of struggling writers, regardless of diagnosis, in order to allow freer expression of their creative thinking, will ultimately be of benefit to us all.

Notes

[1] For the purposes of this article, we have taken our cue from Keith Hjortshoj, who uses the term "*writing blocks,*" as opposed to the singular "*writer's block,*" to describe the multiple processes that can interfere with writing productions (Hjortshoj 8).

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Appendix 1

Writing Blocks Self Inventory

The following are questions, broken down by stages in the writing process, that the blocked writer can use to generate and assess strategies for pushing through their "blocks."

Getting started:

- Would it help to discuss work time and work space with someone?
- Have I tried breaking the paper down into smaller pieces (steps)?
- Do I need to understand the whole topic, the big picture, before I can start or will I learn about my topic as I write?
- Would it help to meet with my teacher or someone else to discuss the topic or steps or to clarify the assignment before beginning?

Topic selection:

- Can I keep the scope of this paper in proper proportion? This is, after all, one undergraduate paper and my goal is to get it in, not to write a doctoral dissertation.
- Am I interested enough in this topic? Am I so passionate about the topic that I'm unlikely to be satisfied with what I can cover?
- Would it help to meet with someone to choose my topic?

Generating:

- Would brainstorming, mapping, or clustering help?
- Would it be useful to meet with someone to discuss my topic before beginning? (Make sure that someone takes notes during this discussion.)
- Would warming up with a free associative freewrite before turning to my topic help?
- If I'm feeling like a perfectionist, have I tried handwriting or turning off my monitor so I won't be tempted to edit?

Thesis formation:

- Can I use a preliminary thesis or a guiding question to get started?
- Have I tried forming a thesis by using the formula: Although _____, (nevertheless) _____?
- Have I considered using a disclaimer that acknowledges that my treatment of the subject is not necessarily the whole picture?

Organizing:

- (If I'm good at summary writing and finding main ideas) Have I tried doing a brain dump, brainstorm, or freewrite and then highlighting to find subtopics and possible sequences?
- (If I'm good at taking essay tests) Have I organized my subject by asking myself guiding questions and then answering them as if this were an essay test?
- Would it help to find a template that might help me organize?
- Would drawing help? (After you draw, you label the parts of your drawing and that can serve as an outline.)

Drafting:

- Have I tried a warm-up freewrite before drafting? (Your freewrites may feel like you're just "spinning your wheels," but you may really be "winding up.")
- Have I considered writing under supervision?
- Should I remind myself not to edit as I go (would it help to turn off my monitor?)
- Have I tried stopping drafting and starting a fresh page of freewriting on the topic?
- Have I tried moving off the sequence I have set up? Gone to another part of the paper?
- Should I try moving from handwriting to the computer, or the computer to handwriting?

- Should I start a separate sheet of paper for a list of thoughts that come up as I work that seem off topic?
- Have I tried limiting myself to one sentence on the topic: "what I'm trying to say is...."
- Should I ask myself if I am feeling under-stimulated (bored) or over-stimulated (anxious) and choose the strategy based on that feeling? (i.e. If you are bored, change locations or change the music. If you are anxious, take a short walk outside, or take a meditation break by closing your eyes and counting fifty breaths.)
- Do I have a list of positive things people have said about my writing? Should I read this to myself to dispel the negative voices?
- Is my plan/outline not working? Would it help to make a new list of subtopics or a new plan for the piece of the paper I am working on?

Revising:

- Am I leaving time for revision or am I counting on doing the paper in one shot?
- Would it be faster to do a looser draft and then a revision or to do it one shot?

Proofreading:

- Am I leaving time for proofreading or am I counting on doing the paper in one shot?
- Do I need support for proofreading?
- Do I know what kind of errors to look for?

Releasing the paper:

- Am I worried that the paper is not good enough?
- Whose expectations am I trying to meet?
- Is it better to get credit for the work I've done than no credit at all?
- Is the deadline firm? Would it help if it were?

General things to try:

- Answer the questions in Appendix 2: "Writing Blocks Interview." Use your answers as a starting place to look for strategies that might help you.
- Are there medical, coaching, or counseling issues that need addressing?
- Examine the big question: What is my personal writing goal?

Appendix 2

Writers' Block Interview Protocol

1. Identification of the problem
    - Do you think your problem is a cognitive (thinking) problem or a behavioral problem?

2. Discomfort Level
    - How important is writing to you?
    - How uncomfortable are you?

3. History
    - Do you take medications and if so, how do these affect your writing process?
    - Have you ever experienced "flow" in your writing? What was the task?
    - How successful are you at freewriting?
    - How successful are you at taking essay tests?
    - How do you do with summaries? Saliency (picking out main points)?

4. Description
    - What generally happens when you have a writing assignment? How early/late do you start? How many attempts? How often do you hand in a paper on time? Finished?
    - Can you talk out ideas easier than writing them? If so, explain why you think this is true for you?
    - Do you have difficulty choosing a topic?
    - Do you have difficulties with thesis formation? When in the process does this step normally occur for you?
    - Do you have trouble sticking to your thesis or to an outline? Does your subject tend to grow or change?
    - Do you typically discuss the paper topic or organization with anyone?
    - How often do you get to the revising step? (Do you need to revise?)
    - Do you edit as you go?

- Do you struggle with word choices? Sentence options? The big picture? Do you feel like you have to understand the whole essay before you can write it or do you learn about your topic in the writing?
- What type of assignments do you find easiest? Hardest?
- What metaphor would you use to describe how the problem feels to you?
- What happens when you are asked to write in a structured environment (such as a class)?
- Do you wait for/need a certain level of arousal/pressure to write?

5. Strategies tried
    - What strategies have helped you to produce?
    - What teaching methods have helped?
    - Do deadlines help or hinder?
    - Can you count on pressure and hyper-focusing to produce?
    - Do you have a particular place and time to write that works best?
    - How conscious are you of your patterns, the process that worked or didn't work the last time you worked on a paper?

6. Goals
    - How important are grades to you?
    - What would you like changed about your writing process?