

WRITER'S BLOCK IN A CHINESE SAMPLE¹

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Summary.—To assess whether writer's block occurs in languages other than English, a Chinese language translation of Rose's Writer's Block questionnaire was administered to 98 university students in Taiwan. Analysis suggests that writer's block occurs for Chinese students, and, as in English, it is related to premature editing and to a lack of strategies for dealing with complex writing tasks.

Good writers have developed efficient strategies for dealing with complex writing tasks, sometimes termed "the composing process." Good writers spend more time in planning than less accomplished writers (7, 8) producing at least an informal plan, but one that is not excessively detailed (4). Good writers are also willing to change the plan as they write and are in general willing to revise (11, 12): They realize that as they write new ideas occur (1, 3). Good writers also understand that excess concern with form while writing interrupts the generation of ideas. They do not confuse editing with actual writing, and they delay editing until ideas are on the page (7).

Failure to utilize these strategies is one source of "writer's block," defined by Rose (9) as "an inability to begin or continue writing for reasons other than a lack of basic skill or commitment" (p. 3).

Writer's block has been operationalized by Rose in the form of a writer's block questionnaire (9), presented in the Appendix (p. 542). There is a Blocking subscale which concerns behaviors associated with writer's block, e.g., "There are times when I sit at my desk for hours, unable to write a thing." Rose's questionnaire includes two other subscales on what may be considered potential sources of writer's block: the Premature Editing subscale, dealing with strong concern with form while writing, has items such as "Each sentence I write has to be just right before I'll go on to the next sentence" (see Appendix, p. 542), and the Complexity subscale for lack of strategies for complex writing tasks, e.g., "There are times when I'm not sure how to organize all the information I've gathered for a paper."

Rose (9) administered the questionnaire to 351 university students and obtained significant correlations between scores on the Blocking subscale and both the Premature Editing ($r = .37$) and Complexity ($r = .59$) subscales.

In validation of the Premature Editing and Complexity subscales, Rose examined the composing behavior of 10 university undergraduate writers,

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including several who scored high on the Blocking subscale (1 *SD* above the mean) and several who scored low. From observations of their writing and subsequent interviews, Rose stated that those classified as High Blockers tended to engage in premature editing more than those classified as Low Blockers and had inappropriate strategies for dealing with complexity. One High Blocker, who scored 1.9 *SDs* above the mean on the Blocking subscale, was so preoccupied with editing and correctness she often forgot the thought she was trying to express (9, p. 46). This writer also did not engage in sufficient planning before writing, "but planned in increments as she wrote" (p. 48), which prevented her from getting a sense of the essay.

Thus far, all research on blocking has been done with English-speakers living in North America. The present goal was to assess blocking in Mandarin Chinese in Taiwan. It seems highly unlikely that blocking is limited to North Americans writing in English. Chinese is an especially interesting case. It has been argued that the rhetorical structure of Chinese prose differs in several ways from English prose. Essay writers in Chinese are said to use fixed classical essay patterns, emphasize traditional values through the extensive use of quotations and references to the past, avoid imposing their own views on the reader (2, 5), and prefer an inductive style, delaying the introduction of the thesis (10).

If blocking occurs in Chinese and if it is related to the same factors as in English, namely, premature editing and lack of strategies for dealing with complexity, then at least some aspects of the composing process may be the same in languages with different rhetorical styles. We hypothesized that subjects writing in Chinese would exhibit blocking, as reflected in scores on Rose's Blocking subscale and that in Chinese, as in English, scores on the Blocking subscale would correlate positively with scores on the Premature Editing and Complexity subscales.

As additional support for the generality of the blocking phenomenon, we also examined the consequences of blocking. Rose reported a positive correlation between scores on the Blocking subscale and responses to his "Lateness" subscale (see Appendix, p. 542). As expected, those who reported more blocking tended to turn in their written assignments late. This behavior was checked for the current sample.

METHOD

Ninety-eight college students enrolled in National Taipei University in Taiwan were subjects, 32 men and 66 women. All were taking an English writing course. Forty were first-year students majoring in English and were taking the course as a requirement. The other 58 were students with other majors (mostly business and law), were from all four years of university study, and were taking the course as an elective. Subjects completed a Chi-

nese language version of the Rose questionnaire, prepared with the kind permission of the author, Dr. Mike Rose. To ensure that the Chinese version was accurate, back translation was used: two highly proficient bilinguals (university professors who were native speakers of Chinese) translated the Chinese version back into English to confirm that the versions were identical.

Factor analysis (Principal Components Analysis with varimax rotation) was performed on the Chinese version of the Rose blocking questionnaire. Factor loadings of .6 or higher were considered a defining part of each factor, as is consistent with the results of applying the formula provided by Norman and Streiner (6, p. 174), which recommends a minimum factor loading of .52 for our sample size. Lowering this criterion did not greatly affect the results (cf. Appendix, p. 542). The Principal Components Analysis extracted three factors, and all the items were significantly loaded on their designated factor, Blocking (Items B1 through B5 in the Appendix), Premature Editing (Items E1 through E5), and Complexity (Items C1 through C5). The variance explained by each factor was 11.45%, 16.29%, and 34.4%, respectively. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy was .82, meaning all items were sufficiently good in explaining the overall scale. The total variance explained was thus 62.15%. Coefficient alpha for the entire scale was .84.

