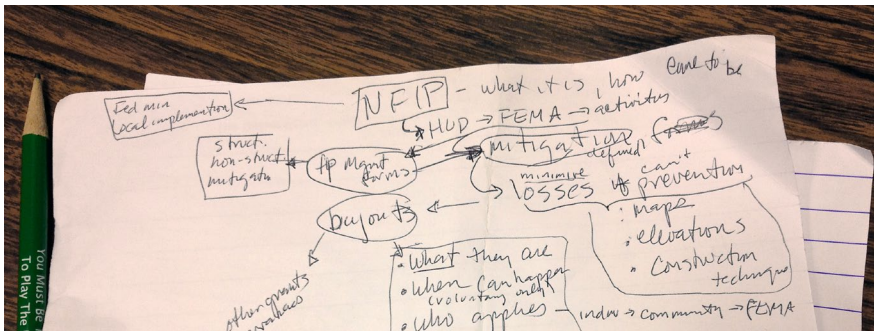




vantage point

Writing Under Pressure



them into new sequences. The photo here is of one such brainstorming outline.

That's really what the outline should be: a solo brainstorming session not locked into a structure until all the thoughts have emerged. Let those thoughts have a place in whatever outline approach you choose, not allowing formality to rob you of the opportunity for creativity in addressing your topic. But knowing what you want to say and sticking to it is critical, so that any prose coming out of your keyboard or pen is related to the primary message. Deleting may be as important as adding to the outline.

Writing is easy for some people and difficult for others, but don't succumb to brain freeze by anguishing over alleged lack of writing skills. Many people speak well and easily on a topic, and this translates to easily edited writing. One method is to speak what you want your document to say and record it, and then transcribe that speech.

I once had a colleague who had great thoughts but his writing obscured them by lack of focus. Our resolution was for me to read what he had written, then "interview" him to determine what he meant to emphasize, establishing a new outline, then delete a lot of verbosity (and excess punctuation). Here's where pride of authorship may have to take a back seat; if you find someone who is willing to help, don't get caught up in particular phrasing you think is great if your volunteer editor/co-author wants to ditch it to strengthen your piece. Shorter is often harder to write than longer (humorous anecdotes attributed to Mark Twain and others abound on this point), but it maintains focus and holds attention. ■

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I recently returned from an Internet-free hiking trip to find that in my absence I had been assigned a major piece of writing for a report, and that my deadline was only four days away rather than the two weeks everyone else had for their contributions. Those four days included no weekend for cram sessions. Uh oh. While the topic was near and dear to me, organizing my thoughts and providing appropriate supporting references would still be a challenge as I fit this project into my already overloaded "catch up" list of things to do. That's writing under pressure, but it can be done. I'll share a few ideas with you on how to accomplish it.

We probably all heard from our teachers as far back as grade school that the first task for any writing assignment should be creating an outline. That can be the single biggest obstacle keeping many people from getting started on their writing. The difficulty is not necessarily having something to say (although that is central to a successful piece) but in mashing our thoughts into the rigidity of Topic A with lower case subtopics, Topic B with the same, or even more off-putting, Roman Numeral I with a subset of i's, v's, and x's. Yes, an outline is important so that you know where you will start, how you will end, and where you need to fill in facts to convince your reader. But there are

other ways to accomplish an outline that may suit your own thought processes better.

One approach is to begin with a list of words and phrases central to your task. Just capture them in writing, whether digitally or manually. Key words in a list rather than in a more formal structure are often easier to move around into various sequences until they flow with the thoughts still swarming in your brain but not yet quite ready to emerge as sentences. Don't worry about order at first; just get those key words and thoughts down so you can see them. That visual cue is important to keeping on track. Sometimes we get caught up in the minutiae of our writing and lose the big picture of what we meant to express.

Once main thoughts are captured and reorganized into a sequence that supports your message, add flesh to the outline with descriptions of facts and figures you will use. Or, if you are a confident writer, you may be ready to start writing from your high level outline. But whatever you write must address the questions to be answered, whether a response to a request for proposals or a research paper; stick to the outline.

Here is a confession. My outlines are rarely formal, and if I am on a crowded bus or train they may end up on the back of an envelope or in the margins of whatever is handy. As key words and thoughts begin emerge, I use circles, arrows, and more words start to link