

Laptop Thinking and Writing

Chapter One - Creative Thinking

“All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know.”

Ernest Hemingway

Hemingway makes it sound easy, but it is not.

This book will show you how to write truly and well; and you will learn that the best way to reach this goal is to spend more time thinking and less time actually writing or staring at a screen.

Staring at a screen or a blank sheet of paper is a time-honored approach that has been frustrating writers for hundreds of years. This tactic is associated with “writer’s block” — a close cousin of constipation. No matter how long you stare, sometimes the words will not come.

The richer the collection of ideas, words and phrases you have built up in your mind, the smaller the likelihood that you will suffer from “writer’s block.”

It is useful to regard the development of ideas as the basis for all true writing. I will encourage you to consider writing to be what happens in your mind when you are out walking, running or driving a car — not just the act of sitting and working on your laptop.

In some respects, this thinking is like the planting and tending of a garden, while the composition of sentences and paragraphs is more like harvesting, chopping and arranging what you have grown in order to create a salad. The better you do with the planting and tending of ideas, the easier you will find it to manage them with your word processor.

Idea processing is the foundation for word processing, and you will learn from the strategies suggested here how to generate and refine thoughts, sentences, paragraphs and pages so that your finished product is both pleasing to read and persuasive.

While some of these strategies could be employed prior to the advent of

Laptop Thinking and Writing

the computer and the laptop, there are aspects of electronic text that make this kind of thinking and writing much easier than it was with the older writing tools.

Playing with ideas

Whether you plan to write a winning love letter or a college essay, success will hinge upon your bringing a playful attitude toward the task. Old approaches to writing were often linear — meaning you had to move from “Roman numeral I” to “II” then “III” in a very logical way. This could hamper writing like a straitjacket.

Fortunately, back in the 1970s the Bay Area Writing Project (still thriving in this decade) offered a much different approach that stressed prewriting activities and incubation. Instead of beginning with Roman numerals and the traditional outline taught in the past, you employ strategies like brainstorming or mind mapping to generate dozens of useful thoughts and fragments (words and phrases) that may be strung together later like beads on a string.

The strategies suggested in this book were originally inspired by many of the ideas that emerged from the Bay Area Writing Project, but four decades of successful writing and experimentation with computers expanded my understanding of what is possible.

Some suggest waking the right side of the brain to help you do this work. Without getting into science or brain theory, the right side of the brain is thought to drive imagination, creativity, intuition and invention. You might think of the right side of the brain as the clown, while the left side is the critic. The left side is best at logic, analysis and criticism. When your left side dominates, constipation is not surprising, as idea generation is hampered by fear of failure and embarrassment. Our goal is to get both sides to work as a team.

When groups try brainstorming to solve a problem, one of the basic rules is “no criticism!” If someone’s suggestion is met with ridicule, risk-taking stops, and people offer nothing but ideas that are safe. Fear of judgment often leads to what is called “Group Think” — safe, boring, conventional and sometimes life-threatening as a team fails to stop the ill-fated Apollo 13 space shot or prepare adequately for a hurricane like Katrina.

Ironically, the capacity to entertain the absurd and the ridiculous often

Laptop Thinking and Writing

leads to the most productive inventions. Roger Von Oech has suggested that creative thought is often hindered by what he calls “mental blocks.”

They are listed here, because they are the enemy of the kind of thinking and writing proposed in this book.

Roger Von Oech's Ten Mental Blocks

1. Trying to Find the “Right” Answer
2. Logical Thinking
3. Following Rules
4. Being Practical
5. Play is Not Work
6. That's Not My Job
7. Being a “Serious” Person
8. Avoiding Ambiguity
9. Being Wrong is Bad
10. I'm Not Creative

There are many Web pages explaining what he means by these ten “blocks.” This is one of the best:

<http://bigthink.com/articles/10-mental-blocks-to-overcome>

The quality of your thinking and writing will depend upon your ability to develop “habits of mind” that free you from these blocks. This freedom comes from recognizing and resisting the blocks, replacing such attitudes with what will often be their opposites.

Can you be silly?

Can you be illogical?

Can you break the rules?

Can you be impractical?

Can you play full throttle?

Can you dive into unfamiliar territory?

Can you entertain the absurd?

