

# Overcome Writer's Block ... Write a Letter

BY BRYON CAHILL

**A**ck! You are hunched over your computer or laptop. Your fingers are hovering above the keyboard. The ideas swirl around in your head restlessly, desperate and eager to escape. You know what you have to write about—your topic is screaming to be written—but nothing is happening. Now what? You need a fast cure. Should you stand on your head or jump on one foot?

The next time you find yourself withering under the incredible power of writer's block, try following this advice: Write a letter.

**W?** No, not that kind of letter! A *letter* letter! Pay attention, dear reader!

## 'The Tyranny of Perfectionism'

In her book *Bird by Bird*, writing teacher Anne Lamott says, "When you don't know what else to do, when you're really stuck and filled with despair ... try telling part of [your story] in the form of a letter. The letter's informality just might free you from the tyranny of perfectionism."

When you strive to make your writing perfect, the strategy often backfires. That is what Lamott means

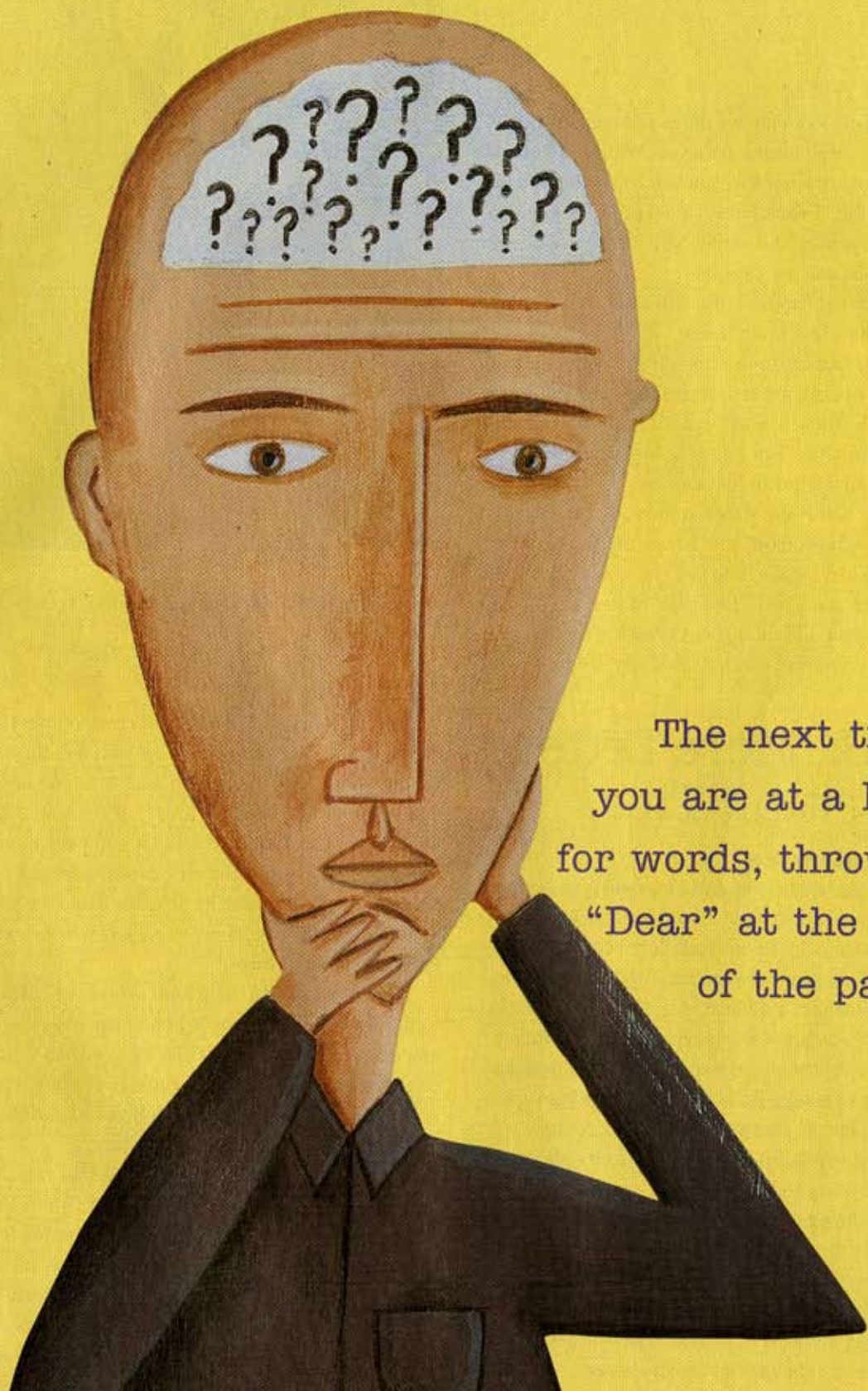
by the "tyranny of perfectionism." Your desire to write a flawless sentence can often keep you from getting any words down at all! But if you clear your head and write a letter, before you know it, your story, essay assignment, or research paper will begin to write itself.

