

## **rough drafting, ABC outlines, mental maps: RECIPES FOR FAILURE**

A writer hunches over the keyboard. His face is as blank as the screen he faces. Another sits, pen in hand, at a desk. Her knuckles are as white as the sheet of paper before her.

Writer's block. Who hasn't felt its clammy presence? Aaaaarrghhh!

Then the mind unblocks--with a vengeance. Ideas gush out in torrents, far faster than the hand can record. Thoughts elbow one another to get the writer's attention. One sentence is no more than half written when a better way to say it comes to mind, or it is interrupted by one or more other ideas, some finished, some half-baked.

The mind is fast, the hand is slow. That is the essential problem in organizing writing. *Most writing courses ignore that important fact--and recommend approaches bound to make the problem worse instead of better.*

### **Here are some sure recipes for failure:**

\* Recipe #1--Produce a rough draft. Lean back, relax and let the ideas flow, just to get them down on paper. You can always fix up the draft later.

*Not so. You are very likely to create a mess that you can't ever clean up.*

\* Recipe #2--Make an A,B,C, I,II, III outline.

Dear Walt...

*Just thought I'd jot write dash-off write  
you a note better memo note.....*



**SOMEWHERE, 37000 FEET ABOVE SOUTH DAKOTA**

*Such a grocery list would be helpful--if you're buying bananas.*

- \* Recipe #3--Create a "mental map" by jotting down key words to jog your memory later.

*Like trying to make sense of that telephone note you scribbled to yourself last week, perhaps?*

## **Rough Drafting is Rougher Than You Know**

Why are so many messages disorganized? Chiefly because writers *do* rough-draft. They begin with only a general idea of what they want to say, spill their ideas as best they can onto paper, rough-edit for spelling and grammar--and send the message.

Rough drafting looks at first like just a swell idea; for one thing, you can get right at it. But drafting this way is like building a house without a plan: Buy some lumber and, starting at one corner, bang and saw away in a random manner and in no particular direction.

The advice "Let the ideas flow just to get them down" presumes:

- \* That ideas do flow. Instead they dribble, spurt--or clog in the mental pipeline.
- \* That they can be fixed up after they land on paper; but that is a faulty assumption.

But let's say that, in this slapdash manner, you manage to rough-draft 20 pages. Think about it for a moment: How many possible combinations of ideas

might these pages contain? (Your guess is probably low.)

Suppose you have 10 ideas in your message--only 10, a couple of pages worth. Would you believe these 10 ideas may be combined in **3,628,800 separate sequences**? It's true; grab your calculator, and multiply 1 times 2 times 3, etc. through times 10.

(By the time you get to 15 ideas, the possible combinations exceed *three trillion*.)

