In this article I deal with two kinds of writing blocks. One occurs when we cannot write in fluent, timely fashion. This first sort of block is a familiar pressure for many of us (and for our students). The second kind of writing block refers to the paradoxical reluctance evidenced by academicians who could but do not offer help to stymied colleagues or students as writers.

The causes of writing blocks are multiple. In the following pages I will review a variety of hindrances to writing fluently, among them perfectionism and procrastination. Overall, though, I focus on the quandary of why we leave the tacit knowledge of writing fluency generally untaught. To accomplish this, I address three related considerations: first, I consider why writing blocks are costly yet neglected; second, I assemble the scattered literature on writing blocks, much of it more interesting than convincing; and third, I draw lessons from that literature and from related knowledge about agoraphobic and dieting failures that could help with all kinds of blocks. In the end, blocking and unblocking may tell us something about why education and its close kin, therapy, often fail.

The First Consideration: Why We Overlook Blocking

As we proceed, one thing will be most apparent: we have, for the most part, overlooked blocking. But we cannot blame our neglect of blocking on a complete lack of prior interest. Long before Freud [59] warned about the watchers at the gates of our consciousness, therapists and edu-
cators speculated about writing blocks. Blocking has found the most currency among psychoanalysts, usually as a label for the inhibition of affect that stifles the discharge of emotions [76]. Writing about blocking also persists in self-help books where creative blocks are tied to nonplayful and rule-bound styles of working [1, 137]. We know more about a converse of blocking, productivity; information continues to accumulate about the general correlates of faculty outputs, such as the age at which doctorates were obtained [9, 38, 53].

Nor can we excuse our neglect of blocking on a lack of personal relevance. Nothing in academe and in related arenas comes close to the penalties for silence [38]; without writing, academicians rarely maximize career rewards [25]. Moreover, writing blocks may play another, generally unappreciated role in shaping our profession. Estimates of graduate students who qualify to write dissertations but never finish them run as high as 50 percent [127]. Rates of disappointment for academicians who survive dissertations and assume professorial careers may be even higher; individuals who want and need to do substantial scholarly writing but do not write comprise some 50–85 percent of faculty [122]. The costs of so many potential writers remaining more or less blocked go beyond anonymity and exclusion; people who are not heard may stop listening [141].

If the neglect of writing blocks lies neither in a lack of prior interest nor in personal relevance, where then? The explanation I favor is that writing fluency is a kind of practical intelligence whose basics remain traditionally untaught. The tacit knowledge of writing fluently is much like that of becoming proficient in other implicit skills essential to thriving in academe; they are often learned incidentally or poorly, if at all [129]. Reasons why the tacit knowledge essential to thriving remains generally untaught comprise the next subsection of this article.

Tacit Knowledge

The problem about tacit knowledge for blocked writers can be seen in a parallel to school children. According to some researchers, what unsuccessful students have not learned is the practical intelligence of managing success in school [130]. Teachers expect students to come to school already equipped with knowledge about how to allocate their time for homework, how to study for tests, and how to talk in class. And, so long as teachers’ expectations remain private, many students will not be able to meet them [54].

Sternberg [128] offers a variety of proofs for the importance of the tacit knowledge that makes up practical intelligence. Its acquisition pre-
dicts success on academic tests and in long-range career activities such as management. Sternberg also provides a reminder about why educators so rarely attend to tacit knowledge: most of the learning crucial to thriving in school depends on informal tutelage and so "much tacit knowledge remains generally unverbalized, it may be disorganized and relatively inaccessible, making it potentially ill-suited for direct instruction" [129, p. 213].

Tacit knowledge carries another handicap: more direct and effective teaching of practical knowledge would require a fundamental reorientation of attitudes and teaching styles [130]. As a rule, teachers tend to prefer students who already display highly developed motivation and sophistication [131].

A related and regrettable phenomenon also hinders our readiness to teach tacit skills in academic settings. As a rule, professors prefer demonstrations of brilliance far more than its acquisition [4]. So it is that we may unintentionally teach in incomplete ways so as to encourage demonstrations of brilliance among the best-prepared and "brightest" students. This preference denies many students a realistic chance to become comfortable and successful.

Why would academicians value demonstrations of brilliance over its acquisition? Astin [4] touches on two reasons. First, we may prefer students like ourselves; professors seem to have been selected for their careers in part by their skills for solving incompletely framed problems. Second, teaching incomplete material may be easier than having to coach students in all the elements of subduing problems. Sternberg [128] adds a related reason: the kind of intelligence we usually value and assess depends on the ability to learn in the absence of direct or complete instruction: "distractors on intelligence tests are frequently chosen so as to be the right answers to the wrong problems. In my own research . . . I have found that the sheer novelty of a task is an important determination of the task's correlation with measured intelligence" (p. 99). So it is, apparently, that we leave untaught and unconsidered some of the most important things to be learned, including the skills and attitudes of writing fluently.

_Tacit skills and writing blocks._ Consider how we impose similar demands for tacit knowledge on ourselves and others as writers. We expect graduate students to learn the craft of writing with little direct teaching. And we value each other highly for persisting in writing for journals that boast of high rejection rates and unencouraging comments from reviewers to match.

The result of keeping the skills of writing and publishing tacit is a
quandary. All but a few new faculty members, even at campuses where publishing is not encouraged, see publishing as central to their professional growth [21]. Yet in most academic disciplines the incidence of those of us who publish is the square root of those who presumably could [122]. One reason for the silence that many of us manifest is a lack of instruction about some of the simplest skills of fluency. Experts on writing productivity suppose that silent writers often lack even the conception of how a scholarly article should be prepared and formatted [38].

While there is a growing body of information on how to write and publish [7], these sources rarely provide tutoring on the most basic of tacit skills such as finding ideas, motivation, and momentum. We have already seen one reason: tacit knowledge is generally untaught and difficult to find in written and substantive form [140]. In the next section, I examine the limitations and benefits of organizing a literature on writing blocks that is usually kept tacit.

The Second Consideration: Making Sense of Writing Blocks

Elsewhere I have annotated but not analyzed most of what has been written on writing blocks [17]. Even a cursory glance suggests that this literature has four salient characteristics. It is, first of all, often marked by an anxious self-consciousness. In my twenty-five years of conversations with colleagues on this topic, the best-known of articles follow the same format: They are humorous, consisting of a title about blocking (for example, "My latest attempt to overcome my writing block") followed by a blank page [135]. Perhaps we exhibit discomfort when we have obviously failed to learn something essential to thriving in academe.

The literature on writing problems, second of all, shows a reticence in providing help. Most of the writers who reflect on how they write seem inscrutable and mysterious. Some simply suppose that analysis can only ruin the spontaneity and momentum of writing [37]. Some conclude that writing processes are too inchoate to specify [3]. And some, including social scientists renowned for their objectivity [27], attribute their writing to a whimsical unconscious. Even where writers claim to share their cures for writing (for example, sharpening pencils before beginning; writing with one's bald pate in the sunshine), the results prove unpromising. As its label suggests, tacit knowledge of writing fluency tends to remain uncommunicated.

