

# Funding Focus: Overcoming Writer's Block

OHSU Research Funding &  
Development Services

December 8, 2011

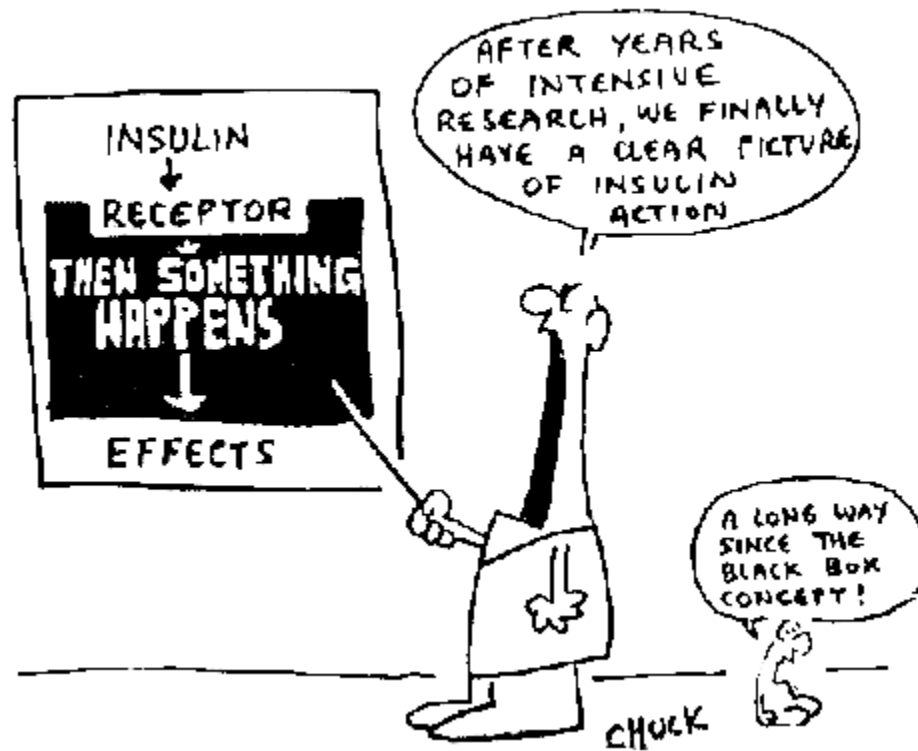
# Why do scientists need to write?

- Funding
- Publication
- Academic and professional success
- Scholars vs. students
- Without writing, **THERE IS NO DISCOVERY.**