## Up Close and Personal

When was the last time you wrote a long letter or e-mail? Do you remember how your words became such a constant flow that you had to stop and shake out your cramped hands? There's no rule that says all writing can't be that easy!

A letter is the most intimate form of writing. You can use it not only for fiction but also to describe something that's close to your heart.

Have you ever noticed how telling a friend about a personal experience makes you revisit it? The memory can be as emotional and real as the actual experience. Now try to picture how easily you could write if you were communicating your thoughts, feelings, and memories in a letter. Addressing a friendly face can make all the difference.



The next time you are at a loss for words, throw a "Dear" at the top of the page.

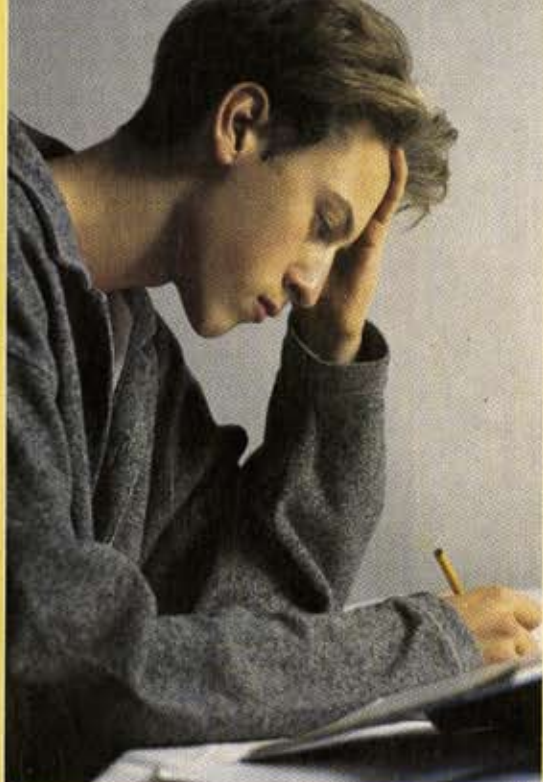
## Panic Attack!

Sometimes, looming due dates and dastardly deadlines can cause mental paralysis. With your impending doom on the horizon, you may try fooling yourself by thinking, "I work better under pressure anyway." But eventually the stress will arrive, and your fingernails will get gnawed.

When that happens, the letter-writing technique can unthaw that brain freeze.

Once, Lamott found herself up against a wall, staring a magazine-article deadline straight in the face. The article was to be about how she was a life-long Giants fan. Not knowing where to begin, she composed a letter to her son Sam.

"Dear Sam," she wrote at the top of the page, "I want to tell you about how I loved the San Francisco Giants when I was a little kid." By replacing her editor's sour glare with the image of her son, Lamott unburdened and unblocked herself. She was then able to smoothly and successfully recount many




—Image State/PictureQuest

valuable baseball memories. Her letter to Sam set her words free.