Can you delight in ambiguity?

Can you risk being wrong?

Are you a magical thinker?

Laptop Thinking and Writing

Encouraging creativity and incubation

Much of our best thinking takes place during what is known as the incubation stage. Sadly, most people pass through school without ever learning much about incubation or the creative process.

There are many Web pages devoted to the steps and stages of creative thought, but we will keep them simple.

- **Preparation**
- **Incubation**
- **Frustration**
- **Intimation**
- **Illumination or insight**
- **Verification**

Thinking and the invention of ideas rarely moves forward step-by-step in a straight line. Most times you must circle back to earlier stages, and often several stages will be happening at the same time — simultaneously.

Imagine you must write a love letter or lengthy email to a romantic partner who is angry with you because of repeated mistakes you promised to stop.

Preparation

During the *preparation stage* you will map out every aspect of this problem that you can identify. Some of these will seem obvious to you, but chances are you will be blinded by your own point of view and defensive feelings. Individuals and groups rarely spend enough time defining the problem. They tend to jump to the first solutions that come to mind. In the case of this love letter, empathy for your partner is required if you wish to make peace and win forgiveness. During the preparation stage you must put yourself in his or her shoes and list every possible complaint that must be addressed by your letter.

The list can start in your mind, but listing and brainstorming also flourish in mind-mapping software. This kind of thinking works best when splashed on a screen in a free-floating diagram rather than a list.

In the sample diagram shown on the next page, the complaints of your

Laptop Thinking and Writing

partner initially center around repeated lateness, but you have figured out that the real problem is below the surface. She has been urging you to get more serious about the relationship and move into an apartment with her.

On the surface, the recent conflict seemed to be about lateness and broken promises, but when you invest in the expansive thinking required by the preparation stage, you realize the real problem is something quite different.



The real issue is your partner's sense that you are avoiding her heart's desire. She picks lateness as the issue to fight about, but it is not the real issue. She wants to live with you. If your email speaks to nothing but lateness, there is little chance you will actually make her happy.

This opening stage of creative thinking is often neglected. In fact, the entire process is often neglected. It is rarely taught and rarely practiced.

Identifying the real problem is essential, but many people and many groups stay on the surface and work on the symptoms rather than the real problem. Even if they end up writing with great style, this product doesn't amount to much if it is wrong-minded. This book takes a strong stand on the importance of clear-minded thinking as an essential foundation for good writing. The thinking and the writing are intertwined and inseparable.

Writing great sentences about mediocre ideas is indefensible.

Laptop Thinking and Writing

Incubation

When you hear the word “incubation” perhaps you picture eggs sitting under a lamp or under their mother. This is a good metaphor for the way ideas need time before they can “hatch.” If we rush the process, we end up with scrambled eggs instead of young chicks growing into mature chickens.



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If you have done a good job during the preparation stage, your mind will keep working on the issues and problems you identified even when you are out jogging or when you are sleeping.

For most people this is an unconscious process, but once you become aware of incubation, you can actively nurture the development of the yet unborn ideas, setting up both the activities and the conditions that encourage incubation to thrive.

During the incubation stage, your mind will wrestle with the issues you have identified earlier. Much of this wrestling will occur subconsciously. Being aware of this stage enables you to mine its potential much more effectively than would be possible if you had never heard of it.

“Sleep on it!” is good advice.

You may wake up in the middle of the night with a dream that relates to the problem before you. Most people fall back asleep and cannot remember the dream the next morning, but you keep a pad of paper or your iPhone near the bed and capture the dream before you fall back to sleep.

Many companies that rely upon the invention of new ideas and products make incubation a priority and do everything possible to encourage it. They

Laptop Thinking and Writing

devote many hours to training all members of the team in creative problem-solving strategies, making them aware of the mental locks mentioned earlier and equipping them all with ways to set free their imagination. Idea generation is boldly stated as a priority and steps are taken to make sure ideas can thrive. The group must greet new ideas with applause and praise, especially when they wander from “what has been done in the past” and might seem unconventional.

The same is true for you as an individual. You must give yourself permission to “walk on the wild side” and entertain ideas that may seem at first blush to be outrageous. Later in the process, there will be many opportunities to combine these ideas with others and refine them so you are comfortable with the final product.



