



Work-block

If you can't work, it is important to know if this is caused by procrastination or work block.

Procrastination is characterised by an *avoidance* of work, whereas work-block is characterised by an *inability* to work. If you can't work because you procrastinate, then see the leaflet in this series entitled 'Procrastination'.

Why are you unable to work?

- **Perfectionism.** It isn't really that you can't do anything, the problem is that you can't do the task to the standard which you set yourself: fear of missing the standard feels like failure or ineffectiveness
- **Judgement.** You could work if only you didn't have to expose the end result, either to yourself or others, for assessment. It is difficult to cope with criticism and / or with praise. There is an assumption that you *will* be judged harshly, or ridiculed.
- **Communication.** You know what you want to write or say, but you just can't express it meaningfully – it won't come out.
- **Connections.** You can't seem to connect what you know to what is required. It's as if there is a missing link somewhere, that is probably very simple, which you just can't identify.
- **Ignorance.** Sometimes we can't perform because we don't have the necessary tools, information, knowledge or understanding.
- **Defeatism.** You no longer believe that you can work, because you couldn't yesterday, or the day before, or the day before that. And no-one can give you realistic-sounding encouragement.

What to do about it?

Try to analyse honestly and objectively why you can't work. Do any of the previously described situations 'fit' you? If you are able to analyse what the problem is, can you go on to understand how it arose? And if you can understand, in part or totally, does this give you clues about what you might experiment with to try to start working again? Here are some examples:

- **Perfectionism.** In order to feel good about myself I need to produce perfect work. As a child it seemed that I only gained approval from others when I performed well. But maybe people might like me for who I *am*, rather than what I *achieve*? And maybe I might discover that I like me? Can I risk just aiming to work, and then see if I still think I am OK?
- **Judgement.** If I do produce work, it will be judged by others. Will I feel embarrassed if they praise it? Is this a problem because in the past I felt destroyed by someone's criticism? Why do I believe that it is *me* being judged rather than the piece of *work*? How can I change my thinking so that both criticism and praise become normal, just a consequence of producing anything for assessment, from which I might learn useful things?
- **Communication.** Why can't I get what's in my head into a meaningful end-product? Is it because I can't think clearly, can't focus, or because I don't have the vocabulary to express myself? Am I trying to be too clever, too complex, rather than being content with expressing things simply, at least to begin with? Maybe I equate cleverness with jargon?
- **Connections.** I seem to have the mental equivalent of something being "on the tip of my tongue". Maybe I can't conceptualise? Maybe I can't use 'lateral' thinking? Have I, in the past, been taught to think in an ordered, hierarchical way, so that to look at things in new or seemingly chaotic ways seems risky? Perhaps I can learn to *play* with knowledge, and just follow where leads take me?

- **Ignorance.** Is there something vital that I need to know or to be able to do before I can tackle this task? If there is, why haven't I already done it? Have I, in the past, been left feeling foolish after owning up to not knowing something basic? Can I persuade myself that its better to acknowledge ignorance and deal with it, rather than remain blocked?
- **Defeatism.** Can I really not work...at all? I must have been able to do things once, or I wouldn't be where I am today. Why have I lost my self-belief? Can I learn to tolerate, in the short-term, the discomfort of not being able to do something straight away, so that I can stick at it until something happens? I know it takes more effort to start something than to sustain it (think of push-starting a car). Could I take the risk and tolerate the discomfort of just producing anything, even what seems like rubbish, just to get myself started? And can I tell someone else, who will encourage me without nagging, and who will remind me that all I need to aim for at first is just to get started again?

Getting started again

1. Create the right working environment for you. Then gather together all the necessary equipment and information that you need for the task.
2. Start playing with the material. Brain-storm, make a mind-map, or talk into a dictaphone – record or note anything that comes into your mind when you think of the topic, even if it seems ridiculous, far-fetched or nonsense. Or try using an old scrap of paper and pencil, and allow yourself a very short time (5 minutes) to scribble an outline. Or if it feels OK, bounce your ideas off someone else.
3. Select one bit from (2). Start asking questions about it. Why do you think it came into your mind? What is it connected to? What does it lead you on to?
4. Imagine telling a specific person about (3). Then start writing down what you are telling the person, however colloquially, and with all the gaps and asides.

5. When you have a chunk of stuff from (4) begin to edit it.
6. Repeat steps (3) to (5) with a different bit from (2)
7. Begin to put your chunks into order, and continue the editing process.
8. Work out where the gaps are, and do what's necessary to fill them in.

Remember that the objective is to get you working again, not to produce perfect work straight away. Once you start to be able to work, you will slowly build up confidence again. Then you will feel able to edit and look for gaps. And to begin with, don't aim for 'perfect': 'good enough for purpose' will be fine.

Can anyone else help you?

You might want to 'reality check' your assumptions with someone you trust, to discover what is realistic and what is unrealistic. They might help you in analysing and understanding the work-block, and encourage you in risking new approaches. And they might help you fill in gaps in your knowledge and skills.

You could speak to a manager, colleague or friend if you find them approachable and not over-critical. But if you think they are part of the problem, you might want to consult someone outside your Department.

The University Staff Counselling Service offers individual appointments where these concerns can be addressed.

Staff Counselling Service
1st Floor, 17 Mill Lane
Cambridge, CB2 1RX
Tel: 01223 762160

Email: staffcouns@admin.cam.ac.uk

Website: <https://staff.counselling.cam.ac.uk>