

PRE-WRITING: BEATING WRITER'S BLOCK

Amid phone calls, meetings, crises, and other stock discombobulations of business life, executives are expected to be able to clear their minds, sit in front of a blank piece of paper, and turn out crisply worded memos, letters, and reports with assembly-line speed and precision. That's fine for robots, but most managers suffer from writer's block just as acutely as professional writers do.

Recognizing this, someone has come up with a simple technique to help executives break free from mental gridlock. It's a freestyle method of writing called clustering.

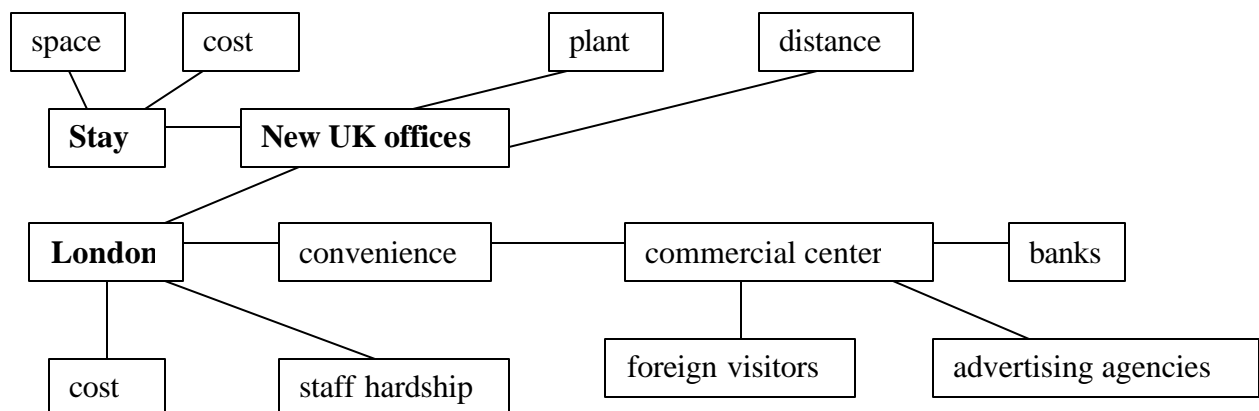
"Clustering," says Dr. Gabrielle Lusser Rico, professor of English at San Jose State University and author of *Writing the Natural Way*, "is a great productivity enhancer because it takes as little as thirty seconds and never more than three or four minutes."

Taught to executives in workshops and seminars around the country, Rico's method is designed to overcome writer's block by liberating the right hemisphere of the brain, the part from which thought flows freely. To do this, forget what your grade-school teacher said about working from an outline. The problem with outlines, explains Rico, is that they presuppose a logical, linear sequence. "The human brain doesn't really work that way," says Rico, is that they presuppose a logical, linear sequence. "The human brain doesn't really work that way," says Rico. "It thinks in leaps, jumps, and bounds. An outline assumes you have an organization fully hatched in your head."

Clustering allows the mind to shift into a free association mode. You start with a blank page. Write one key word, or group of words, in the center. This is the nucleus. Circle it. Then think of other words related to the subject you're writing about. Jot these down at random. You may want to circle them, too, and connect them as you go. At this point, don't worry about wording, editing, or organizing; just let the ideas flow. This preliminary phase should take you at most a few minutes.

In phase two, you organically "build" your memo or report, using the cluster page as a kind of blue print. Only at this point does the left side of the brain—the organizing and editing hemisphere—come into play. The actual writing should be an easy process now that you've done the groundwork.

Sounds great, but does it work? We asked one U.S. executive, whose British-based branch office is considering relocating to London, to put clustering to the test. In weighing the various reasons for or against transplanting the company, he let these words and concepts spill onto the page. Here's a facsimile of his final product:



From this, he put together the following memo:

Our office lease at X site expires in February 1986, and we must decide soon whether we want to renew. If we stay, there is the advantage of relatively low rent—20,000 pounds a year. However, the offices are 50 miles from a commercial center and 400 miles from the plant. We are also terribly cramped for space.

One advantage of relocating to larger offices in London is that we would be in a commercial center, close to banks, advertising agencies, major customers, and suppliers. The most obvious problem is the inconvenience of pulling up stakes and a longer commute for many employees. The higher rent—60,000 pounds a year—is also a major consideration.

Despite these drawbacks, I think the pros of relocating outweigh the cons. Subject to definitive financial analysis, I therefore recommend that we set our sights on London.

This executive estimated it took him 45 seconds to do the clustering exercise and two minutes to write, edit, and polish the memo. Not bad.