On Writing:
Overcoming Writer's Block…The Programmer's Way

Scott Coon

When I went to school for programming, one of the first things they taught us was how to look at a monstrous task and not run off into the night screaming.  This skill came in handy when I was asked to whip up a little program to convert signature cards into signature images with all of the typed data stored as digital data… oh, and make it flexible so it can be used by any bank in the English speaking world regardless of what data they put on their signature cards.

Yes, that happened.  And, yes, I finished that project.  But I started by breaking it down into smaller units of work like designing a configurable dataset.  Then I broke that down into even smaller steps like designing a configuration file for the dataset.  Then I just did that one, little thing and that one little thing was done, setting me up for the next little thing.

Often I sit before my computer with that next chapter to edit or before a scratch pad with the seeds for a new story all over it and I find myself deflated.  I just can't do it.  It's too much.  I want to just try again tomorrow.  But then I tell myself that, first, let's just do one thing—one little thing—THEN I can call it a day, I promise.

I almost never keep that promised because once I get going I keep going.

If I'm on a scratch pad with my seeds, I'll just start jotting down questions.  I build my ideas into stories by asking myself questions about those ideas.  If you're stuck on a story that you are brainstorming, you most like have a question waiting to be asked.  Write it down.  Then start writing answers to it.  Always write down the bad answers or they'll keep crowding the good ones out of your head.  Also, when the bad ones are down there with the other good and bad answers, they sometimes come together to make something amazing.

Here's an example of merging ideas at a very early stage of brainstorming.  Inspired by a convention panel, I had wanted to write a story about an animal that drank something from humans other than their blood.  At the same time I was exploring the idea of putting firefighters in science fiction settings; firefighters have a lot of untapped potential in the genre.  My first question was, "What does this animal  drink and why does it drink it from firefighters?"  The answer ended up being adrenaline.  And I was off.  This story would later be published as "Hero Rush" by Bewildering Stories.

If I am facing a complex passage that needs to be reworked because I know that I did not get it right the first time, then I just set off one chunk and look at that.  A chunk would be a single paragraph, a couple of small paragraphs, or a section of dialogue up to a logical breaking point.  After I isolate the chunk by creating white space around it in my word processor, I explode the paragraph into individual sentences or even phrases.

This paragraph is from my story "Type-II Agoraphobia" published by Pariah:

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     Shane was at the end of a chain of six- and
seven-year-olds strung together by a safety cord.  He
had the whole thing looped back around to its
beginning, where the hapless Janet had hoped to keep
Shane and his questions as far away as possible.  At
the apex of the loop, another boy tested the cord's
integrity by trying to lunch off into space, pulling
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off the kids to either side of him as he launched
again and again.  Station security kept a shuttle
posted above us, just in case the kid made it.
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Yeah, not so smooth.  But it's not all bad.  Some of that needs to stay but some needs a fix.  Exploding the paragraph helps me sort through it.  Sometimes, I find it best to break the sentences into ideas allowing me to alter the flow of information through the paragraph.  Here is this paragraph exploded with some thoughts I had on how to fix it at the time.

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       Shane was at the end of a chain of six- and
seven-year-olds strung together by a safety cord.
(needs Janet here? Establish that kids not roaming
free?)

       He had the whole thing looped back around to its
beginning,

       where the hapless Janet had hoped to keep Shane
and his questions as far away as possible.

       At the apex of the loop, another boy tested the
cord's integrity by trying to lunch off into space,
pulling off the kids to either side of him as he
launched again and again.  (superfluous detail!)

       Station security kept a shuttle posted above us,
just in case the kid made it (or…?? Imply other
dangers and setup for coming disaster!).
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Once the paragraph was exploded, I went sentence by sentence fixing my language.  I also considered which information was really needed and in what order the reader would need to know the information in order to form a complete picture in their head.  When I was done, I had a much better paragraph:

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       Shane was at the very end of a chain of six and
seven year-olds strung together by a safety cord and
tethered to Janet's waste.  The rambunctious boy had
the whole string looped back around to its beginning,
thwarting Janet's attempt to get away from him and his
endless questions.  At the apex of the loop, another
boy tested the cord's integrity by repeatedly trying
to lunch himself into space.  Station security kept a
shuttle posted above us, just in case the kid
succeeded, amongst other things.
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This improvement started with nothing more than exploding the paragraph and looking at the shrapnel of sentences and sentence fragments.  By focusing on just what was wrong with this

paragraph, I was able to get myself moving.  I would later hit another wall where a passage seemed insurmountable. But then I would break off one more little chunk and keep on going.

Of course, the number one thing to overcoming writer's block is simply keeping your butt in that chair.  So, just sit there and do just one unit of work, just one little paragraph, just one little question to brainstorm.  THEN you can call it a day, I promise.