Make Writing Easier For Your Brain!
A Writing Guide Workshop on working memory & writing

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Today's Workshop:

- Cognitive Overload & Working Memory
- Working Memory & Writing
- Relieving the Pressure
Cognitive Overload & Working Memory
Working memory refers to the ability to temporarily hold information in our heads while using or manipulating it.
Working Memory

temporary storage for current use

Long-Term Memory

long-term storage of info, events, procedures, skills, habits
With enough rehearsal, things stored temporarily can eventually make it into long-term memory.

- **Working Memory**
  - temporary storage for current use

- **Long-Term Memory**
  - long-term storage of info, events, procedures, skills, habits
Working memory plays a role in planning, making decisions, and initiating those plans and decisions – because all of those actions require us to hold information in our heads.
Working memory has a limited capacity – there’s only so much we can hold onto in our heads at once.
Think of working memory like a juggler: there are only so many balls or pins or scarves we can have in the air at any given time.
If we try to give our juggler too many things to juggle...
... something is going to get dropped!
This feeling of cognitive overload is familiar to all of us, especially when we’re asking our working memories to hold onto...
This feeling of cognitive overload is familiar to all of us, especially when we’re asking our working memories to hold onto…

... all of this:
Working Memory & Writing
Research (esp by Ronald Kellogg & Deborah McCutchen) has shown that working memory plays an important role in the writing process.
These researchers find that, in order to write well, we need to hold onto three things at once:

author (you)  your text  imagined reader
what you want to say

author
(you)

your text

what your text says

imagined reader

how a reader might understand your text
Essentially, writing requires us to do three tasks at the same time: we need to plan what we're going to say, we need to generate the text itself, and we need to review the text.
Even on its own, this burden on working memory makes writing challenging.

But when we're already in a state of cognitive overload...
... it can feel like we're being asked to juggle with one hand tied behind our back.
We might think we’re asking our brain to do this:
But we're really asking our brain to do this:
Cognitive overload while writing looks like:

- Getting stuck on the “right” word/phrase
- Decision paralysis
- Unsure how to revise
- OVERWHELM
Good news!

We can relieve the pressure in 2 ways:

1. Simplify the juggling task
2. Better equip the juggler
If we want to simplify the juggling task...
...let's juggle one ball instead of three!
Simplify the Juggling Task:
3 Strategies for Juggling One Ball At A Time

➔ Embrace Multiple Phases
➔ Write the “Bad Version”
➔ Separate Structuring from Drafting
Strategy: Embrace Multiple Phases

- phase/draft for planning
- phase/draft for generating
- phase/draft for reviewing
Strategy: Write The “Bad Version”

- Only occupies the planning function
- Takes pressure off generating and reviewing
- Figuring out what we want to say, not how
Strategy: Separate Structuring from Drafting

- Outline then draft
- OR draft then outline
- OR move back and forth
Two ways to relieve pressure:

1. Simplify the juggling task
2. Better equip the juggler
To better equip our juggler...
... we can give them other ways to hold onto the things they're juggling (like an extra arm or a net to catch things that drop)
PLAN

GENERATE

REVIEW

containers outside brain
When we try to hold onto all of our thoughts and ideas in our heads, it leaves less of our working memory for the writing process.
But when we record those things elsewhere, we're relying on resources other than our working memory, which frees up our working memory for the task at hand.
Better Equip the Juggler:  
3 Strategies for Relying on a Net

➔ Keep a “Distraction Pad”
➔ Deposit Thoughts Outside the Brain
➔ Freewrite as a Planning Method
Strategy: Keep a “Distraction Pad”

- Keep a pad of paper (or sticky notes, or voice recorder, etc.) next to you while you work.
- When thoughts pop up about other parts of the paper or other projects, jot them down.
- Then go back to the task at hand (whether you’re planning, generating, or reviewing).
Strategy: Deposit Thoughts Outside the Brain

- Don’t try to remember all the thoughts that might pop up over the course of your day!
- Establish a way to record your thoughts as they occur to you
- E.g. using a notes app, mind mapping, sketching or doodling, voice recording, talking with someone (and recording), etc.
Strategy: Freewrite as a Planning Method

- Brain dump, write through your thoughts, or plan your ideas
- Then set it aside while drafting
Recap: Strategies to Make Writing Easier for Your Brain!

➔ Keep a “Distraction Pad”
➔ Deposit Thoughts Outside the Brain
➔ Freewrite as a Planning Method

➔ Embrace Multiple Phases
➔ Write the “Bad Version”
➔ Separate Structuring from Drafting
References & further reading


