

Writing under Pressure: Writing When You Can't Think Straight

Adapted from: Elbow, Peter and Pat Belanoff. *A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing*. 3rd ed., McGraw Hill, 2000.

We often have to write a paper even though something in our life has derailed us: Someone we care about is ill or has jilted us, and we are seething with hurt or anger. There are many situations that can short-circuit our brains. The most obvious solution is to put the writing task aside for a while and let the circuits reestablish themselves—to allow the mind to heal. But what do we do when there isn't much time?

Clear your head.

1. **Talk about it.** Get a trusted friend to listen while we talk about everything that has upset us. Make it clear that his or her job is to listen and be supportive, not trying to think of answers or cures for our problem. If we speak and our friend listens supportively, we can usually find the perspective we need to put our upset aside for a while.
2. **Write about it.** If such a friend is not available, *create* a friend out of blank paper. Simply freewrite about what has upset you. Spill your feelings on paper. This too will usually help you to clear your mind and feelings and to feel fresh again.

Try this two-step outline.

1. Grab Bag

- a. Start with the “grab bag” nonoutline process and write down every point that you can think of that pertains to your topic. Don't write them on a piece of paper. Instead get a pile of cards or cut up pieces of 8 ½ - by-11 paper into eighths and write each point on a separate card or slip of paper.
- b. Write them as they come to you—in any order. That way, you only have to think one thought at a time. But try to make each one a sentence, not just a word or phrase.

2. Outline

- a. Lay out the slips around you and begin to group them together according to your feeling of which ones “sort of go together.”
- b. Next, choose one clump of cards or slips of paper—perhaps the one that appeals to you most—and gradually coax your mind into figuring out why this clump goes together. Write it out on one of the cards. Do this for all your clumps.
- c. Next, try for sequence. Try to feel which clumps or main ideas go before or after the others.

- d.** As you are working out a sequence and a story, figure out your main, overall point. Make sure to write that out too on a slip or card. Once you've written out a one-sentence main point, look back at your sequence or story and make sure it fits your main point.

Notice the process you have been using. Your mind cannot hold onto more than one idea at a time. Therefore, you give your mind a break by using a simple calculating machine that consists of movable slips of paper. Throughout the process, your mind never had to deal with more than one thought.

Take a Break.

Take some time away from your paper at this point to clear your head. Even half an hour can help.

Write your draft.

- Give yourself permission to write ugly, ungainly, absurd, broken *nonsentences*. It's fine to use sentences like these: "I'm not sure, but it seems like . . ." "Here's something that I want to say . . ." Try to talk your thinking onto paper; the more you can talk it, the easier time you'll have.
- Don't get stopped or tangled trying to fix sentences or stymied by fussing over a grammar or usage problem. Keep following your outline and writing out your thinking.
- Once you have written your draft, clear your head with a short break that will distance you a bit from your language and help you examine it more objectively.
- Now, go back through your draft to clarify and clean up the language. Your best tool is your voice. Force yourself to speak every phrase and sentence aloud. As you do so, you'll find it easy and natural to change words and phrases so that they fit more comfortably in your mouth.
- You might find it helpful to take another tiny break so you can come back to check spelling, punctuation, and grammar with fresher eyes.