

Role of Left-Brain/Right-Brain Functions in Writing

by Frank Milligan

My book, *Time to Write: Discovering the Writer Within After 50*, presents powerful tools and techniques to help writers develop ideas and transport them from the mind to the page in the quickest and easiest way possible. But understanding the underlying concepts enhances learning, so let's spend a few minutes on the theory of left-brain and right-brain functions and how they relate to writing.

The theory

The theory holds that the left side of our brain is the analytical, logical, adult, linear, rule-following side, which combines individual pieces to make a whole. Conversely, the right side is the emotional, childlike, nonlinear, big-picture, intuitive, visual side, which looks first at the whole, then identifies the individual details.

The concept evolved in part from work done by Roger W. Sperry. He won a Nobel Prize in 1981 for demonstrating, in research conducted on the brains of epilepsy patients, that although the brain functions as a unit, the two sides of the brain each have primary responsibility for different motor and thought processes. Subsequent research has revealed that things are not quite as simple and direct as that, but we can leave that to the physiologists to debate. For our purposes, traditional left-brain/right-brain theory is all we need to know.

How this applies to writing

In writing, the left-brain corresponds to the editor, the part of your brain that functions in a linear, orderly fashion—the part that makes us want to be sure we're correct and careful. The right side is the hey-let's-have-a-party, anything goes, the-more-creative-the-better side of your brain that wants to deal with the big picture without worrying about details.

When planning what we'll write (the first of the three part process of writing), we want to turn-off the editor for a little while to enable our right-brain to conceive of as many ideas, and employ as much creativity as possible.

If you tend to be a left-brained linear thinker, don't let the prospect of an unfettered right-brain running in all directions at once scare you. Remember, you are the only one who will ever see the results. You'll use what's useful from this process and discard what is not.

The objective is to call forth the raw material you need to write the first draft (the second stage of the three stage writing process). Feel free to put anything you want into your first draft, knowing that you'll bring to bear your left-brain side, the editor, to make a finished, polished product in the third and final stage, the revision stage.

Engaging your right-brain mind

Why do we have to deliberately engage the right-brain? Shouldn't it function on its own?

Unfortunately, as we move from childhood to adulthood we are consciously and unconsciously trained to repress right-brain creative thinking in favor of conformance with rules.

Henriette Anne Klauser in her 1987 book, *Writing On Both Sides Of The Brain*, says: "It is true that the logical left deserves the credit for grammar, punctuation, format - all essential to writing anything readable. But the right hemisphere has *style*. It has rhythm. It has the flow and the energy of excitement when you're on a roll. It provides images and analogies, color and music—in short, everything that lifts your written piece, whether it is a short story, a legal brief, or an office memorandum, from the mundane and predictable to be inspired and inspiring, the unforgettable."

But she also says that the left half of the brain dominates the right half in most instances, ". . . in Western society in particular, right-brained kinds of thinking—intuition, speculation, and others of that sort—have generally been ridiculed or downplayed. So before we can celebrate this glorious freeing unity, most of us need to deal with a part of our brain (wherever it is located) that does not allow the other part equal play, that does not support, encourage, invite, and credit the contribution of its opposite number."

To understand why this is so, it's useful to examine the work of Gabriele Lusser Rico, who in 1983 authored *Writing The Natural Way: Using Right-brain techniques to Release Your Expressive Powers*. She developed a method of tapping right-brain creativity called "clustering," which we're going to examine in a few moments.

In the preface to her 1983 book, *Writing the Natural Way*, Rico described the process: "Its thesis, quite simply, is that writing is inherently a much more natural process if we learn to flow with, rather than fight, the natural corporative rhythms of the hemispheres of our brain."

By freeing your creative side, clustering assists you in doing a mind-dump onto the page. Rico says: "In so doing, you'll discover and develop your own unique means of expression and you will draw on memories, emotions, experiences, and images you may never have thought within reach."