## Cloud Nine

Writing a letter is a powerful and creative tool that can help you get your groove on with any form of writing that you're doing. The next time you are at a loss for words, throw a "Dear" at the top of the page. Once you have said all that you have to say, take your letter—and that airy, carefree feeling you had while writing it—and incorporate it into the draft of the essay, paper, or longer work of fiction you originally intended to write.

This technique can help with serious or difficult topics as well. Letter writing can help you explore emotional complexities. It can be a way to vividly convey your memories and truths to readers while connecting them to a larger human experience, which is the goal of all good literature.

Student Eric Sütter tried to do just that when he wrote about a harrowing experience. When Eric found that he wasn't sure how to express his feelings in essay form, he found it easier to detail the episode in a letter to his friend Marijke. Read his letter/essay on the next page, and try to visualize the difficult episode and the relief Eric must have felt once his words were released. 

## P.S., More Letter-Writing Tips

- **Be a know-it-all.**

In your letter, write down everything you know about your subject. Don't stop the facts from flowing. Bust it out now. Sort it out later.

- **Talk to your baby brother.**

If you have a difficult idea, concept, or thesis that you are trying to understand, try writing a letter about it to a younger brother or sister (or a younger kid in your school). When you explain an idea in the simplest of terms, you will learn the nuts and bolts of paraphrasing and come across as an expert.

- **Make up an imaginary reader.**

Sometimes, envisioning an actual person on the receiving end of your letter can halt the creative process. An imaginary reader, however, will never have a harsh word to say about you or your writing. Conjure away.

## DANIEL

By Eric Sütter

Hey, Marijke,

I don't feel like writing this down in an actual letter, and I probably won't be able to talk to you till at least much later, but I do need to say something to somebody right now.

I witnessed the death of a man, today. His name was Daniel. He was painting the house next to us. He was on the top couple of rungs of the ladder when it folded under him. It was a cheap ladder. Corroded aluminum.

I am right in the line of sight on the back porch of our house; I hear the ladder starting to collapse and see him hit the ground. At first I call out to him. He doesn't respond. I guess I should have called 911 then. I don't. I run over to him.

He's barely conscious. I ask him if he is OK, and he can't form any words. He's moving around his left arm, as if searching for something on the ground. I remember that he has glasses and then see them lying 5 feet away on the grass. I put them on him. One arm of the glasses had snapped off, so they don't go on straight.

I get my mom. When she gets there, she asks him what his name is. "Daniel," he wheezes out. She asks him what day it is, but his eyes glaze over, and he loses consciousness. She goes in and calls 911. When she comes back out, she tells us that paramedics are on the way. Then she just stands there waiting next to him, and I sit next to him with my hand on his shoulder. He's convulsing, and he gasps. I can feel his body tensing up under my fingers. I let go. He is foaming at the mouth. We talk to him, saying stuff like, "It'll be OK; the ambulance is on its way." And, "Just hold on, Mr. Daniel, hold on, till the ambulance gets here." He's still for 20 or 30 seconds at a time, not even breathing, it seems like. Then he convulses gently. Each time he convulses, I feel myself sighing in relief that he hasn't gone yet. It is more serious than I thought at first.

He was still alive when the paramedics finally got there. But (the fireman said later) he stopped breathing and his heart stopped beating as they stood over him, checking his pulse. They did CPR on him, right there on Ms. Selma's lawn, and a few minutes later, they loaded him onto the ambulance.

I say to the fireman, "How is he? Is he alive?"

"Well, his heart and breathing stopped as we were checking him, and they're trying to bring him back now, on the ambulance."

"So that's it, huh?"

"Yeah, that's it. I mean, they might get him back, but not yet."

Um. Yeah. So I'm a little shook. I went back to painting for a few hours, just because ... what else am I going to do? Sit in the house and think about it? No, I just felt like immersing myself in work for a little while. But now I'm taking a lunch break, and it's all coming back to me.

I was painting our house on the ladder yesterday, about 10 feet higher than the one he was on today. That could've been me. And can be me, later today. Well, sorta. I have a good ladder. But anything's possible. This is real life, Marijke. I feel like I've just woken up from a dream, and Daniel was my alarm clock. Yeah, I'm shook.

Eric