

# Coming up blank: The science of writer's block

By Maya Sapiurka, The Conversation, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.30.17

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Not being able to find the right word or continue the next part of a story is called writer's block. Recent research shows that both the "brainstorming" and "creative writing" portions of the brain are used in writing, suggesting that writer's block may be a "creation block." Photo from Flickr

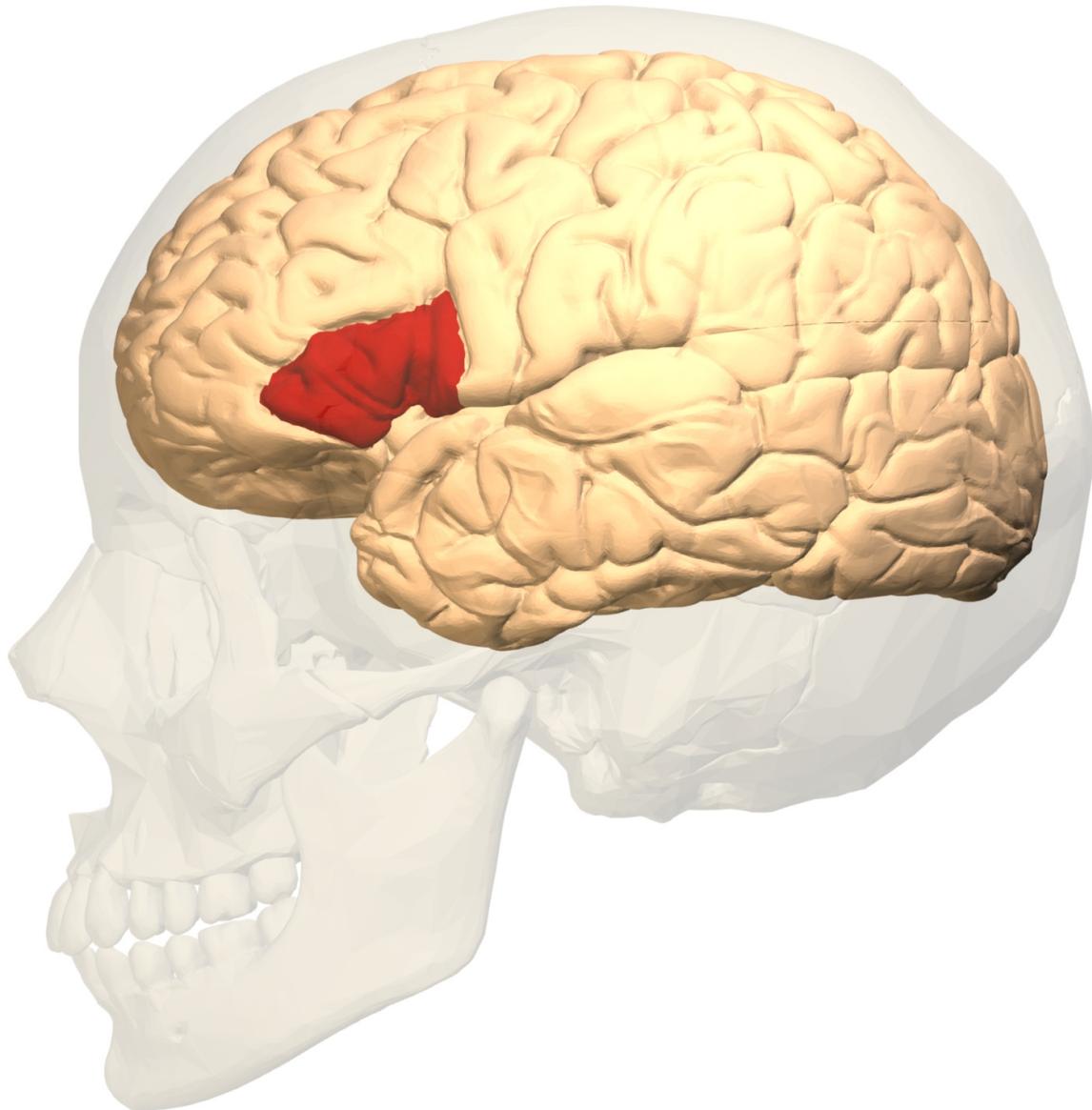
Writer's block is difficult to define because no two people experience it in exactly the same way. Probably the simplest and most straightforward definition comes from Dr. Patricia Huston. According to her, writer's block is a distinctly uncomfortable inability to write.

