Burning Questions
or: How to fight back the Grinch

- “So what is it that you want to tackle now? Is it getting in the flow, or finally finishing this paper? Or is it getting back the fun?”

- “Can I be just egoistical? I want to get back the fun.”

This is a writing conference. Stephanie is a writing tutor, short hair, dark glasses, a straightforward person with a passion for literature and writing, and with lots of dimples in her cheeks. Her eyes have an expression of genuine and sympathetic interest in the person vis-à-vis.

Julie*, her client, is a professional environmental activist, in her thirties, working on a fact sheet about impending patents on plants and animals that big multinational companies try to put through European legislation. “They want to make money out of patenting plants and animals that have lived on the earth as long as we can think”, Julie explains. The paper is important. And she should have completed it months ago.

In the US, student and professional writers alike are used to the concept of writing conferences. Sharing their writing questions and problems with a writing tutor is just a normal step in the process. In Germany and Austria, this is still something of a novelty. So, what does a writing tutor do exactly, and why would we need one?

Julie has almost given up on her paper. She hates the fact that it’s been looming for an extended period of time now and that she can’t seem to bring herself to work on it. She has been doing extensive reasearch on the topieck but when she tries to write on it, there’s nothing left. “It’s like a lemon that you squeeze”, Julie says, “but there’s no drop coming out anymore”.

Stephanie keeps asking Julie questions. Writing tutors learn to communicate in a non-directive way, asking questions and trying to help the client discover themselves what is the core of their problem.

“From the start, I think I’ve wanted too much”, Julie recalls. “I wanted to write about this immensely important topic, and then I noticed how little I knew about it really. Then I got insecure, and the fun was gone. I enjoyed the first hour of my writing project, maybe, but now I just can’t seem to get back into the flow. I get angry with myself, it’s such a complex topic, and then I get anxious about what my expert colleagues might think when they read my paper.”

Julie’s problem is a common one. Other widely spread issues are: collecting so many notes and drafts that people can’t decide how to give them a structure. Or perfectionism. Or not wanting to put an end to a process, deciding: this is my final draft.
What all those problems boil down to is: cognitive overload. Our working memory is permanently in danger of being overstrained. This is something that affects all people who write, because writing is such a complex task.

What we usually hear when we lament about our experiences of cognitive overload is: “Well, pull yourself together, sit down and start getting things done. After all, it’s just a matter of discipline”.

Is it really just that – a matter of discipline?

If we put writing projects aside and leave them untouched for weeks or even months, it’s not because we’re just plain lazy. It’s a strategy of avoidance that we have developed to reduce cognitive overload. There are, of course, more useful strategies than pure avoidance. Writing tutors can tell you plenty of them. Using methods like Freewriting, for example, or drafting and structuring techniques. Got curious? Check out the box.

At school - where they claim they are teaching us how to write -, we do not usually learn such strategies. Instead, we develop something else: we grow a Grinch. The Grinch is my inner censor. He is a little mischievous thing, green, with giant warts all over him. He sits on my shoulder when I write – always on the side where my writing arm is – and exerts his destructive powers on me. He whispers into my ear: *Wait, can you really write that? Doesn’t that sound daft? Have you checked on that? Is the spelling correct? Hold on, you can’t write anything down that’s short of perfect, think of all the people who will read this. Remember the last bad critique you got on that text? That’s what happens if you don’t put more effort in it. Go back and think, and please look up more information.*

Most Grinchs have grown big and fat during school years. This country’s school writing culture makes us produce papers that are, at the same time, the first and final draft. You have just one try, and that should be perfect, because you will be marked. Everything that we write is going to get marked. Grinchs just love that.

My personal Grinch thrives on holding down my creativity. He jumps right into the little time and space before my pen touches a blank journal page. And he has formed a malicious connection with my backspace key. The Grinch stops my pen from forming words, and the backspace key erases my creations, ruthlessly.

So there’s the Grinch, the inner censor. And there’s the danger of cognitive overload. The Grinch, of course, accelerates cognitive overload, because he makes us think of a million stressful things at once. This makes writing impossible, even to start. And, more importantly, any pleasure and fun that we might have had before is lost. This is nothing short of dramatic. It’s a point where our destiny as writers goes either direction.

