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Shedding light on medical websites

Find trustworthy health and medical information online

By Juliette Savin

Both as readers and as writers we often turn to the internet to find information about medical conditions. Whether we are trying to self-diagnose unusual symptoms, find information about the health benefits of certain products, or check facts about a condition, finding good, trustworthy medical information on the internet is not always easy. But there are resources out there. WebMD and the Conversation are websites that provide well-documented articles written or reviewed by experts and are easy to understand. Unlike other online publications, the writers and editors of these websites read the scientific studies they report on and select them on the basis of their scientific relevance, and not on their hype factor.

WebMD (<http://webmd.com>)

All content on WebMD is reviewed by at least one professional medical doctor. Whether it is part of a feature article or news content, every single article, graphic, video or animation posted on the website is reviewed, and approved, by a medical doctor before it goes online. The editorial team of nine comprises five medical doctors who constantly scan the medical literature for news and updates on current medical knowledge and research.

The stories are then carefully selected by the editors, who report on only the relevant, or clinically significant studies. This seems trivial, or obvious, but it is not. This is precisely what makes WebMD trustworthy. The medical literature is a jungle of information, just like the internet, in which everyone finds it hard to find their way. Most journalists and editors still choose to report on medical and health stories based not on their relevance or clinical significance, but on what they think their audience will want to read. This is dangerous because not all medical and health news stories are scientifically significant enough to be worth reporting on.

Most studies need to be checked before they can be handed over to the general public. Unfortunately, very few journalists do that. WebMd stands out from the crowd because its reporters and editors check the validity of the studies they report on.

About Us

Our Class Magazine is published three times a year (sometimes under different names) and is written and edited by the students of "Magazine Writing: The Works," at www.writingclasses.co.uk.

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As well as news pieces, WebMD offers a wealth of information about all medical conditions. Their articles cover popular health topics such as dieting and exercise and more specific health needs such as those of women or teens.



Websites like WebMD and The Conversation provide accessible information and shed light on complex medical topics.

The Conversation – Health + Medicine section (<http://theconversation.edu.au/pages/health>)

The Conversation describes itself as an independent source of information, analysis and commentary from the university and research sector. The team of editors works with academic experts to make their knowledge and expertise accessible to all. The articles in the health and medicine section are written by scientists or medical doctors and report on recent scientific studies.

Because the authors are experts, they are up-to-date with the latest research on the topics addressed in the articles. They only write about topics they think are worth commenting on, and give their informed, expert opinion. From debunking homeopathy to explaining the ethics of using the placebo effect in research, they address complex topics in very clear and simple terms to make them understandable to all. The Conversation is a great resource if you are looking for expert opinion on controversial topics or reviews on specific conditions, such as autism or Alzheimer's.

Juliette Savin is a science writer and translator living in Munich, Germany.

How to cure writer's block

Why writer's block is a curse to us all

By Annie Hay

Many of us who have experienced writer's block will recognise the feeling of frustration coupled with self-recrimination. Feeling stuck is bad enough, but the barrage of self-criticism and questioning makes matters even worse. The internal nagging voice which says, "Do I have anything to say?" or "Will it be good enough?" stops us in our tracks, and the accompanying feeling of anxiety, self-doubt and incompetence can be debilitating.

A Personal Journey

Writers block can be agonizing for people who experience it, students, researchers professional and amateur writers alike. However it has other widespread negative consequences. Writer and researcher Adeleine Strummer speaks from a first-hand perspective. "There are many things I would like to have expressed but hit a wall instead. I hate to think now of the ideas and research, just wasted."

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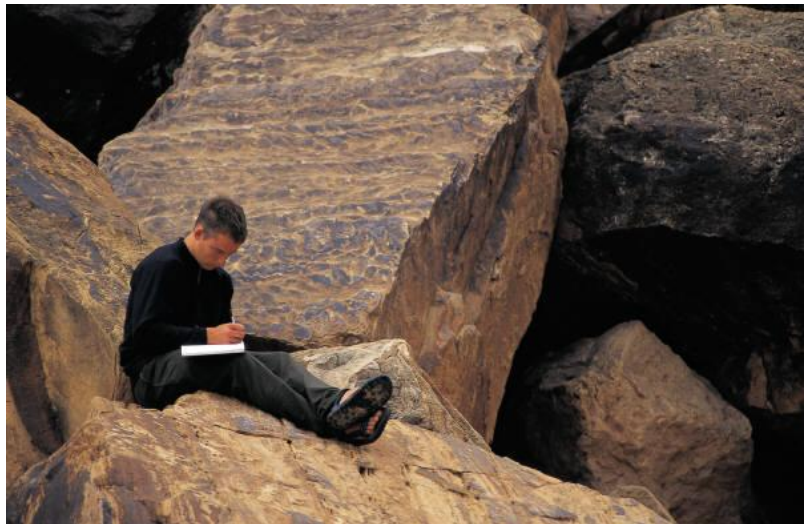
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Many ideas, new developments, research and discoveries are not communicated to the rest of us because of writer's block. Loss of creative energy and experience, the subsequent failure of much good work getting published is detrimental to us all. It is society's loss.

From a Professional Perspective

Edinburgh psychotherapist Graham Davies says, "It's unfortunate that so many people live with these life-limiting problems when they can be quite easily and effectively worked through." Davies says that different factors may be at play. One such factor is grandiosity whereby the "Be Perfect" driver raises internal demands "to get it right" before risking committing to paper. Failure to be perfect can lead to extreme anxiety. Another factor is procrastination, where the writer protects against the fear of "not knowing enough yet" by endlessly drawing out the planning process, taking copious notes, and allowing the project to become so out of hand that it never happens.

Revealing our ideas can be exposing, leading to feelings of shame, a need to hide or escape. But, says Davies, "Writers can address the feelings of threat which have been stirred up at a deeply unconscious level. While the underlying conflict is heightened by the prospect of committing ideas to print, the very act of writing can be cathartic."



How Writer's Block Can be Tackled

For those of us affected by writer's block, there are several ways we can help ourselves. We can give ourselves permission to be imperfect. Perfection is the enemy of creativity. We can learn to enjoy the ebb and flow of our activity, enjoying the process, rather than focusing entirely on the end product. We can release the tension in our minds by changing focus, exercising, playing an instrument, listening to music, and even making a jigsaw. We can explore our strengths but also our vulnerabilities and our inner critical voices; these are often at the root of creativity. By listening to the creative force of our inner child, we can experiment with playfulness and pleasure, allowing for mess and chaos. It is so important to try not always to get it all right, to be perfect.

Writer's block is a problem which affects both sufferers and many potential recipients of the creative process. Meaningful and relevant work is simply getting stuck in people's heads, held back by issues deep within themselves which with the right encouragement could become unblocked. Strummer now says, "When I started to write again, albeit slowly and cautiously, I began to find new energy. Ideas which previously were held back as if in a mist, at the periphery of my field of vision, started to come to the fore. Writing is really a healing process."

Annie Hay is an Edinburgh-based writer.