The third characteristic of the literature on blocking is its occasional absurdity. Some of the most memorable of writers aimed for little more than shock value; expressions of tacit knowledge, because they are not
subject to scientific scrutiny, may be inclined to exaggeration. Consider Bergler’s claim that blocking is normal and writing is neurotic [8]: “How about normal writers? . . . ‘Normal’ does not suit the writer . . . It is as if one were to say: Hot snow, humanitarian Nazi. . . . Normal people just don’t feel impelled to write. In 20 years of psychoanalytic practice . . . the most depressed, pitiful lot has been that of writers” (pp. 204–24). “The writer is the most antisocial human being conceivable” (p. 239). In his writings on blocks Bergler ignored issues that seemed to demand explanation: why he wrote prolifically, why he helped blocked writers, and whether his disdain for writers contributed to their misery.

But the most frustrating thing about authors, like Bergler, takes us back to the second characteristic of the literature on blocking: therapists rarely communicate their methods for inducing unblocking. So, for example, while Bergler was clear about the supposed causes of writing blocks (that is, we block because we reject our mother’s milk, and, so, our writing), he remained vague about his therapies. Similarly, Schuman’s recent article on curing a blocked writer mentions the therapy only after a long harangue about the failings of other investigations of blocking [120]. Even then, he evidently did little more than shame his blocked patient into a burst of writing. By the end of the article, readers remain uninformed about whether the patient completed his dissertation.

The fourth general characteristic of the literature on blocking is its reliance on speculation, based at most on what worked for the writer offering the advice. Kubie [87], one of the few modern writers to gain much attention with his ideas on blocking, apparently based his notions of a cure on his own experience of writing in the late evening when tired. This presumably gave him access to his preconscious. Some writers, in my experience, find Kubie’s method a soporific.

Similarly, most self-help books on writing blocks [90, 109] offer no evidence for the reliability and generality of the methods they prescribe. Moreover, many such books are notable for the unrealistic ease they promise in overcoming writing blocks. Ross’s [113] claim that writers can unblock in their sleep is typical. My own surveys of academicians who have read these self-help books indicate that their prescriptions seldom have lasting effects [20]. The most commonly listed reasons for this ineffectiveness were (a) the less than credible psychologizing of self-help books, usually in the form of supposed right-brained mechanisms of unblocking, and (b) the lack of clear information about moving from ideas to action.

At first glance, then, the literature on writing blocks confirms what we might expect from dispatches about knowledge usually kept tacit. For related reasons this literature also lacks continuity; its authors rou-
tinely write as though no one before had addressed blocking. But does this mean that tacit knowledge, because of its reliance on lore [96] and incidental learning, is doomed to remain so? A closer look at the literature on writing blocks suggests ways of making progress; we may need to begin with unconventionally systematic reviews as a first step in making tacit knowledge public, verifiable, and useful. Two examples of first steps follow. One draws out commonalities from the most explicit information about the causes of blocking. The second relies on the historical pattern of themes about unblocking.

The Six Most Common Causes and Cures

We look first at the conclusions of writers who evidence the most experience with blockers and who state their conclusions the most clearly and usefully. In my own compilations of the literature on writing blocks [15, 17], two trained judges and I used 100 manuscripts to derive the six most common notions of causes and cures.

An aside. Causes overlap in the subset of literature on the symptoms of blocking, one entirely anecdotal but useful to our understanding of blocking. I overview that knowledge here as a prelude to my analysis of the causes of blocking.

A handful of writers have described the paralysis and discomfort of writing [43]. Perhaps the best-known of these accounts is by an academic: "I worked steadily, though with difficulty and anxiety; I knew, however, that I could last five minutes of difficulty, so I continued. At last the bell went off and I collapsed. I went into the bedroom and threw myself on the bed, breathing hard and feeling my heart race" [136, p. 167].

Besides their fascination, such accounts of blocking carry two other values. One is that blocked writers find relief and hope in discovering that their blocking experiences are not unique. (Might not the equivalent practice work for students who are stuck in a course and who could find encouragement in the accounts of students who struggled but succeeded in the same situation?) The second value is that potential helpers of blocked writers are often surprised to discover how traumatic and disabling blocking can be. (As teachers of blocked students might be in, say, science classes [131].)

To an extent, the following list of commonly attributed causes of writing blocks looks like an inventory of symptoms. The symptomatic account, just above, of Valian's anxiety about writing, for instance, resembles the commonly listed cause of fear of failure. But as a rule, causes are less personal and more abstract. And causes tend to be narrower in scope; most therapists and theorists of writing blocks suppose
that a single cause, say fear of failure, subsumes the whole of blocking. The following list rank-orders causes of blocking from most to least commonly mentioned among salient themes:

1. **Censors.** The most popularly attributed cause of writing blocks is the interference of internal censors. It is also the oldest. We have already seen the classic example, Freud’s recounting of Schiller’s much older “watchers at the gates.” The essential idea in attributing blocking to imaginary, internalized critics has two parts: one is that blockers suffer from having accepted and exaggerated the warnings of teachers, parents, and other authority figures [65, 86]. The second is that blockers use these watchers to reject what could be written — or is being written — before giving the process of writing a chance to generate momentum and useful prose [47].

Tests of the correlates of self-handicapping on academic tasks including writing reveal a kindred process: expectations communicated by parents can play powerful roles in generating internalized pressures and in predisposing problems including procrastination [115].

2. **Fears of failure.** This second most commonly attributed cause of writing blocks is at least as old as Adlerian concerns for feelings of inferiority. And, like the category of censors, it has origins in authority figures. But more than with any other cause, fears of failure have a basis in reality. Blockers perceive writing as difficult and risky because it is: once we reach the dissertation stage, our writing is often rejected by committees, reviewers, and editors. Blockers also notice that academic writing carries a confusion about the costs of failure [98]; expectations of how much writing is enough may not become apparent early enough in professorial careers to be helpful [52]. Like knowledge about writing fluency, general information about how to thrive in academe often remains tacit. One telling outcome of ambiguity about the conditions of failure for new faculty is that it induces self-described immobility for writers [23].

Two variations on familiar patterns of fear of failure merit mention. Some academic writers avoid writing because they fear it could expose them as frauds [23]. And, some fear success as much as failure [114]. But whatever the variations, those of us stymied as writers are especially likely to be fearful of evaluations [34, 125].

Of late, we have learned some new things about the fear of failure. It is, first of all, rooted in anxiety and, so, resembles phobias [115]. That is, it puts a premium on saving appearances in the face of embarrassment, it lowers expectations where failure is a likelihood, and it even limits the credit taken for successes. Second, the problems associated with failure are not so much a matter of the fear as of the resiliency in recovering from it. Bandura [5] finds that early failure is the norm in
creative ventures. The inevitable self-doubt that comes in its wake is not the problem; the speed of reinstating perceived self-efficacy (PSE) is. Ultimately, the problematic part of fear of failure may be little more than low PSE. As in the case of phobias, the result becomes one of avoiding the experience of fear; stated another way, blocking can become a fear of fear.

3. Perfectionism. One irony about perfectionism as a cause of blocking is this: we rarely see its kinship to fears of failure. The traditional emphasis on perfectionism as unrealistically high standards [83] clearly has similarities to fears of not meeting those standards. Another curious quality in both causes of blocking is associated with immoderation. Students who score high on measures of fear of failure tend to choose extreme, not moderate, goals [114]. So it is that the writers already reluctant to begin exacerbate their fears with unrealistic expectations; they, more than already fluent and successful writers, want to write something that is novel, significant, perfect [20].

Perhaps the most useful insight about perfectionism is the most recent. We now know that some kinds of perfectionism are adaptive. Of some six dimensions of perfectionism (concern about mistakes, personal standards, parental expectations, parental criticisms, doubts about actions, and organization), two of them (high personal standards and strong organization) distinguish effective perfectionists with records of competence and success [60].