Rose did not perform a factor analysis but reported high intercorrelations among items for each subscale. In general, our results were consistent with Rose's three subscales, but there were some exceptions: Item E3, originally part of Rose's Blocking subscale ("I find myself writing a sentence then erasing it, trying another sentence, then scratching it out. I might do this for some time.") clearly loaded on the Premature Editing factor and was therefore shifted to this factor. Another item, "There are times when I find it hard to write what I mean" loaded on more than one factor and was deleted.

Each item on the questionnaire and the scoring system was discussed with the subjects before it was administered. The completion of the questionnaire took approximately 30 to 40 minutes.

RESULTS

Questionnaire results suggest that blocking on the five items occurred for Chinese students. Subjects chose among five options in response to each item, ranging from almost always (90 to 100% of the time), often (75% of the time), sometimes (50% of the time), occasionally (25% of the time), almost never (0 to 10% of the time). Scoring the responses from 1 to 5, the most highly blocked respondent would score 35, the least would score zero. Chinese-speaking subjects scored 18.1 ($SD=4.3$; M item score = 2.4), indicating a modest blocking (<50% of the time).

Pearson correlations between scores on the Blocking subscale and the Premature Editing and Complexity subscales were positive for both English and Chinese students and of similar magnitude. The correlations for Premature Editing were not significantly different ($z = .97$), English speakers' correlation between Complexity and Blocking fell short of significance as larger than the correlation for Chinese students ($z = 1.36$, $p = .09$).

TABLE 1
CORRELATIONS FOR BLOCKING, PREMATURE EDITING, COMPLEXITY, AND LATENESS

Study	<i>n</i>	Premature Editing	Complexity	Lateness
1. English (9)	351	0.37	0.59	0.37
2. Chinese	98	0.39	0.49	0.53

The consequences of blocking were similar across languages, supporting the hypothesis that scores represent the same phenomenon in both English and Chinese groups. Rose reported a correlation of .37 between scores on the Blocking and the Lateness subscales. For Chinese-speaking students, the correlation was also positive ($r = .53$) and significantly larger than the one reported by Rose ($z = 1.75$, $p = .04$).

Our results show that blocking, measured by a Chinese language version of the Blocking subscale on the Rose questionnaire, is reported for university students in Taiwan who wrote in Chinese. The version we used was only slightly different from Rose's original version. One item was deleted, and another was moved from the Blocking subscale to the Premature Editing subscale based on a factor analysis. In addition, our results support the hypothesis that for Chinese, as with English, writing blocks are related to premature editing and failure to develop strategies to deal with complex writing tasks. They are also consistent with the hypothesis that the aspects of the composing process are similar in Chinese and English.

We do not claim that inefficient composing processes are the only cause of blocking. Other candidates include the inefficient use of time and the belief that one must wait for inspiration before writing (1). But we have identified at least one likely contributor to writing blocks that appear to occur for students in Chinese as well as English. For some cases of writer's block in Chinese and English one should delay editing until ideas are on the page, plan, but employ a flexible plan, and be willing to revise.

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APPENDIX

FACTOR LOADINGS AND COEFFICIENT ALPHA FOR SUBSCALES (PRINCIPAL COMPONENTS ANALYSIS) OF ROSE'S WRITER'S BLOCK QUESTIONNAIRE, CHINESE VERSION

Item†	Blocking	Premature Editing	Strategies for Complexity
B1. There are times when it takes me over two hours to write my first paragraph.	.77	-.43*	
B2. It is awfully hard for me to get started on a paper.	.64		
B3. There are times when I sit at my desk for hours, unable to write a thing.	.82		-.42*
B4. Some people experience periods when, no matter how hard they try, they can produce little, if any, writing. When these periods last for a considerable amount of time, we say the writer has a writing block. Estimate how often you experience writer's block.	.74		
B5. When I write a paper, I'll hit places that keep me stuck for an hour or more.	.71		-.40*
E1. Each sentence I write has to be just right before I go on to the next sentence.		.74	
E2. I'll wait until I find just the right phrase.		.78	
E3. I find myself writing a sentence, then erasing it, then trying another sentence, then scratching it out. I might do this for some time.		.65	
E4. My first paragraph has to be perfect before I go on.		.79	
C1. There are times when I'm not sure how to organize all the information I've gathered for a paper.			.63
C2. It is hard for me to write on topics that could be written about from a number of angles.			.80
C3. I have trouble figuring out how to write on issues that have many implications.			.82
C4. I find it difficult to write essays on books and articles that are very complex.			.69
C5. I have trouble with assignments that ask me to compare and contrast or analyze.			.70
Reliability: Cronbach alpha	.83	.76	.82

†Reproduced with permission of Dr. M. Rose (9). *Loadings > .6 and < .3

Lateness Subscale

1. I have to hand in assignments late because I can't get the words on paper.
2. I run over deadlines because I get stuck while trying to write my paper.