Stephanie’s own biography is a perfect example for this. She had a genuine interest in language, words, and writing, even before she actually knew how to write. Only six years old, she wrote words in her diary, just guessing how they could be spelled. When she learned how

**Freewriting**

Just get yourself a piece of paper, a pencil and a timer. Put your timer on 5 minutes – this will be enough. In fact, it will be plenty. Now start your timer and start writing. Anything. There’s only one rule: do not stop writing until the timer beeps. Can’t think of anything to write? Then write blablabla until the next word comes into your mind. Now do it. How does it feel?
to write properly, just the motoric skill, she felt simply great. But, growing up, her joy for writing was marred: by school, but especially by expectations that were just too high. Coming from a publishing family, she began to stop writing so she wouldn’t be at risk of not meeting her parents’ expectations. “I was predestined to set up a school magazine, but I didn’t”, she says. “For me, the joy of writing had been soured thoroughly.” How did Stephanie rediscover the pleasure that writing made her feel once? After all, Stephanie has published not only a critically acclaimed PhD thesis in contemporary literature, but also a number of plays, essays and journalistic work. “Hindrances just make me try even harder”, Stephanie says. She did not believe the criticism of her teachers. And she just never gave up. At university, she enjoyed acquiring the skills of academic writing – on her own. Universities in this country do not teach academic writing skills.

And now, for her, writing has become a way to explore the world and herself. She is inspired by all sorts of things, pictures, movies, conversations that move her and spark questions. And they ignite a desire to find out more about what moves her. “It’s exactly that: burning questions”, says Stephanie. “I just want to get to the heart of those burning questions! And this I’ll do by writing texts. It feels great.”

“Did you enjoy your writing process so far?”, Stephanie asks Julie. Julie shakes her head. She enjoyed the first hour or so, but then she noticed how complex the topic was and how little she knew about it. Then, any pleasure was gone. The Grinch took up his work, telling her how she needed to think about her expert proof readers and colleagues and how they might find out she was, after all, no expert on her topic. Not fit for her job! Cognitive overload ensued, making Julie put her work aside, getting more and more enervated about it. Time passed, and now it’s months that she looked at it.

Julie’s accounts tell a story that we probably all know: a topic that we thought we’d love to write about, something that we chose to work for professionally becomes a tedious, gruesome affair. And we want to get done with it. “Everything is screaming: Do something, get active!”, Julie says. But we don’t.

Instead, we procrastinate.

Writing tutors know some techniques that might help. In this situation, Stephanie asks Julie to talk about the central questions of her topic while she will be her scribe. Stephanie wants Julie to get emotionally involved again, to find back to her burning questions about this topic. And Julie does. She is talking, freely, elaborate, clearly and with heartfelt concern. As she keeps on talking, she becomes more and more involved. At the end of her speech, she is exactly this: an expert environmental activist with a cause that matters. To her and to the world. Maybe it was this hugeness of the topic that made writing about it so difficult: something that mattered to the world, to the future, to our whole planet. What Julie dictates to her scribe is pure, clear, and definitely gives me the goose bumps. It is easy to grasp and in-depth at the same time. “You won’t believe me”, Stephanie says, “but I’ve got exactly one page now, and it’s absolutely precise and clear for me.”

Both laugh.

The concentrated atmosphere gives way to relief. A sense of achievement on both sides.

We can outsmart the Grinch. We can reduce cognitive overload so our writing project becomes manageable and we can proceed one step at a time. Writing tutors know a lot about
the writing process, writing problems and how to overcome them. They try to help the client understand their own process better, and to find out what the next step in the writing process might be. They know techniques and methods, but they know that writing and writers are complex, and what works for themselves might not work for their clients. So they act as a sounding board to their clients’ problems, needs and questions. In a session of 45 minutes, one problem is tackled. At the end, the client develops a clear idea of the next step in their writing project.

Julie will get back to her writing project tomorrow, “first thing in the morning”, she says. She will put all that she knows about her topic down on a huge piece of paper. “Now I know”, she says, “that I can’t let myself be silenced. This is too important, and I have to write this paper so we can start taking action.”

Julie’s eyes sparkle with energy. I can see a grin on her face so wide that I wonder: When was the last time that I’ve seen her that happy?

Writing, for Stephanie, is: making sense of the world, and, fundamentally: satisfaction. As a writing tutor, Stephanie wants to help writers gain back the joy and most powerful motivation of writing: a deep pleasure that stems from writing about and towards our burning questions.

*Name changed for privacy.*