4. Early experience. This fourth-ranking cause focuses on early classroom traumas with authoritarian and opaque teachers. Scardamalia’s [118] studies of children learning to write confirm some aspects of these claims, especially in terms of how unhelpful teachers can be. Other observers of early experience emphasize deficits in playful opportunities to learn [50], in confidence building [86], and in learning useful rules for improvement [55].

5. Procrastination. Much like blocking, procrastination often elicits self-conscious humor. Consider Murray’s law of delay [93]: “that writing which can be delayed will be” (p. 375). But most studies of procrastination take a serious approach to a costly problem. Recent investigations have distinguished its components including self-disparagement (“self-downing” [49]), emotional cycles of good intentions followed by shame [34], fear of failure and task aversiveness [125], poor self-confidence and task-management skills [89], and busyness displays combined with patterns of binging work [19].

6. Mental health. This sixth most commonly attributed of causes is two-sided. On the one hand, it suggests that the unhealthy nature of
writing acts to block writers. On the other hand, it suggests that writing attracts unhealthy personalities who tend to block. (The animosity displayed by Bergler toward writers is not unique.) So it is that writers often portray writing as crippling [43], themselves as unsociable [133], and each other as embittered and psychotic [48]. Concerns about the perils of writing date back to automatic writers who worked in marathon sessions [92] and to surrealists who relied too extensively on spontaneity in creating art, including writing [26].

The recent explosion of interest in mental health and writing focuses on mood disorders (depression and mania) as afflictions of writers. As a rule, this literature makes little attempt at even-handedness; its depictions of writers are almost exclusively negative. Holden [77], for example, starts with the typical argument: manic-depressiveness appears to be pronounced among writers, especially poets (for example, Lowell, Jarrell), some of whom committed suicide (for example, Plath, Sexton). But Holden is unusual in buttressing his claims with data: in one survey of famous British writers, 38 percent had sought treatment for mood disorders, a rate supposedly thirty times that of the general population. Still, these data are selective. Similarly unflattering levels of mood disorders may occur among other professions. And it could be that writers are atypically likely to publicize their maladies.

Some claims for the pathology of writing do include potentially useful information about hazards. Holkeboer [78], for instance, reminds us that writers work in a high-risk profession where rejections are common and rewards delayed. And Holden [77] supposes that success in writing depends on inherently strong tendencies to depressions and/or mania. The key, presumably, to translating this gift into fluent writing lies in keeping expressions of mood disorders at subclinical levels. (Would we suppose that prosperity as a professor or student relies on a similar phenomenon?)

I believe that this fascinating area of concern for writers may not have much impact until its questions are posed in a more balanced fashion. One example: do some of us work at writing in patterns that heighten mood disorders? There are hints, little known, that writers and even jugglers exposed to binges of writing react with depression and mania [33, 132]. And there is mounting evidence that academic writers who work in moderate patterns reliably avoid dysphoria associated with writing [23]. Thus, much of the problem ascribed to poor mental health and the act of writing might more parsimoniously be linked to immoderate work habits.

The generality of commonly attributed causes. When we take the trou-
ble to assemble the consensus knowledge in an area of information usually kept tacit, how reliable and useful is it likely to be? Heretofore, we have had little experience in winnowing tacit knowledge for public application. This literature offers an especially interesting test of making sense of tacit knowledge because its traditional erudition can be juxtaposed with the growing accounts of direct observations of writers writing fluently or dysfluently.

The most cited description of nonfluent writers is Perl's study of college students composing aloud [103]. She found that unskilled writers spend less time prewriting (that is, thinking and planning ahead about what to write) and more time at premature editing than do more skilled writers. Here is a reliable symptom of nonfluency, one that corresponds to lore about interference from internal editors.

But, subsequent observations of dysfluent writers across all academic levels suggest the existence of other causes of blocking not commonly listed: first, Rose [111] and Oliver [99] relate blocking to rigid and nonfunctional rules held by student writers (for example, writing in a single-draft strategy). Second, Scardamalia [118] saw children struggling with the most basic of hindrances for writers: putting words together. And third, I [19] observed that the junior faculty who accomplished the least writing were most likely to display busyness and binging (that is, persisting in academic tasks including lecture preparation and scholarly writing for periods of at least five continuous hours). It seems, then, that traditional lists of causes for blocking are incomplete. Other studies of blockers confirm that impression.

The most extensive empirical accounts of what inhibits writing rely on thought-lists compiled by blockers trying to write. In one such study, two groups of faculty, one blocked in terms of not producing recent manuscripts and the other productive during the same period, made lists of their self-talk about writing over extended periods at planned writing times [15]. The result of sorting thought-lists into reliable categories is this rank-ordering of blockers' maladaptive thoughts about writing:

1. Work apprehension (that is, an aversion to the hard work of writing).
2. Procrastination (for example, thinking about the need to do other things before starting).
3. Depression (that is, hopelessness, helplessness, and pessimism regarding the writing task).
4. Impatience (that is, wanting to rush to catch up on writing projects).
5. Perfectionism (for example, wanting to produce something better than the usual stuff written for publication).
7. Rigid rules.

Fluent professors showed the same general pattern of problematic thinking but at much lower frequencies overall. The exception came with the commonest thought: productive writers most resembled their counterparts in terms of aversion to writing. Evidently, scholarly writing, even in its fluent forms, is often accompanied by negativism. Fluent writers also evidenced two relatively unique qualities. First, when they talked to themselves about writing at the onset of sessions, productive writers were far more likely to say positive things to facilitate their writing (for example, “once I get started, I will enjoy writing”). Second, fluent writers often plunged into planning for writing and actual writing with little self-talk about the process or perils of writing and with no felt need for “warm up.” To an extent, then, cognitively oriented studies of writers at work confirm the commonly listed causes of blocking: procrastination, perfectionism, depression, and evaluation were reliable hindrances for dysfluent writers. But, customary assumptions about the nature of blocking miss some of the most powerful of causes, notably work aversion and impatience.

We can find a similar uncovering of factors in two related areas of study, on procrastination and on computer anxiety. Only recently have investigators openly supposed that work aversion, impatience, and negative self-talk can act as inhibitions to action [63, 125].

Usual lists of causes of blocking also miss the mark in another way: they typically fail to characterize blocking as a complex of related problems. The blocked writers who thought-listed problems like work aversion and procrastination routinely manifested most of the rest of the list of maladaptive cognitions. Evidently, blocking only rarely has a single cause. And, equally important, researchers who insist that different kinds of writing and of blocking demand separate considerations [39] ignore some of the facts about blocking.

Although this approach to illuminating tacit knowledge by finding its common and clear insights has promise, it has limitations. When this method falls short, even with information added via observational studies, it reminds us of a general handicap of tacit knowledge: the temptation may be to suppose that descriptions suffice for action. The literature on writing blocks teems with explanations but it lacks for convincing demonstrations of unblocking. The next subsection of this article exam-
ines the same literature from a different perspective, one of treatment methods.

**Historical Trends in Treatments**

This second look at the literature draws out its most enduring methods of treatment. In the case of writing blocks, the historical trends have appeared in distinct and sequential fashion. As we will see later, these same four basic methods of treatment combine for unusually effective cures, suggesting that each evolved to supplement the voids left by predecessors. Predictably, each of these four treatments carries the limitations of knowledge commonly kept tacit: as a rule they occurred in intellectual isolation from each other; as a practice they are little known in academe; and, by themselves, each is incomplete.

