Difficult Piece Diagnostic

A piece that resists being written is almost always resisting for a reason. Identify the cause before applying a remedy — the same approach will not work for all difficult pieces.

1 — IDENTIFY THE CAUSE

Read through these four causes and identify which one — or which combination — applies.

■ The argument has not been found.

There is a subject but no clear position. The piece keeps starting and stopping because there is nowhere for it to go.

Remedy: stop drafting. Return to notes and questions. Find the argument before attempting the piece again.

■ The subject is too close.

A recent experience, a strong conviction, or a relationship not yet resolved. The writer's proximity interferes with the distance that writing requires.

Remedy: time, or a deliberately more analytical frame — treat the subject as material to examine rather than something to express.

■ The piece is trying to do too much.

The scope is wider than the argument can support, or the piece is trying to say several things simultaneously without a single central claim.

Remedy: reduce. Choose the most important thing the piece has to say and let the rest go.

■ The thinking is incomplete.

The difficulty signals that the writer is not yet in a position to write the piece — the material has not been sufficiently absorbed.

Remedy: more time with the material. More reading, more thinking, more notes before drafting is attempted again.

2 — WHEN THE PIECE WON'T COME

If the piece has been attempted and failed to cohere, try these before attempting it again.

■ Stop trying to write it — create distance first.

A piece wrestled with too intensively becomes less visible. Step away and return when you can see it differently.

■ Write about the difficulty rather than through it.

A short account of why the piece is difficult — what is wrong, what it is trying to do — often surfaces the diagnosis that direct attempts have not.

- Lower the ambition temporarily.

Give yourself permission to write it badly. A rough, provisional version is a necessary precondition for writing it well.

---

3 — SHOULD YOU ABANDON IT?

Not every difficult piece should be finished. Apply this test:

- Is the difficulty productive — does it contain clues about what the piece needs?

A section that keeps working. An argument that keeps emerging. These are productive signals.

- Or is the difficulty unproductive — nothing is working and there are no clues?

This piece should be set aside. It is not yet possible, not a failure of perseverance.

The piece that is difficult is almost always telling you something. The question is whether you are listening.