# Bad things happen from writer's block

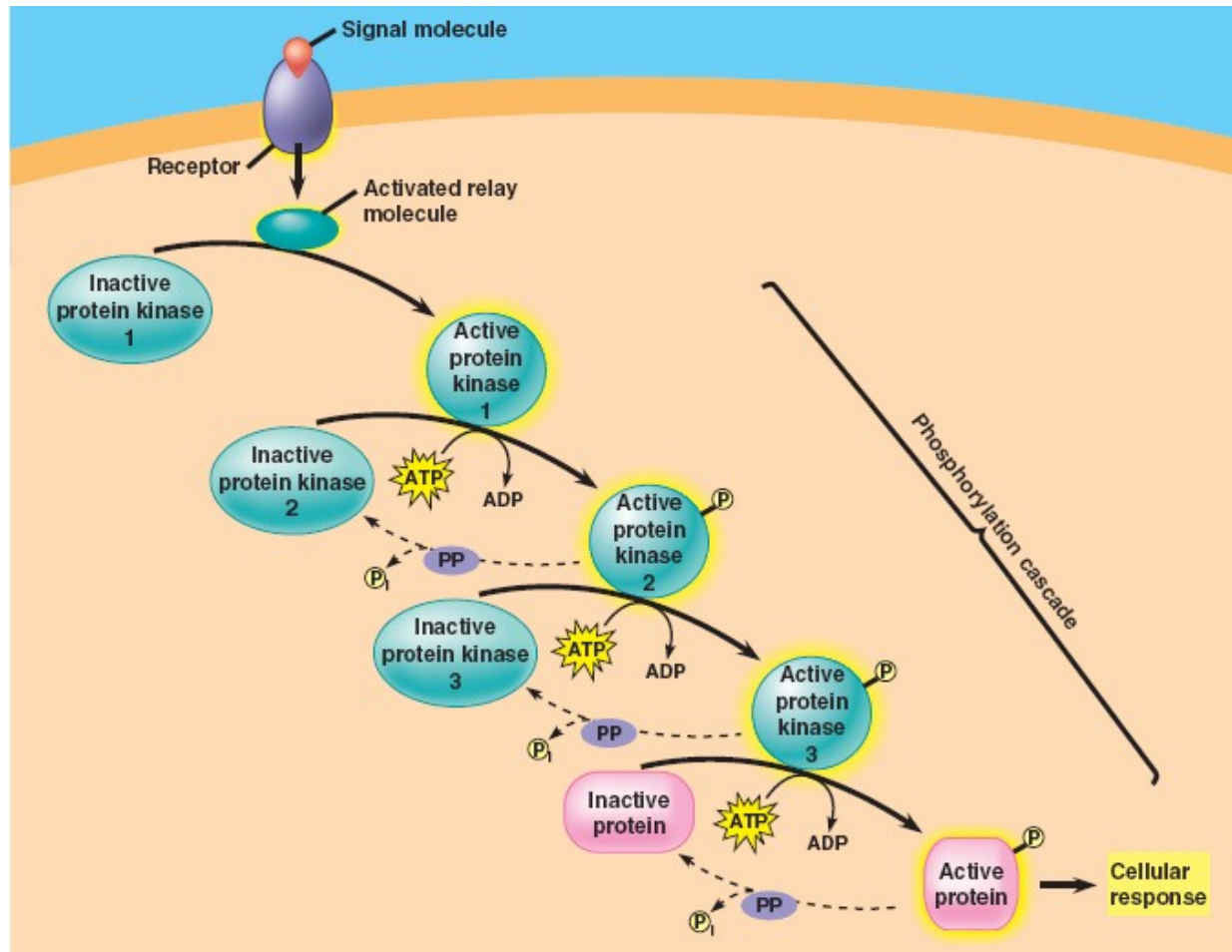
- Stress and anxiety
- Lack of funding and productivity
- Strained relationships in your lab and with your colleagues
- Creation of emergencies all over campus
- Bad reputation

# We think writing is like simple signal transduction.



# But it's more like phosphorylation

## MY IDEA



What I wrote.

# Two forms of writer's block

Acute vs. chronic

# When does writer's block happen?

When you don't know what you're talking about  
- or you think you don't.



# Many reasons for writer's block

The following list was compiled by David Rasch, Ph.D., August 8, 1997. He's from Stanford.

## Procrastination and Avoidance

- Ongoing difficulty with sitting down at desk to write
- Fear of failure or success
- Sense of dread: "It will be unbearable"
- Loss of confidence
- Resentment or rebelliousness
- Time management and planning difficulties
- Repeated cycle of failure and self-promises to improve

# Other habits of mind associated with writer's block

## Perfectionism

- Rigid rules about the process or product of writing
- Unrealistic expectations
- Process of writing is excruciating and slow
- Over-editing on early drafts
- Difficulty declaring a project finished
- Exaggerated fear of criticism

# more

## Negative Self-Talk

- Self-criticism
- Catastrophizing
- Dread and overwhelm
- Pessimism

# more

## Anxiety

- Panic attacks
- Going blank
- Catastrophic thinking
- Reinforced patterns of avoiding writing to reduce anxiety

# Yet more

## Interpersonal Issues

- Isolation
- Reluctance or inhibition about asking for help
- Unresolved conflict with advisor, colleague, boss, publisher
- Reactions to criticism or rejection of a manuscript submitted for publication
- Lack of mentor or colleagues to discuss writing with
- Preoccupation with personal relationship problems

# Still more

## Difficulty Finishing

- Excessive pre-writing research
- Unable to decide what to edit out as unnecessary
- Pursuing peripheral issues, lose sight of main focus
- Working on multiple unfinished projects
- Completing projects but not showing anyone, or submitting for publication

# Even more

## Psychosomatic

- Cramps, headaches, fatigue, nausea, dizziness

## Mental Health Conditions

- Depression, anxiety, substance abuse, grieving, post-traumatic stress, bipolar disorder
  - Attention deficit disorder, learning disabilities
- (Thanks, David Rasch, Ph.D!)