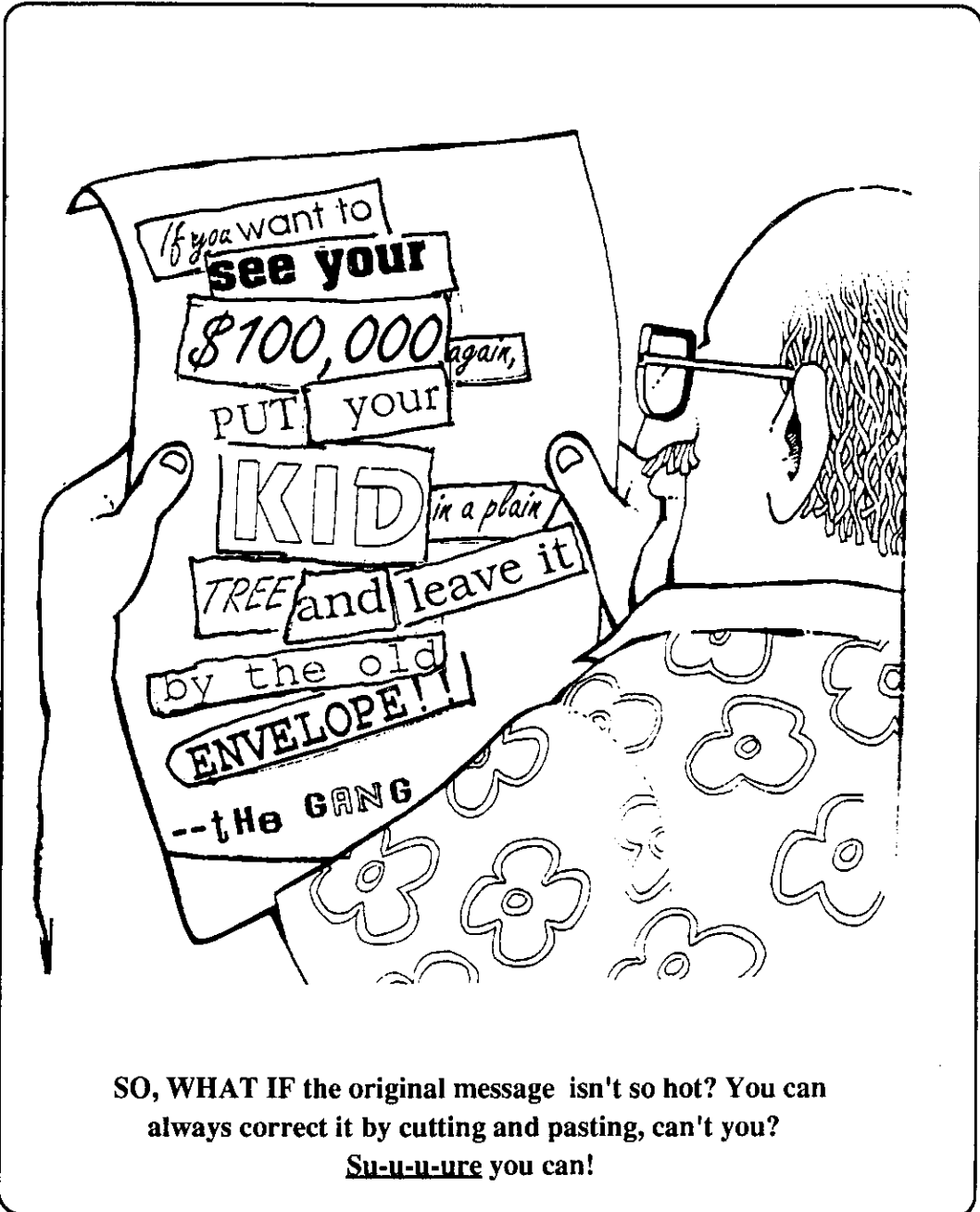
In spite of these incredible odds, people continue to rough draft their merry way, spilling brainfuls onto paper, *dreaming that--perhaps through divine intervention--the one best sequence will emerge from the million or trillion possibilities.*

Is that the kind of gamble you'd put money on?

Aside from problems with sequence, what are the chances that the rough draft has **left out** some information the reader needs or wants? Very likely. The mind is a sieve, not a sponge. Some ideas are retained, but others leak out and are lost.

How likely is it that content has crept in that is **irrelevant** (although perhaps interesting or even important)? It's almost certain. How likely that you have **unnecessarily repeated** some idea--for example, made the same point on page 18 you already had adequately made on page 3? That, too, is almost certain.

And, of course, forgivable. A writer can hardly be expected to create the perfect document at the first



SO, WHAT IF the original message isn't so hot? You can always correct it by cutting and pasting, can't you?

**Su-u-u-ure you can!**

pass. So he expects and will tolerate a lot of flaws at this stage.

Now comes the second, and worst, problem, with the rough draft: *Once written, it starts to look "right."* Right enough, anyway, that the writer figures he couldn't do any better starting from scratch. Like footprints in wet cement, the tentative ideas have hardened into place.

So the corrections at this stage tend to be cosmetic, adjusting the things that are most adjustable: spelling, vocabulary, wordiness, capitalization, grammar. These, however, are *writing* problems, not organizing problems. The latter--including poor sequence, redundant and irrelevant content, and harmful omission--are much harder to correct (or, for that matter, even *detect*.)

Sometimes the writer does vaguely sense that something is amiss. So she grabs pencil and starts changing the wording. Since the wording is not the problem, this "solution" works about as well as itching in one place and scratching another.