Another benefit is that it helps your hand keep up with your mind. How many times have you thought of three or more things that you need to do, and as you began writing them down in a list so you won't forget them, you find that by the time you have written the first two you've forgotten the rest?

As children, we were as naturally creative and spontaneous as we now observe in the fun and spontaneity our children and grandchildren bring to the most routine of occurrences. As Rico says when talking about the childhood origins of natural writing: "The playfulness, the willingness to take risks, the spontaneity that are characteristic of creative behavior in general and natural writing in particular depend on two fundamental acts you engaged in from the moment you began to talk: wonder and storying . . . you wondered about everything because everything was new to you. . . . Storying expresses an innate human need to make mental connections, to perceive patterns, to create relationships among people, things, feelings, and events -- and to express these perceived connections to others." She describes this stage, from age 2 to age 7, as one of "innocent creative expression".

However, as we encounter the outside world and progress through school, a stage lasting from about age 8 through age 16, replaces that open, innocent, and imaginative period. Rico says: "During these years of conventional perception and expression, we are well entrenched in a school curriculum that emphasizes logical/linear, rule-governed learnings taught piece by piece, and usually in the absence of a larger context that would allow us to hook these bits and pieces of learning to a larger picture. Education is compartmentalized as we begin to move from a class in English to a class in science to a class of mathematics, and so forth. . . . Understandably, with such an imposition of rules and criticism about "the right way" and "the wrong way" to accomplish learning, our writing becomes more anxious, less spontaneous, far less daring and grandiose in conception."

She goes on to say, "Most of us at this stage gradually slide into a negative attitude about writing, with the result that we write only when it is required of us: book reports, perfunctory thank you notes, and tests, endless tests."

Unfortunately, few ever leave that stage. Over and over, in my Business Writing classes, I've met professionals who throughout their lives have viewed writing as a very unpleasant but necessary chore that must be endured. But, through use of the techniques we're about to discuss, they invariably find that learning to write smarter makes their writing much less onerous, much more pleasant to do, and much less drudgery.

Freeing your creativity

To move beyond this negative stage we must learn how to regain access to that repressed creativity. Rico says, "It is a paradox of creativity that the very way to move beyond the conventional stage is not to try harder, but to take a seeming step backward: to reawaken and cultivate in ourselves some of the ways we had perceiving and expressing when we were children."

My book describes several tools can help you to achieve that reawakening of creativity, to generate fresh ideas, and to get your words from the mind to the page quickly and easily, but for now, I'll share with you my personal favorite: clustering.

Clustering

Clustering (sometimes called brain-mapping or bubbling) is the one of the easiest and most effective ways to generate ideas. It enables you to visualize your thoughts in a way that allows you to see connections that might not otherwise have made themselves apparent, because instead of a list of words or a narrative, clustering results in a diagram showing how the concepts work together.

Clustering can be used for any size project, from laying out a paragraph, to writing an article; from organizing thoughts for a poem, to laying out a chapter, or even an entire book. It is particularly useful for people who think and learn visually because it enables you to see the entire concept on a single page.

I've found clustering a useful tool not only for writing, but in other aspects of my life as well. I've used it to analyze management problems, to analyze organizational structure and business processes, and to develop various types of proposals.

