

Stuck Piece Diagnostic

Use this when a piece feels wrong but you cannot name why. Identify the cause before applying a remedy — vague dissatisfaction treated with more drafting produces more drafting.

1 — IDENTIFY THE CAUSE

Read the piece without making changes. Then check which of these applies.

■ The argument has not been found.

The draft exists but the piece does not know what it is trying to say.

Remedy: stop drafting. Return to the notes stage. Find the argument before continuing.

■ The piece is trying to do too much.

The argument has accumulated sub-arguments, qualifications, and context that have diluted it.

Remedy: identify the single central claim. Cut everything that does not serve it.

■ The structure is wrong.

The argument is clear but the piece is in the wrong order — conclusion buried, opening misplaced, a section doing work that belongs elsewhere.

Remedy: reorganise. This is the easiest problem to fix once identified.

■ You are too close to see it.

The piece may be working, but familiarity has produced blindness.

Remedy: put the piece away for at least a day. Return and read it as if for the first time.

2 — WHAT NOT TO DO

These responses are natural and almost always wrong.

■ Keep drafting in the hope the problem will resolve itself.

More words do not fix a structural problem or an unfound argument.

■ Cut indiscriminately.

Cutting without diagnosis removes working material alongside what isn't working.

■ Abandon the piece out of discomfort rather than judgment.

A piece that is difficult because the thinking is incomplete is worth staying with.

3 — THE SEQUENCE

Once the cause is identified, apply this sequence.

- Stop writing. Read the piece without making changes.
- Note where the argument arrives — if it arrives at all.
- Note where the piece loses momentum or direction.
- Read the original notes. The piece the draft has failed to become may be visible there.
- Apply a specific remedy to the diagnosed cause.