

On Being Stuck

Dealing with Writer's Block and Other Obstacles

On Being Stuck (In the Middle)

“Here in the muddy middle is where confidence erodes, not because the writer lacks ability but because the process becomes *complex*. The [work] demands decisions. Real ones.”

J.D. Barker, “Writing a Novel: The Psychology of Quitting”

Rolling Stone May 8, 2026

Face the Problem

“καὶ πρὸ ὁδοῦ γίνεται τὸ τῆς ὁδοῦ ταύτης
ἐνστατικόν.”

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 5.20

“What stands in the way becomes the
way.”

Gregory Hays, trans.

What
stands in the way
becomes the way.

- 1) Reframe the Problem
- 2) Act to Overcome the Problem
- 3) Have the Will to Deal with the Consequences

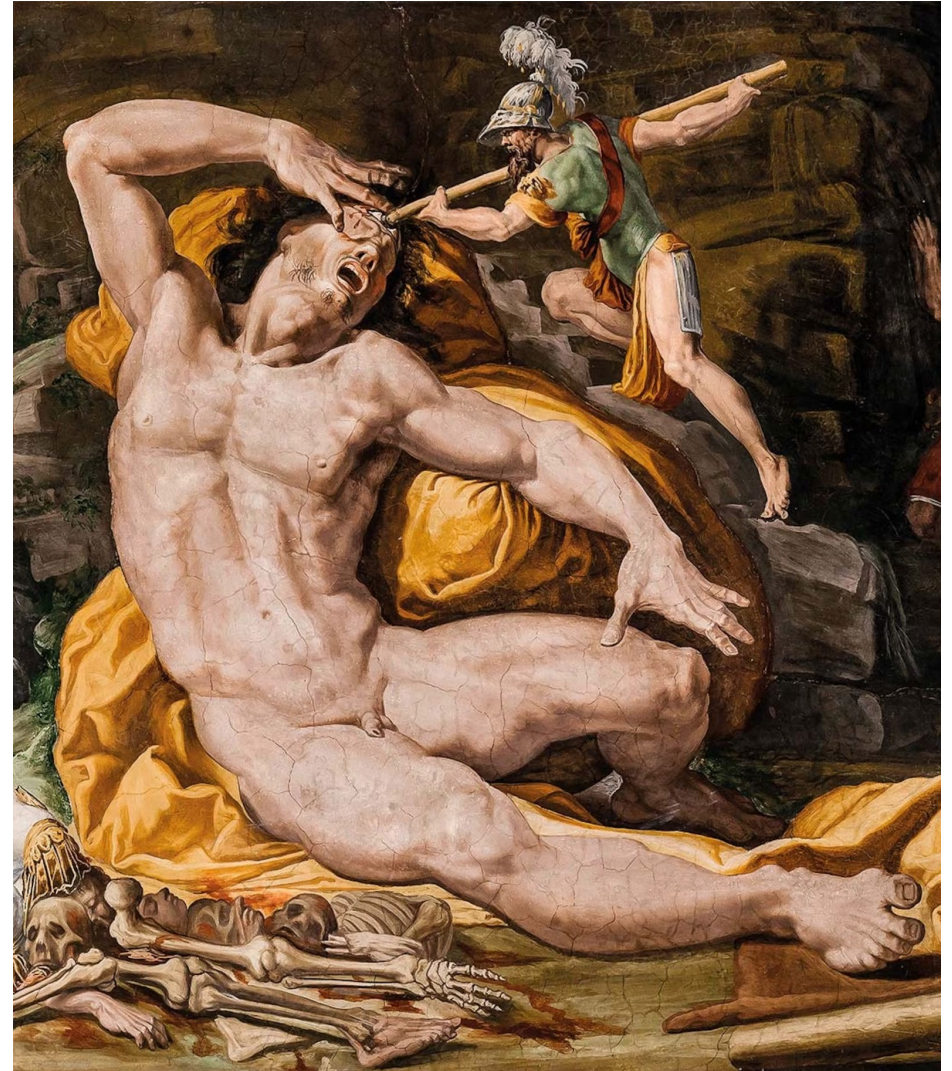
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1) Reframe the Problem



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2) Act to Overcome the Problem



What
stands in the way
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- 3) Have the Grit to Deal with the Consequences



5 Techniques for Getting Unstuck

- 1) Get Small
- 2) Explain it to a Freshman
- 3) Get Big
- 4) Talk it Out
- 5) Reverse it

Getting Un-stuck: Get Small

Write two sentences:

- 1) After reading this, the reader will understand...
- 2) After understanding this, they will be able to...

Getting Un-stuck: Explain it to a Freshman

Pretend you're talking to a first-year undergraduate major. Explain the concept you're working on to them in language they can understand.

Getting Un-stuck: Get Big

Focused Freewriting

Just write for 30 minutes (I like to use Write or Die) about the issue. Don't stop. Don't edit. Don't worry.

Getting Un-stuck: Get Big

Focused Freewriting

(click the image to go to a web-based app that can help you freewrite)

Write Or...

Set your timer, click start, and then get writing. If you think too much or stop writing, you'll get a "consequence."
Turn on 🧠 mode to make it even more interesting. Based on the beloved but now sadly 🧠 Write or Die tool.

3 min

5 min

15 min

30 min

1 hour

🧠 Mode: Off

Words: 0 WPM: 0

00:00:00

Start Writing

Stop Writing

Copy Text

Reset

Getting Un-stuck: Talk it Out

Writing Groups

Voice-to-Text

AI as a Writing Partner

Getting Un-stuck: Reverse It

Reverse Outlining: create a paragraph-by-paragraph outline from the draft of your paper