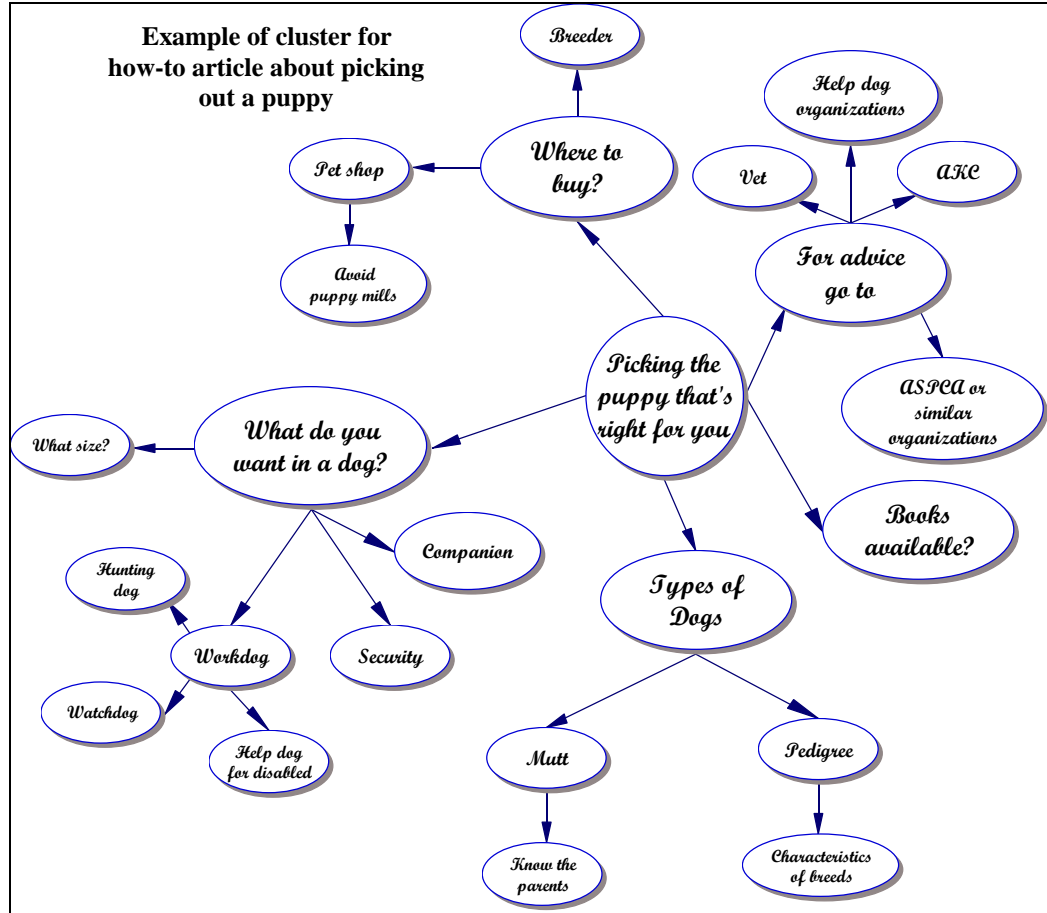
How to cluster

- In the middle of a blank page, write the central idea that you're writing about. It can be a word, a phrase, or a sentence.
- Draw a circle around the word or phrase.
- Relax. Don't try to think of things to say, let them come naturally into your mind. Permit your mind to go in whatever direction it chooses with regard to the circled word or phrase.
- As each new thought occurs, draw a line out from the center circle, write it down, and circle it.
- As additional thoughts spring from these new thoughts circle them and connect them with lines.
- Work as quickly as you can. Don't take time to analyze the thoughts or filter them in any way. As they occur to you, simply write them down.
- Keep going until you run completely out of new thoughts.
- Take a few minutes to review the diagram that has resulted and identify and associate like items.
- Eliminate any duplicates by drawing a line through them.

Now sit back and take a look at what you've got. I usually find that connections I was not aware of on a conscious level have made their way onto the cluster diagram.

Sample cluster

Below is the example I use in my book of a cluster for a how-to article.



Organize your ideas

Once you've finished drawing your cluster, lay out the clustered material in an outline. Organizing involves grouping similar concepts and then linking the resulting groups in logical order. The nature of the project will usually determine which organizational method makes the most sense: chronological, hierarchical, logical, comparison and contrast, advantages and disadvantages, or listing.

Clustering is not for everyone

In my experience, most of the people who take my business writing and creative writing classes find clustering just as amazing and useful a tool as I have. But it's not for everyone.

It may not appeal to people who tend to think in a linear fashion. But, fortunately for them, there are other equally valuable tools, such as freewriting, rainbowing, storyboarding, and heuristic interviewing, all of which are described in my book: *Time to Write: Discovering the Writer Within After 50*.