**Automaticity.** Of all the cures for blocking, the oldest and most persistent are variations on automaticity. "Automatic" means writing with a reduced awareness of what is being written. The success of this method for generating momentum and ideas for writing lies in its effortless, unself-conscious, and self-revealing products [48, 92].

Impetus for using automaticity as an aid to writing came from several directions. The first came as part of recurring advice in the popular literature about finding fluency by writing whatever came to mind (and paper) and without stopping to edit. One of these, published by Borne [28] in 1858, was the eventual stimulus for Freud to transform automatic writing into the rapid-fire, unrestrained talking that he came to call free-association [48]. The second main source of automaticity is even less respectable nowadays. The spiritualists who used "mediums" to record ostensible messages from the spirit world noticed that the method of having these writers write in unself-conscious fashion led to remarkable fluency. A variety of spiritist publications attest to the productivity of automatic writers [26], including poets who conjured seven to fourteen poems per hour and "rarely trivial in subject" [62]. Contemporary experts on automatic writing conclude that it produced some material of literary merit [73].

Inevitably, automaticity became a curative for blocking. James [81] used automatic writing in some of the earliest of published research about the role of consciousness in writing fluency over a century ago. Janet, his contemporary, used automaticity in more verbal fashion to reveal the "fixed" or pathological ideas of patients, without having to deal with their conscious defenses [82]. Of this early work on automaticity, the most durable was that of James's students, Solomons and Stein [126]. Their finding, that automaticity depends more on distracting the
writer's attention from what is being written than on the personal qualities of the writer, still attracts interest [74].

A brief sampling of the laboratory work on automaticity since James gives a sense of the potentials for using "dissociation" (that is, automaticity) to help unblock writers. Martin found that automaticity in visual imaging was more easily elicited than its equivalent in writing [91]. Thus, blocked writers may fare better in beginning with visual planning of how a manuscript will develop than with thinking out specific sentences. Harriman [68], like later clinical investigators, showed that hypnotically implanted conflicts could be uncovered in subsequent automatic writing. Thus, blocked writers who await ideas before attempting to write would do better to let the act of writing uncover forgotten ideas for writing. Hilgard [73], finally, renewed another line of early research suggesting that automaticity works best when writers write with only moderate dissociation from consciousness. Thus, hypnosis (with its conventionally strong form of dissociation) works less well to unblock writers than the mildly dissociative state where writers uncritically write whatever comes to mind.

Recent research on dissociation reflects the ideas and work of Hilgard about why automaticity works. The first reason is that it apparently lowers writers' repressive defenses and allows greater access to inner experience. Bowers [31] used Hilgard's scale of hypnotizability to show that the highest scorers were also the most fluent writers — and the most readily absorbed into writing. Consistent with their lack of inhibition about being hypnotized, fluent writers wrote with only a casual awareness of the words they used; overall, they relied more on images than on consciously selected words. Writers who scored low in hypnotizability, in contrast, found difficulty in proceeding by trusting vague images. Instead, they worked in response to the salient presence of a background editor, a strategy that invites blocking.

The second reason for the effectiveness of automaticity owes to the fluency engendered by writing unself-consciously. Dissociation (or automaticity) helps build a greater motivation to write, which like hypnosis, induces compliance in carrying out mutually agreed-upon tasks. The third reason is that automaticity helps weaken interfering memories [74]. Writers who write with the aid of automaticity seem less burdened by fears of uncovering disturbing materials.

Automaticity has other advantages, mostly forgotten. Ribot saw dissociation as powerful in its own right, as a tool for preparing and simplifying ideas [108]. He also saw the advantage of association in writing, notably in transforming ideas by means of analogy.
In addition to the enduring but obscure tradition of research on automaticity there exists an analogous effort by therapists and teachers. Prince [106] and Erickson [51] helped promote automaticity as a therapy by advocating it as a cure for thinking blocks. Composition teachers who advocated dissociation as a means of establishing momentum and ideas for writing [32] perpetuated the tradition of automatic writing in the classroom [26]. The most widely used of moderately dissociative strategies today is called "free writing" (that is, writing whatever comes to mind, without stopping to edit) [47]. A variety of studies with faculty writers show the effectiveness of free writing for inducing temporary momentum in formerly blocked writers [16, 20, 22].

Why, then, is automaticity so little known in academe? Searching out reasons for its obscurity may provide clues why tacit knowledge generally tends to remain that way. The first reason may be the most compelling. By definition tacit knowledge is not taught; by extension we may assume that it should not have to be taught. By implication, those who teach tacit skills in systematic fashion may be pandering or dealing in ephemeran.

A more specific reason for the unacceptability of automaticity has to do with narrowness and illegitimacy. The links of automaticity to spiritism and hypnosis could not have helped promote its credibility in academe. More importantly, dissociation may have suffered from narrowness. As Ribot [108] hinted, its use without the necessary balance of association would ensure its obscurity. He even implied a reason why practitioners would side with dissociation. The processes of association, used in concert with dissociation, are "constitutive" and more demanding in switching back and forth from the mindlessness of automaticity to the thoughtfulness of planning and organizing. Perhaps because of these shortcomings of automaticity, a more forceful method for unblocking surfaced by the turn of this century.

Regimen. From its outset, advocates of regimen or regular practice in writing have been stubbornly devoted to what I call "practicalism". Its proponents invariably assume that romantic notions of writing have little practical value. Ribot [108] and Royce [116] were leaders a century ago in attempts to debunk what they saw as mystical thinking about writing fluency — an effort depicted by modern-day practicalists as perpetually unsuccessful [102]. The essential points about practicalism and writing were clarified by lesser-known scholars.

The first of these, Downey, elaborated on the demanding, constitutive strategies that actually help induce lasting changes in fluency: exercises in improving mental efficiency (for example, by practicing habits of ob-
servation) and in building mental sets (for example, the simulation of an audience while writing) [45]. A second practicalist, Nixon, advocated similar strategies and offered a reminder that fluent, creative writing is more the result of hard work and of borrowing than of inspiration [94]. His related caution is worth another look: good writing, because it grows effortless with careful and intense concentration, is too easily misperceived as originating in the supernatural. Stated another way, once we have appreciated the tacit knowledge of writing fluency, we may tend to overlook its real basis in regular practice. We may even, as an unthinking way of keeping what we have learned to ourselves, attribute tacit knowledge to mysterious sources such as Muses or desirable genes.

The surprise in this tradition of practicalism is that behaviorists played only a brief, transient, and redundant role in it. Their strategies for unblocking (for example, charts of one's daily progress, setting contingencies to ensure regular writing) had already been a long-term use by successful novelists [64, 101, 139]. While this information, even with the additional publicity provided by behaviorists, has remained generally unknown, it contains a valuable insight about why tacit knowledge is rarely made explicit. Trollope writing in 1883 put it most clearly: "I have been told that such appliances are beneath the notice of a man of genius" [139, p. 78].

Behavioral therapists published the bulk of their work on writing blocks in the 1970s and early 1980s. For the most part, they used single case studies to show that blocked writers could be made to write in response to rewards and punishments [29, 97]. Once they had shown that writing is like any other behavior that waxes and wanes with reinforcement schedules [124], behaviorists may have lost interest in the study of writing block treatments. Nonetheless, some of their efforts were exemplary. For instance, Dillon, Kent and Mallot [44] helped a group of graduate students avoid blocking in finishing their theses with a multifaceted program that included methods for: (a) generating literature reviews, (b) eliciting effective guidance from faculty advisors, (c) incorporating task descriptions and performance guidelines for ensuring quality in thesis writing, and (d) effecting timely completion of thesis writing via powerful contingencies. This strategy not only proved effective but two-thirds of the students involved in this demanding program gave it strong approval.