What could be the cause of this problem? Is it just what happens when a writer's inspiration deserts them, or can we find an explanation hidden somewhere in the brain?

## The Location Of Language

The first step in finding an answer is to try and determine what parts of the brain may be affected when a person experiences writer's block. One approach is to look at where words come from in the first place.

Language skills are associated with a very specific location in the brain: Broca's area, which is located on the left side of the frontal lobe, or front part of the brain.



Broca's area is named after the scientist who first reported that damage to this part of the brain causes aphasia, or the inability to form words. Because writer's block is an inability to write down words, the frontal lobe seems likely to be involved.

We can also look at writer's block as an inability to come up with a story, be it fiction or nonfiction. Most who experience writer's block are not having trouble producing words, they simply cannot figure out what should happen next.

### **Brain Activity's Role In The Creative Process**

A small number of scientific studies have looked at the concept of "story creation" and what areas of the brain might be involved. In one study from 2005, participants were presented with a set of three words and asked to create a story based around them.



So when we speak of writer's block, we may actually be talking about a "creation block." Rather than being an inability to form words, writer's block may be the inability to make the connections and the plans that allow creative writing to occur.

## **Ways to Beat Writer's Block**

So we have an idea of where writer's block is happening, but what can you do to fight against it? There is no pill you can take to make it go away, but there are some simple things you can do that may make writing easier:

Try reading someone else's writing. Studies have shown that people are more creative when they are exposed to the creative ideas of others. Just make sure you are only inspired by their writing and not copying from it.

Break the work down into pieces. If you can't get the introduction to flow the way you want it to, try something in the middle. Check off each part as you finish so you can get an accurate sense of how much you have completed.

Try writing a rough draft straight through without stopping and without going back to re-read what you've written until you're done. Some of it may not be great, but most likely a lot of it will be useful. At the very least, it will give you a place to start.

Plan breaks into your writing schedule so you will have a chance to be refreshed. Go for a walk or grab a meal with friends or watch a cute animal video on YouTube. Relaxing will make it easier to get back into the writing spirit.

Don't put off starting — in other words, don't procrastinate. The more you put off what you have to write, the more anxiety you will feel and the harder the task will seem.

Ultimately, it is important not to be too hard on yourself. You are not the first person to experience writer's block and you will not be the last. Being stuck doesn't make you a bad writer or a bad person. It makes you a human being with a flawed — but marvelous — brain.

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## Quiz

- 1 Which answer choice BEST explains why the author wrote this article?
- (A) to report on definitive research claiming to have identified the causes of writer's block and to explain how the studies were done
  - (B) to question whether writer's block is actually rooted in the brain or whether it is caused by a lack of imagination and motivation
  - (C) to explore the possible roles of different parts of the brain in causing writer's block and to offer tips readers can use to overcome it
  - (D) to consider whether there is a possibility of developing a cure for writer's block or whether people can simply learn to work around it
- 2 Fill in the blank.
- The author of the article is MOST concerned with \_\_\_\_\_.
- (A) designing and completing further scientific experiments to reveal the effect of writer's block on the brain
  - (B) drawing conclusions between scientific studies that indicate what locations in the brain are actively involved in the writing process
  - (C) analyzing data presented by scientists who are experts on the brain in order to find a potential cure for writer's block
  - (D) providing support and resources to enable readers to become stronger and more confident in their ability to write creatively
- 3 How does the image in the section "The Location Of Language" support the reader's understanding of writer's block?
- (A) It depicts a brain hooked up to an fMRI machine and shows the effect of increased blood flow during writing.
  - (B) It identifies an area of the brain associated with motivation, which is necessary for writing.
  - (C) It emphasizes the damaging effect writer's block can have on some parts of the brain.
  - (D) It provides a visual representation of an area of the brain that is essential for writing.

4 Look at the diagram in the section "Brain Activity's Role In The Creative Process."

Which sentence from the article is BEST supported by the information in the diagram and the caption?

- (A) The first step in finding an answer is to try and determine what parts of the brain may be affected when a person experiences writer's block.
- (B) The level of blood flow to a particular region is an indication of how much mental activity is occurring in that region.
- (C) Some of these areas, such as the anterior cingulate cortex, are associated with making connections between seemingly unrelated ideas — a critical skill for a great writer.
- (D) Rather than being an inability to form words, writer's block may be the inability to make the connections and the plans that allow creative writing to occur.