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Frustration

Not all models include frustration as a stage, but it is important to understand that it is a partner to incubation. Your mind will be feeling pressured during the days you are working on your project. Things will be “out of whack.” This is a good thing, but it will feel uncomfortable. Many people will rush to embrace conventional thinking to avoid discomfort, but this flight to the ordinary will make their product mediocre.

It turns out that dissonance drives the incubation stage. Dissonance in music occurs when the sounds are not harmonious. With ideas, it occurs when there is tension or a clash of some kind. The mind naturally wants to resolve this clash and move toward harmony and resonance. Resonance results when conflicts are resolved and things make sense.

Laptop Thinking and Writing

Intimation

When new ideas begin to form during the incubation stage, you will notice their onset, much as egg shells start to show cracks when the chicks are almost ready to hatch. This is known as the intimation stage. The new ideas are half-formed. They are inklings — hunches — ripples on the surface that suggest a school of fish below. One learns to read these surface hints much like those who fish for a living. Those with no exposure to this creative process are unlikely to notice or be able to take advantage of this learning and thinking.



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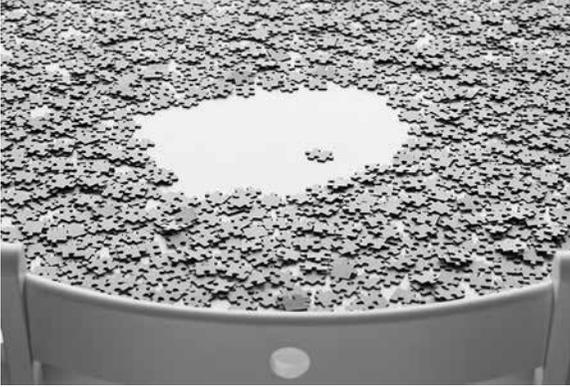
In Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, there is a passage before the big fish strikes describing the old man's reading of the birds, the ripples and the other fish as he comes to realize what is under the surface. He then begins to see and feel vibrations on the line that tell him the fish is tasting the bait. He must interpret these vibrations so he knows when to give a strong pull on the line and set the hook.

“Eat it a little more,” he said. “Eat it well.” Eat it so that the point of the hook goes into your heart and kills you, he thought. Come up easy and let me put the harpoon into you. All right. Are you ready? Have you been long enough at table?

“Now!” he said aloud and struck hard with both hands, gained a yard of line and then struck again and again, swinging with each arm alternately on the cord with all the strength of his arms and the pivoted weight of his body.

Laptop Thinking and Writing

Thinking works in much the same way, and you can learn to translate inklings into bigger fish.



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Illumination

Even though the old man knows he has hooked a very large fish, he cannot understand how big it is until he breaks the surface. In thinking, this is known as the “Aha!” moment. All of sudden, a bunch of the fragments come together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The bold new idea or understanding breaks the surface and vaults into plain view.



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The line rose slowly and steadily and then the surface of the ocean bulged ahead of the boat and the fish came out. He came out unendingly and water poured from his sides. He was bright in the sun and his head and back were dark purple and in the sun the stripes on his sides showed wide and a light lavender. His sword was as long as a baseball bat and

Laptop Thinking and Writing

tapered like a rapier and he rose his full length from the water and then re-entered it, smoothly, like a diver and the old man saw the great scythe-blade of his tail go under and the line commenced to race out.



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“He is two feet longer than the skiff,” the old man said.

Verification

Eventually, the bold new ideas must be refined, tested and proven worthwhile. You will want to make sure your thinking is reliable and can stand up to scrutiny. Hunches must be transformed into something substantial. When it comes to thinking and writing, the ideas must now be woven together into a tapestry that makes for a compelling document. You will move from the composition of ideas to the writing of sentences and paragraphs capable of communicating persuasively. Often your ideas will multiply even as you begin to compose sentences and paragraphs, as the act of stating or voicing thoughts can bring related notions to the surface.

Communicating Findings

As you develop your ideas, you will move on to sharing them. Perhaps you will write a persuasive essay. Maybe it will be a dramatic presentation with slides. You begin with the composition of ideas and then move on to the composition of sentences and paragraphs. Succeeding chapters will guide you toward powerful communication of ideas.