Still, that study and subsequent demonstrations of the effectiveness of produced or forced writing for blockers [11, 13, 17, 67, 112] left an understandable uneasiness in romanticists. The usual reservation is whether forcing productivity before writers found inspiration and readiness in-
hibits the quality and creativity of their writing. The few attempts to
answer these qualms have generated a consistent result: writers who
work in a regimen of regular writing, regardless of readiness or mood,
produce more writing and evidence more creative ideas for writing than
do writers who wait for inspiration before beginning [12].

Regimen persists as an effective but low-profile strategy for unblocking. It works to a point by inducing the regular habit of fluency in
writers who previously had problems of self-discipline. But it fails when
academic writers eventually drop the external contingencies, including
rewards and punishments, that keep them in schedules of writing [18, 20,
22]. Much as Deci and Ryan [42] might have predicted, forcing denies
the sense of self-determination that comes with writing in response to in-
trinsic motivation. So it is, perhaps, that the next tradition of treatment
to emerge paid more attention to the internalization of unblocking; in
the long run, intrinsic motivation may be more important than extrinsic
contingencies [2].

Cognitions. The earliest practicalists paid attention to internal events
in unblocking. Downey [45] reviewed the methods extant in 1918 for
enhancing mental imagery (for example, auditory versus visual imag-
ing), inner speech (for example, auditory versus vocal modes), and stylistic
considerations (for example, melodies versus rhythms of writing). Nixon,
after detailing exercises for developing inspiration, added his usual practical advice: “imagination is not a mysterious and magical
faculty, but a normal mental process of relating revived associations.
Within limits it is subject to practice and improvement” [94, p. 310].

Until recently, cognitively based methods for encouraging fluency
survived mostly in the fields of composition and communication. In the
former, Flower and Hayes [55, 56, 57] refined the old technique of hav-
ing writers think aloud as they wrote to document their “problem repre-
sentations.” The result was confirmation that more experienced writers
have better developed representations which enable them to build quick
images, plans, and senses of audience. These tacit skills of fluency have
only rarely been taught in direct fashion [54].

In communication research, Daly has taken the lead in uncovering the
internal and external habits of writers [39]. His widely-used Writing
Apprehension Test [40] assesses the behaviors, emotions, and cognitions
behind the kind of blocking specified in the title. That test has generated
extensive research, some of which confirms the obvious (for example,
writing apprehension has roots in the intimidating practices of teachers)
or raises questions (for example, the possibility that writing apprehen-
sion is unrelated to self-esteem).
One of the first signs of renewed interest in cognitions and treatments for blocking in psychology was Barrios and Singer's study of unblocking with imaging techniques [6]. Their blocked writers were recruited via newspaper advertisements and assigned to one of four treatments: (a) as hypnotically induced dreamers, (b) as waking imagers, (c) as rational discusers, or (d) as controls. Both groups of imagers (dreaming and waking) practiced themes aimed at helping them unblock in their creative projects. Although Barrios and Singer present only abstract results of their experiment, they indicate superior satisfaction for the two imagery groups over the blockers who had no intervention or else met for rational discussions. One of Barrios and Singer's most intriguing results appears in an aside. Some of the subjects with the highest levels of hostile or guilty daydreaming were unlikely to unblock. (In the parlance of automaticity, these writers probably failed to dissociate their guilt and anger from their writing.)

More recent studies of cognitions and unblocking have shown mixed promise due to a confusion of methods, usually a practical mixture of interventions [112]. Consider the study by Salovey and Haar [117], perhaps the best study published in this area. They recruited sixty-four subjects who scored high on the Writing Apprehension Test and subjected one group of them to cognitive behavior therapy (that is, stress inoculation techniques, rehearsal, and application where subjects identified negative self-statements and replaced them with coping statements). A second group received a combined treatment of cognitive behavior therapy and of "writing process" training (for example, free writing, breaking writing tasks into manageable units). The overall result: the two treatment groups were only slightly better than no-treatment controls on self-reports of improvement. Laboratory measures of progress showed improvements only in the quality, not quantity, of writing for the combined treatment. Overall, then, we cannot conclude much about the potential of either intervention for unblocking.

The most promising work on cognitive strategies for unblocking continues to come from the field of composition [110], much of it relying on "thinking aloud" and "directed retrospection" protocols to access the self-talk of writers [57, 84, 102]. Flower's program for teaching by "reading-to-write" methods is the most visible of these [54]. In essence, she and her colleagues are building fluency in writing by immersing students in the conversation of their disciplines. The basic notion is akin to one of imparting tacit knowledge: students must do something to learn something. In higher education parlance, we might label this assumption "involvement theory" [4, 100].
More specifically, Flower [54] helps students learn by ensuring that they begin their learning venture with an appropriate task representation. What typically handicaps unsuccessful students is that they try to solve the wrong problems (for example, hoping to write everything they know on a topic). What can help them learn to write more fluently and effectively is a clearer focus on solving problems such as scheduling regular daily times for important tasks like studying and writing. To use Flower’s terminology, writers need to learn to engage in active metacognitions about writing that will enable them to talk about problems and strategies, to effectively monitor their writing, and to develop a variety of writing strategies.

Overall, though, the cognitive approach to treating blocks seems no more ready to stand on its own than the older areas of automaticity and regimen. My own studies of simple cognitive therapies as treatments for blocked professors suggest that when applied alone their effects on fluency are fleeting [22]. That is, while blockers report a fondness for the exercises of identifying and supplanting their negative self-talk, they quickly realize that doing so is not sufficient to keep them writing amid distractions and busy schedules. At the same time, they spontaneously comprehend that they also need external pressures and social supports to make writing efficient and effective.

Social skills and supports. This fourth trend of treatments is most recent. It came to real prominence with feminist efforts to make the usually unwritten rules about writing and publishing more democratically accessible [119]. Some of the messages from this literature on tacit knowledge are as timeless (but necessary) as reminders about the importance of regular hard work at writing in effective schedules [58]. And some of this practical information is as new as admonishments to use word processing and softwares to ensure fluency [36, 70, 85, 143].

At its most effective, this form of help for blockers emphasizes the social supports and social skills of scholarly writing. Here, more than anywhere else in the historical trends of treatments, a crucial step in determining the tacit skills that need teaching is emphasized. That is, many of the prescriptions for establishing collaborations and support networks rely on observations of already successful writers. My own work on professors with exemplary careers, for instance, models interventions after their habits of success [24]. Specifically, I have found that junior faculty who accomplish little writing can be induced to mimic the patterns of peers designated as “quick starters” who balance time spent on writing with that invested in social networking. Analyses of the concomitants of success in the productivity of professors in general suggests
a powerful role for a similar degree of balance and moderation between
time spent on writing and on collegial networking [38].

The key result of coaching junior faculty to emulate the habits and at-
titudes of quick starters has been a clear increase in scholarly productiv-
ity. Blocked faculty who averaged 0.6 hours per week at writing and 0.1
manuscripts submitted per year improved to a mean of 3.1 hours and of
1.1 submissions to refereed outlets. Moreover, these same junior faculty
were able to approximate the greater success at teaching of their exem-
plary colleagues by moderating the time they spent preparing lectures.
Evidently, junior faculty who fare poorly in student ratings also tend to
overprepare their lectures in ways that lead to fast-paced presentations
and limited student involvement [21]. Taken together, these results sug-
gest that faculty writers, despite their reputations for intractability, can
be taught the tacit knowledge of fluency — much as the practical intelli-
gegence of thriving in schools can be taught to students [130].

