



## Writer's Block

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**A** DATE IN 1997. A long-deferred date. It is the date I am – finally – sitting down to start writing my biography of the famous Victorian cricketer, W. G. Grace. I have been researching it for months. I have even been to Australia, where he toured twice (and behaved abominably). I have filled many dossiers with pages of notes. I have gathered a library of books, which are now spread out around my desk, marked with multicoloured Post-it notes.

Of course, I haven't read *everything*; but I have done a lot of work. I may know more about W. G. Grace than anyone else on the planet (not, as I discovered later, quite true; but I was in the top five). And now is the moment to start getting the story down.

I'm a touch-typist — something I owe my mother, who got me a typewriter and covered up all the letters in order to make me to learn my QWERTY. So, there I was, both hands hovering like a concert pianist's about to bring Rachmaninoff's concerto into vibrant life.

But instead of the spate of mellifluous meaning, the waterfall of wonderfully evocative words, there was nothing. Not a sausage. Indeed, my fingers were limp as chipolatas. I looked out of the window. Blank sky: blank as my screen. I looked at my empty coffee mug. Void as my brain. I looked back at the screen, which was now throbbing like a migraine.

I was stumped.



Though I had frequently faced the horrors of the blank page before, this was the very worst writer's block I had ever experienced. The chances are Grace himself was born with less fuss than my opening paragraph. By lunchtime I had given him a date of birth, an address, two parents and four grandparents. In the process I had become a gibbering wreck. Never have a dozen so prosaic sentences seemed so leaden, so uninspiring. As the nearby church clock struck one, I got up from my desk, tottered downstairs, and all I wanted to do was to walk straight round the corner to my local pub, drown my sorrows, and then, aflame with Dutch courage, ring up my publishers and say I just couldn't do it.

But I did do it. And the book became accepted as the definitive biography, which won me a place at a prizegiving ceremony where I actually *did* meet the man who knew more about Grace than I did (we shared the prize).

But I didn't get there on my own.

I had a mentor, the bestselling social historian – and cricket buff - David Kynaston. David kindly offered to read my work as I wrote it. I would send a batch of chapters and every fortnight we would discuss them in hour-long telephone conversations. These conversations gave me huge motivation to keep going. I owe David more than I can say and would strongly recommend finding a mentor to any writer faced with an overwhelming and intimidating challenge. A mentor will help defeat writer's block.