The poor organization caused by rough drafting makes it hard on the editor also. The reviewer's changes to the message's structure may entail the writer's having to rip up hundreds of words--a major rewrite, as well as a main source of friction between the two of them.

Eventually, rough-drafters begin to see the folly of their ways. Looking about for suggestions on how to do better, they commonly latch onto two **nearly worthless** pieces of advice:

- \* The shopworn structured outline--A, B, C, I, II, III--or
- \* a gimmicky and undisciplined variant known as "mental mapping."

Both these approaches fail because they ignore a key principle of organizing: *You can't express an idea without using a sentence.*

Try it for yourself. What do these words or phrases mean? ***love, exercise, brand-new car?*** Who knows?

By contrast, these are ideas: *People should love one another; exercise builds muscles; let's buy a new car.* Maybe that's what the words above mean.

But--what is important--they could as easily mean: *I have a crush on Myrtle Rooney; complete this short written exercise, and the 1992 Ferrari has a dazzling design.*

### **Mental Mapping (or, Hey, Which Way Is North?)**

Since communication means generating, selecting and sequencing ideas, and since you can't express an idea without forming a *sentence*, any "system" that encourages the random dumping of words and phrases onto paper is suspect--spell that, h-o-k-u-m.

A case in point is the resurfacing of various "spatterbrained" approaches that encourage a sort of stream-of-consciousness spilling of words onto paper, in the hopes of somehow corralling them later and converting them into sense.

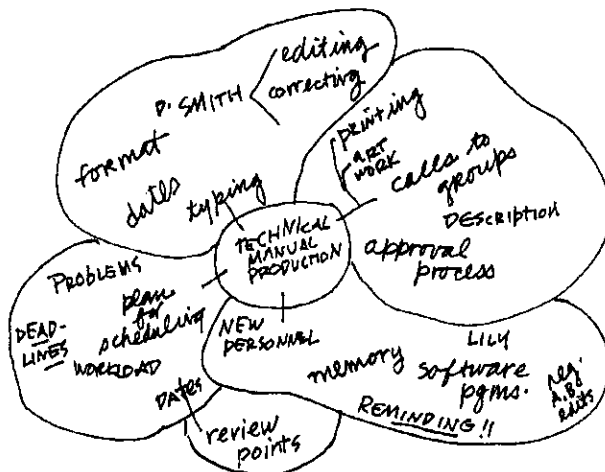
How do mind maps work? They don't.

Here's a rough analogy: To bake a cake, you could start by opening the cupboard and dumping all the ingredients onto the floor. It's easy, and it does appear to get you started. But the premise that you are a measurable step closer to the final cake is highly questionable.

Besides the fact that it **isn't new and doesn't work**, "mental mapping" is probably a harmless way to waste your time. The idea recurs periodically, like locusts, then fades from view as all fads do, to resurface later under some other name. It appeared in the '60s as "concept clustering" and in the '70s as "Tinkertoy outlining." Now it's "mind mapping." What next?

For the occasional verbal paralytic who has never been able to get a single word down on paper, it may appear to be helpful. At least it does get the ingredients (or some of them) spilled onto the floor.

But, have you ever really *looked* at a mental map? Here is one, modified from a model in a text that endorses this spatterbrained approach:



The charm of this "system" is that it has no rules. Well, that certainly makes it easy: Dump whatever you choose onto paper. But how likely are any of these hieroglyphics to mean anything at all a day later--even an *hour* later?

(Using a mind map, Sir Isaac Newton, after having had his insight about the law of gravity, would have made a mind-map notation such as:)



If these spiderwebs of half-understandable notations are indeed "maps of the mind," then the Western world is even more trouble than we thought.

### **A,B,C Outlines--the Worst of Both Worlds**

Here is the time-tested (and disproven) technique that melds the rigidity of rough drafting with the vagueness of mental mapping.