The value of combining historical trends. As we proceed through the
four historical trends for treating writing blocks, a realization grows: the
treatments should work even better in combination. As I have noted,
each of them seems to work in isolation but only to a point; indeed,
where the four treatments have been combined, evidence is strongest for
lasting unblocking. My own study of coaching new faculty to mimic the
patterns of quick starters just reviewed is an example: blockers fared
best when they addressed the sequence of automaticity, regimen, cogni-
tive management, and social networking.

Another study helps illustrate why combined treatments work more
effectively [22]. I picked ten representative professors who had received
individualized treatments in only one of the four singular interventions
for at least a year. Each of the groups experienced an “on-again, off-
again” paradigm of treatments in alternating months that produced mod-
erate indicators of improvement for singular treatments. Blocked pro-
fessors in the free writing group met their goals for writing output in less
than 10 percent of participation weeks. Those in the condition of writing
on a regimen, with external contingencies to force writing, generally met
their goals for output, but only during alternate months when the con-
tingencies were in effect. Professors in the cognitive treatment group
met their productivity goals in but a third of their workweeks. And,
former blockers in the group that arranged social networks and collabo-
rationss wrote congenially but sporadically.

Overall, none of the participants in singular treatments judged the in-
terventions as wholly satisfactory. Nor, in a series of adjunctive mea-
sures, did I. When we looked at the results in terms of (1) sessions with
immediate starts, (2) sessions with negative self-talk, (3) weeks with collegial networking related to manuscripts, and (4) sessions with relaxed, slow-paced writing, none of the singular treatments produced durable effects across dimensions. Only in a fifth group exposed to a sequencing of the four treatments over an academic year did faculty evidence balanced and moderate success over the breadth of measures of unblocking.

A final point addresses the advantages of combining methods of unblocking to results not seen with singular treatments. For one thing, the combined group evidenced remarkable persistence and stability in writing output for over a year and more beyond treatment. For another, these writers put a high stated value on moderation and patience in writing. Once they learned that writing could become more leisurely and enjoyable in brief sessions, they opted for more modest output goals (usually more in line with campus expectations of about one published manuscript per year for tenure and merit raise considerations). By their own accounts, the combined group participants were writing more slowly and more economically while "luxuriating" in more revisions and detailing.

To communicate this new experience, a recently unblocked colleague brought me this quote about an eighteenth-century naturalist often considered the most skillful writer in history: "Buffon wrote as a man freed from want and dowered with time; there was nothing hurried in his work, as often in Voltaire; he labored as carefully with his words as with his specimens" [46, p. 573]. Without this aid to making writing a more relaxing and skillful activity, evidently, some of the most meteoric of writers, soon fizzle [72].

One other study of professors as writers has taken a broad-based approach to fluency. Hartley and Branthwaite [69] used survey data to conclude that the following habits contribute to productivity: (1) starting with rough drafts, (2) completing sections one at a time, (3) using a word processor, (4) revising and redrafting at least twice, spending two to five hours per week on writing, (6) finding quietude for writing, (7) setting goals, (8) eliciting comments from colleagues on early drafts, and (9) collaborating. In the main, these recommendations follow the themes of historical interventions already reviewed — from automaticity (starting with rough drafts) to social skills (collaborating).

The Third Consideration: Generalizing about Unblocking

Before revisiting the parallels between the four historical stages and tacit knowledge, I briefly overview extant theorizing on writing blocks.
Existing Models of Unblocking

Tradition holds that remedies for writing blocks resemble those for creative blocks.

The creativity model. In this view, blocking occurs because of problems in the incubation of ideas or in accessing ideas from the unconscious [87]: the creativity model, then, usually reflects romantic notions of inspiration. The clearest example of this approach attempts cures by means of "creative dreaming," an idea with origins in the creative artists who report that creative impasses ended after vivid dreams or waking fantasies [79, 122]. A study by Davé [41] is often considered the best proof. He used hypnosis to induce nocturnal dreams that, in turn, apparently led to improved creative problem resolution for blockers.

A critical test of Davé's conclusions came in the study by Barrios and Singer [6] mentioned earlier in the present review. While they found indications that hypnotic and waking images produced more unblocking than did a control condition, the intervention aimed at blocking fell short in two ways. First, the conditions of induced dreaming were not significantly more effective than a rational discussion group using ordinary problem-solving strategies. Second, post-session dreams reported by participants evidenced no obvious relations to outcomes.

A related assumption of the creativity model is that blocking is best cured by waiting for inspiration and motivation. Simonton restates the essential idea clearly [122]: "The muses cannot be coerced but they do offer spontaneous gifts if they are left alone" (p. 191). Research on this question, again, shows that automaticity and regimen, both species of forced or involuntary writing, result in more and better writing than does waiting for spontaneity [12].

Perkins [102], the modern day counterpart of Royce and Ribot, argues against traditional models of creativity thusly: "Inheritors of Freud, we find easy belief in the unconscious as a place where mysterious things happen" (p. 50). In general, Perkins argues, we tend to overestimate the power of incubation: "discovery depends not on special processes but on special purposes" (p. 101). Two other practicalists, Flower and Hayes [56] add a related point: Inspiration is ill-adapted to solve writing problems, most of which are really problems in thinking. In sum, then, creative models of blocking rely on unverified processes, such as incubation, whose value in unblocking remains more a matter of attractiveness than of proven effectiveness. Stated another way, creativity theory may be a way of perpetuating the preference for writers who demonstrate brilliance spontaneously.

The separate components model. The other model of blocking with
currency also operates on an assumption of specificity. Its adherents believe, as we have already seen, that there are as many kinds of cures as there are types of writing and blocking. Daly, an authority on writing anxiety, makes the most heartfelt case [39]:

The potentially appropriate model for procrastination lies in teaching something akin to time management. The writer learns to go to a specific location each day and do nothing but write: No distractions are allowed. While this behavior management may work for procrastinating writers, it may have little impact on blocked writers. What may be appropriate for them is “forced” writing, where something must be put down on paper whether it is meaningful or not (e.g., writing whatever comes to mind; free-flowing brainstorming). Misdiagnosis of or a confusion about the nature of a writing problem will lead to inappropriate therapies of limited effectiveness (p. 71).

While Daly presented no evidence for his claims, other researchers have tried to do so. In a test of the specificity model, Peterson [104] measured the independence of three supposedly separate measures of blocking: (1) the Writing Apprehension Test [40], (2) the Writer’s Block Questionnaire [111], and (3) the Procrastination Assessment Scale — Students [125]. Peterson’s conclusion: “Overall, the results of the present investigation suggest that writing block, writing anxiety, and procrastination are related as constructs, at least as measured by questionnaires” (p. 169). Of course, even a limited demonstration of separateness for these three measures would have been of limited value in concluding that each type of blocking demands a separate intervention. Questionnaire responses about people’s supposed tendencies to block probably cannot prove what therapies are most effective.