# Worst thing you can do

## Binge writing at or after deadlines

- This reinforces all your bad behaviors.
- You tell yourself, if you just had more time, it would have been better.
- It is disruptive and stressful.
- You don't need large blocks of time to get your writing done. Really. I mean it.

# Best thing that you can do

Daily writing

Free writing

# Daily writing

Single most important contribution to faculty productivity.

Creates the habits of mind, awareness, etc. that go with scholarship.

Everyone has 10-15 minutes they can take back from their day.

Hardest at the beginning, but will yield results.

Challenge: what to write about?

# Free-writing

Writing whatever comes into your head, without stopping, for 5-15 minutes daily (Peter Elbow technique)

- Surprising amount of text can be generated.
- Keeps writing muscles flexible.
- You might actually have a useful idea.
- Good warm-up when you are tackling a big writing project.
- It is NOT a waste of time—it's like playing scales or stretching.
- Checks negativity: “If you hear a voice within you say 'you cannot paint,' then by all means paint, and that voice will be silenced.” –Vincent Van Gogh

# Productive attitudes

- Self-knowledge
- Realism
- Pay attention to your emotions and ‘self-talk’ about writing
  - It helps to have a piece of paper for “out” thoughts.

# Productive behaviors

- Try to write at the same time every day. Productive people create productive routines that allow them to avoid frittering away their time.
- Turn off your wireless connection.
- Work at a café or coffee shop (one where you don't know a lot of people).
- Build fun into your life (Fiore)
- David Rasch says, "Schedule an optimal daily amount. Short, regular sessions (under an hour) are recommended following a non-productive period."
- Manage your deadlines by attending to your output.

# More behaviors

- Give yourself gold stars.
- Break writing project into smaller parts (“bird by bird”).
- Trick yourself into creating achievable and concrete goals, especially after a period of nonproductivity.
  - Half a page.
- Please don’t go out and buy new software, computers, books, pens, journals, etc. in lieu of solving the problem.

# Writing space

- Have a nice space for writing, but don't use your lack of a nice space as a reason to procrastinate. That's what coffee shops are for.
- Your writing space should minimize distractions. Go to a coffee shop with Internet that you have to pay for.
- You can clean your writing space after you have written. Not before. If it's messy, go to the coffee shop.

# When it's a relationship problem

Is your writing problem really an interpersonal issue?

Mentor, colleague, dissertation advisor? Partner?

# Acute writer's block

- It helps to understand that writing and thinking go hand in hand.
- Make an appointment or take a class or workshop
- Writing groups

# Chronic writer's block

- Form of anxiety disorder. Not a moral failing
- Don't isolate yourself.
- There is help.

# Focus is about saying no

- You are the only person who cares about your career as much as you do.
- “Take” a vacation
- When you are being productive you really can write your project in 15 minutes a day

# OHSU Resources

## Research Funding & Development Services

We can help!

- Workshops
- Informal mentoring
- Resources (e.g. bibliography)
- Help with time management and coaching

[funding@ohsu.edu](mailto:funding@ohsu.edu)

# OHSU Faculty Wellness Program

Confidential counseling services for OHSU  
faculty and residents, 0.5 FTE and above

<http://www.ohsu.edu/faculty-wellness/>

# External Resources

- Faculty coaches and development specialists (there are lots!)
  - National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity - [www.facultydiversity.org/](http://www.facultydiversity.org/)
  - Susan Johnson, MD – Thriving Amidst Chaos
    - <http://susanrjohnson.com/>
- Writer's workshops
- Community resources