Below is a typical A,B,C "grocery list"--this one from the field of industrial safety:

#### TECHCO SAFETY PROGRAM: INDUSTRIAL SAFETY RISK ASSESSMENT

##### A. OVERVIEW

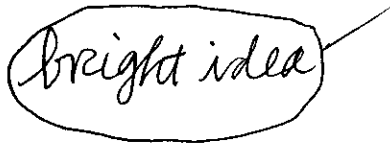
- I. Effectiveness of Current Techco Program
- II. Corporate Culture and Management Style
- III. Role of Management Support

##### B. EXTENT OF HAZARD

- I. Sprinkler Plans for Technical Center
- II. Original Intent of Technical Center Design
- III. Storage of Dangerous Materials

The charm of this "system" is that it has no rules. Well, that certainly makes it easy: Dump whatever you choose onto paper. But how likely are any of these hieroglyphics to mean anything at all a day later--even an *hour* later?

(Using a mind map, Sir Isaac Newton, after having had his insight about the law of gravity, would have made a mind-map notation such as:)



If these spiderwebs of half-understandable notations are indeed "maps of the mind," then the Western world is even more trouble than we thought.

### **A,B,C Outlines--the Worst of Both Worlds**

Here is the time-tested (and disproven) technique that melds the rigidity of rough drafting with the vagueness of mental mapping.

Below is a typical A,B,C "grocery list"--this one from the field of industrial safety:

#### TECHCO SAFETY PROGRAM: INDUSTRIAL SAFETY RISK ASSESSMENT

##### A. OVERVIEW

- I. Effectiveness of Current Techco Program
- II. Corporate Culture and Management Style
- III. Role of Management Support

##### B. EXTENT OF HAZARD

- I. Sprinkler Plans for Technical Center
- II. Original Intent of Technical Center Design
- III. Storage of Dangerous Materials



**REDUNDANCY**--Three basements are too many; the blueprint will reveal this duplication. Can you tell from the above outline whether any thoughts have been unnecessarily repeated? Might not *corporate Culture and Management Style*, for instance, contain much of the same information as **MANAGEMENT TRADITIONS**?

So, the question becomes, just what *does* the A,B,C outline tell you? Only the topics (or some of them) that the writer plans to cover. And that's not enough.

It does not reveal omitted ideas, redundant or irrelevant ideas, or problems with idea sequence because **it does not deal with ideas**, but--just as the mind map does--with phrases, labels and loose words.

**So, the answer is not to jot down forgettable words and phrases. And it *most certainly* is not to plunge into the message and start paddling in some direction. Indulging in trial-and-error false starts is very risky. False starts typically lead to false second steps, and third, and....**

So, what Is the answer? Are we asking, perhaps, too much of an organizing system?

On the contrary, such a system ought to meet even sterner criteria. The next page lists such criteria, and shows how Twain's acclaimed approach to organizing compares with rough drafting, mind maps and grocery lists.

How does your approach to organizing writing stack up to Twain's? Let's find out:

To do you any real good, an organizing system must:	Twain	Rough drafts	Mind maps	A,B,C "grocery lists"
♣ Get the writer off to a fast start	YES	some-times	YES	no
♣ Provide the best possible sequence of ideas	YES	<del>impossible!</del>	no	some-times
♣ Filter out irrelevant content	YES	no	no	no
♣ Detect content omissions	YES	rarely	no	some-times
♣ Lead to concise writing	YES	<del>creates</del> verbosity	no	no
♣ Facilitate brainstorming	YES	no	YES	no
♣ Allow easy revision	YES	no	no	no
♣ Work with ideas throughout, not words or phrases.	YES	YES	no	no
♣ Flow smoothly into writing	YES	no	no	no
♣ Detect redundant content	YES	no	no	some-times
♣ Separate the organizing process from the writing process, preventing writer overload	YES	no	no	partially
♣ Cure "blanking out" at the keyboard	YES	no	some-times	no
♣ Eliminate cut-and-paste (electronic or manual)	YES	no	no	some-times

If you'd like to know more about the highly effective organizing system that has been the heart of Twain's writing programs for over 30 years, call us now.

No--better yet, *don't* call us now. Wait instead until you're hopelessly mired in one of those "impossible" writing projects, one that defies all your efforts to organize it. Wait until your mind has gone into total paralysis.

Then--then think Twain.

Or, if you don't want to wait until the 11th hour, order our book, "Write Smarter, Not Harder." This book will show you how to cut your writing time in half--guaranteed. "Write Smarter" will take the pain out of the organizing process--guaranteed.

But...if you ever find a better book on writing--**ever**--we'll refund your money.