Evidence comes easier for combined therapies. One kind of informal support for their power goes beyond the experimental evidence for increased productivity we saw earlier. When therapists attempt to conduct interventions in singular fashion, they may unobtrusively add other kinds of curatives. One example harkens back to the cognitive therapies that added mechanisms such as writing process training to induce regular writing. Other examples include the recent attempts of specifists to treat the seeming idiosyncratic blocks of individuals with strategies such as deflation of grandiosity [88] or time-management [10]. They too ended up using a commonplace mixture of interventions for blocking. Of course the nature of tacit knowledge may contribute to this intermixture; so long as the causes of blocking remain ambiguous, so must the treatments.

In the final analysis, though, the case for specificity suffers most when combined treatments are tested on blockers with a variety of diagnoses.
In one study, a heterogenous group of blocked professors was given diagnoses on an assessment of blocking styles and severity — The Blocking Questionnaire [20]. Regardless of diagnosis, the same sequence of four treatments — automaticity, regimen, self-management, and social management — worked equally well in effecting unblocking. Moreover, this combined treatment worked democratically across another dimension claimed as inviolate by specifiers: the phase of writing at which the writers had blocked. That is, unblocking was equally effective across the spectrum of blocking points — from being stuck at getting prepared for writing to being stymied at revising a completed manuscript [19, 22]. (Where have we, those of us in higher education, already seen an idea similar to this specism? Most notably in claims that we cannot generalize about teaching, that each discipline and each classroom has its own specific rules [142]). In the main, then, extant theories of writing blocks have provided little help in making blocking a better understood and treated malady. The solution may lie in looking elsewhere for ideas about ways for making the tacit knowledge of fluency public and useful.

The IRSS Model.

The four approaches to tacit skills to be reviewed here concern what could be called four elementary components of tacit knowledge. Without mastering these usually untaught lessons, I argue, academic writers will not thrive. Coincidentally, the combination of these four components parallels two independent sources of information: (a) the four historical stages we have already seen for unblocking strategies, and (b) newly formulated ideas from the field of student development. In the model that follows, the four stages of treatment for blocking make up the mnemonic of IRSS:

Involvement. This first component of tacit knowledge is the simplest and, arguably, the most essential. At the student level, individuals who get involved in their campuses and in learning stay in school and excel [4, 100]. More to the point, general practice falls far short of this ideal; the average college student is remarkably uninvolved in campus resources and social activities [5]. And, as a rule, campuses do little in direct fashion to foster the tacit skills of involvement of their undergraduates; those most in peril of failing, unfortunately, are minority students [4]. Why would involvement facilitate thriving in academe? It affords chances to learn by doing [54]. And it encourages what may be the most optimal of conditions, of learning first in a social context and then internalizing it [138].

Does involvement have ready relevance for writing fluency? We have already seen the bountiful advantages of automaticity, of an unself-
conscious immersion in the act of writing. And we already know that blockers are characteristically deficient in their readiness to make this leap of faith. Recall that faculty categorized as quick starters, in contrast, were most likely to display a wealth of involvements: they were uniquely inclined to make time for regular writing, even in the busiest of schedules; they were the most likely to seek collegial advice and collaboration for writing; and they evidenced the most curiosity about the process of writing and publishing.

Regimen. This second component of tacit knowledge is often called task management in the student development literature. Sternberg, Okagaki, and Jackson, for example, use this label to include the teaching of ways to break habits, to become organized, and to get tasks done on time [130]. In unblocking, regimen has a similar application. It means putting writers on a schedule while easing them away from distractions and interruptions. It means teaching the ability to produce writing in substantial amounts, regardless of mood. And, it includes lessons about the value of working with balance and moderation [107]. After all, most productive writers in academe limit their writing to but a few hours a day, to little more than they invest in collegiality [38, 69].

Why does regimen need balance? Skinner, though an advocate of regimen, saw its limitation [123]. When we force writing, he warned, we can reinstate the very conditions that blocked problem writers in the first place. Himself a prolific writer, Skinner placed enormous value on writing in patient, careful, fashion [124].

Another quality of regimen merits mention: once practicing it, writers usually reencounter the benefits of the other three steps. Tremmel's experiments with classes of freshman writers make the point [134]. He began with strong skepticism about the value of forced, regular writing, and students initially reinforced his doubts. But once Tremmel's classes wrote in a regular regimen, they found a variety of benefits besides increased productivity: self-discipline, fondness for writing, time for writing, confidence about writing, and a curiosity about becoming more skilful writers. Tremmel's point, one relevant to the IRSS notion of tacit knowledge, is this: teachers of writing may have erred in the beginning by teaching about product (that is, grading only the finished product) and process (that is, demonstrating the elements of constructing good syntax). Instead, Tremmel concludes, we would do better to begin by teaching the habit of regular practice at writing. In so doing, we would be teaching the tacit knowledge of already successful writers.

Self-management. This third component of IRSS theory represents two ideas, Flower's notion that poor students typically solve the wrong problems [54], and Sternberg's strategies for teaching the tacit skills of
self-management [129]. Both are essentially kinds of cognitive management. Consider Flower’s description of task representation; in her view, it is best taught when the teacher can “(1) teach students to understand and expand on their own repertoire of strategies for planning, revising, and so on; (2) create a context that supports thinking processes we value; and (3) also help students examine some of the nonsupportive contexts and assumptions they may be carrying in their heads” (p. 12). Said another way, a basic step in unblocking consists of ridding oneself of negative self-talk and maladaptive expectations.

The parallel process of learning for academic writers is already familiar from our review of cognitive therapies: when blockers learned to recognize and replace their negative self-talk, they found a modest improvement in fluency and a major increase in comfort with scholarly writing. But cognitive therapies for blocking may do something else that we have yet to verify. They may provide the crucial link in moving from transition between motivation and action [95].

Social networking. The fourth component of the IRSS model is the uncommonly taught skill of making writing more public and more publicly acceptable. That is, this step in unblocking focuses on social supports such as arranging collaborations or eliciting useful feedback while writing is still in its formative stages. It includes coaching in the appropriate formats for publication, in meeting the specific expectations of scholarly outlets, and in learning from criticism [20]. It also builds on Vygotsky’s notion that learning occurs most effectively when acquired in a social setting and internalized later [138].

Here again, there is substantial footing in research on student development. Sternberg’s equivalent category is called “cooperating with others.” As he and his colleagues teach it to students, social management is a matter of figuring out networks and their rules, of being able to assume the perspective of other people, of solving communication problems, and of working in small groups that permit a playful way of learning to critique what is being taught and how well one is doing in his or her work [130]. Another version of social networking is Flower’s scheme, seen earlier, for immersing writing students in the conversations of their disciplines, especially in person-to-person collaboration [54]. The essential result of this involvement and socialization as she sees it is learning metacognitions about writing including the essential skills (what I call tacit knowledge in this article) of expert writers.

When this last of the four steps in unblocking is experienced by sty- mied professors, one especially salient thing happens. First, they report that writing is transformed from an essentially reclusive activity to a more sociable enterprise. Not only do former blockers specify ways in
which they improve their writing by means of collegial feedback on early drafts. But they also note the sharing of information about writing skills. On my own campus, this process included the spontaneous sharing of an article on clear writing in science [66]. In sum, the IRSS model suggests a means of organizing our conceptions and treatments of writing blocks. It also implies a structure for defining writing blocks, something that has heretofore been a problem [15].

Defining Writing Blocks

Traditionally, practitioners have defined blocks in terms of the singular cause, say perfectionism, that they associated with blocking. Of the less specific definitions, Skinner’s is among the most useful [123]. He supposed that blocking is the product of extinction (due to the lack of rewards for most writing) and suppression (due to punishments that often accompany writing). His definition is useful because it offers a compelling reason why blockers tend to remain blocked: when blockers do manage to write, they usually do so under the most aversive of conditions — amidst deadlines, fatigue, and hurried prose that invite rejection and reinstate the extinction and suppression that brought on blocking in the first instance. What remains is the need for a definition that is even broader than Skinner’s focus on writers who struggle to finish or begin manuscripts.

Defining writing blocks in the IRSS model. The IRSS definition says that blocking, at least for professors, has four components: (1) Blocking is, first of all, a failure of involvement in writing as an act of discovery. (2) Blocking is, second of all, a failure of regimen, of practicing writing regularly and in moderation. (3) Blocking is, in the third place, a deficit in self-management of the negativism and pessimism that can accrue to scholarly writing. (4) Blocking, finally, has roots in common practices of keeping writing a private endeavor, one where criticisms and rejections come as a surprise once the seemingly finished product is exposed to public scrutiny.

Implicit in each of these definians is a specific strategy for unblocking. As we have seen, therapies that combine the four specific interventions work with especially broad and lasting results. Another test for the IRSS model of blocking and unblocking lies in applying the definition and treatment implications to kindred maladies.

Links to Other Kinds of Blocking

Each of the following examples of blocking, despite their seeming distance from the problems of higher education, has a message for helping academic writers thrive.
The case of agoraphobia. As a clear instance of a phobia, agoraphobia (with its fear of open places, crowds, and public embarrassment) can also be considered a kind of blocking. Agoraphobics are unquestionably uninvolved in normal society. Their anxieties about the need to make excursions from their homes occupy an inordinate, unbalanced amount of time. And, they often try to solve their problem in impulsive ways and with a minimum of social support (for example, sudden trips to the bank at a time when lines at tellers’ windows are long and threatening and without the presence of a supportive friend).

The common treatment for agoraphobia, like writing blocks, is forcing — usually by means of public exposure. But merely eliciting the desired approach behaviors may not be sufficient for lasting cures [75]. Where, for example, patients become able to force themselves to enter crowded shopping malls, they may do so with persistent discomfort including greatly elevated heart rates. But when therapy includes cognitive restructuring and social skills training, the outcome is far more comfortable and durable.

The case of dieting failures. The parallel in linking patients who fail at diets to blocked writers is not so immediately obvious as with agoraphobia. But the recent expansion of research and theory about dieting failures offers an interesting and demanding extension of the IRSS model. Consider the escape theory of dieting failures [71]. It hinges on the documented observation that people labelled as dieting failures are perfectionistically sensitive to their public images. When they cannot face up to their images, they engage in self-talk about failing, they reinforce their already low self-esteem, they disinhibit the self-control they had established as dieters, and they binge at eating.

How can this seeming obverse of writing blocks (that is, eating versus silence) pertain to the IRSS model? Part of the answer lies in the reminder that both dieters and blockers turn to bingeing when their goals for managing their appearance are not met. The difference lies in the waiting that usually precedes a proper bout of bingeing at writing. Another part of the answer comes in comparing the usual treatments and treatment failures: both rely on forcing and both fail most commonly by way of bingeing. Add to these another similarity: both kinds of bingeing are self-reinforcing — for writing because it induces a powerfully effective kind of forcing and for dieting because it necessitates the resumption of even stronger forcing.

The message in dieting failures, as in writing blocks, is that treatments need to extend beyond strong forcing. Heatherton and his colleagues advocate two strategies [71]. One relies on the finding that dieters who adopt moderate restraints of dieting show greater weight loss than strict
dieters. The second strategy aims to enhance the self-esteem of dieters as a first step in treatment, a change that can reduce bingeing and weight over the long run [105]. Self-esteem may promise similar benefits for writers. It could, for example, help reduce the excessively self-focused attention that anchors so many psychopathologies [80].

My own ongoing research on writing blocks among academicians provides a partial confirmation about changing the self-concept of blockers. While I have not found low self-esteem a reliable correlate of blocking, a related index, of pessimism, is proving highly predictive of writing blocks. Moreover, I am collecting evidence that Seligman [121] is correct in claiming that pessimists can be taught the tacit skills of optimistic thinking; when optimism replaces pessimism, fluency replaces blocking.

Researchers in the tradition of extracting the correlates of faculty productivity find that two other related concepts, self-competence and self-efficacy (that is, seeing that what they do makes a difference), predict behaviors and products of faculty [9]. These same investigators make a point about encouraging fluency that has gone unmentioned here. One good way to influence self-efficacy and, in turn, productivity is to conduct workshops on grant proposal writing for faculty. In this way, faculty can be induced to write with prospects of benefit for themselves and their campuses.

Reprise: The Two Kinds of Blocking

What can we learn by comparing writing blocks to other kinds of blocks? This exercise in finding parallels reinforces the notion that blockers suffer most from a failure to have learned the tacit skills of thriving in various parts of society. In the view taken here, blockers need more deliberate teaching and more patient teachers to unblock.

We have seen optimistic signs that the basic elements of unblocking, such as involvement, can be taught in direct and effective fashion. And we have considered some evidence that the IRSS model helps make sense of the previously elusive concept of blocking and of the tacit skills behind persistent unblocking. What, then, would keep higher educators from adopting this approach to unblocking themselves, their colleagues, and their students?

We have already seen some of the reasons. Tacit knowledge, by its very nature, resists easy presentation and elicits discomfort about whether its teaching amounts to pandering. Other reluctances were only implied. One is that academic life has never been a favorite topic of examination or reflection by professors [35]. When they are asked, for instance, to describe the ways they teach, they typically become inarticulate in ad-
mitting that they haven't thought about it; Weimer [142] labels the result a lack of teaching awareness. Professors are no better able or inclined to describe how they write [22]. Given the inertia in examining how we perform, we may persist just as we have.

A second reason for resistance derives from the hindrances already listed. It is, in effect, a disinclination to either teach or learn tacit knowledge. In my perpetual surveys of new faculty, conducted semester after semester [21], I have learned something surprising by asking about how these colleagues intend to improve their teaching. Many junior faculty members volunteer that they want to learn to teach well on their own; they prefer demonstrations of brilliance in their students and in themselves. These same new faculty, not surprisingly, express a related preference for learning to write fluently without direct and obvious instruction.

In the final analysis, then, we can see that the momentum of social Darwinism may persist in academe; even those of us who fail to find fluency reserve special respect for colleagues who master the tacit skills of thriving without observable help. Perhaps this little-discussed tradition of academe accounts for some of our neglect of useful information about blocking and unblocking. It may even help explain why we perpetuate misbelief about writing fluency including the claim that there are too few pages in scholarly journals to publish the majority of silent academicians who may have something worth communicating in print. With the advent of electronic publishing, we have a plenitude of pages and opportunities for writing in the most specialized of areas [61]. And even if that argument against helping blockers is abandoned, skeptics can always resort to a close relative, such as the claim that writing undermines good teaching [14].

Still, there is hope for alleviating this second kind of block about writing. The traditions of providing treatments for blocked writers grow slowly but surely, especially among composition teachers. And, it may be that the weight of discovery in student development will promote the teaching of tacit knowledge. Most promising, perhaps, is the move in academic recruitment for more democratic, egalitarian representation of faculty and students on our campuses [30]. We cannot meet the growing demands for accountability in this important venture unless we more readily impart the tacit knowledge of thriving in academe.

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