

## Chapter Two – Composing ideas

Once you have invested in the kinds of thinking mentioned in the previous chapter, you will begin playing around with the words and phrases you have generated. It is not yet time to worry about style or the order of things.

In the early stages, it works best if you unload your thoughts quite freely, investing in refinement at a later stage. If you place too much emphasis upon quality or order at this stage, the pressure to excel or meet various rules and standards may inhibit your production.



© iStock.com - Siphoto

In most cases, you should not start writing at the beginning. You have already jotted down many words and phrases that are calling out for expansion. If you start with the ideas that are eager for your attention, you will make good headway, and you can worry about weaving these elements together later.

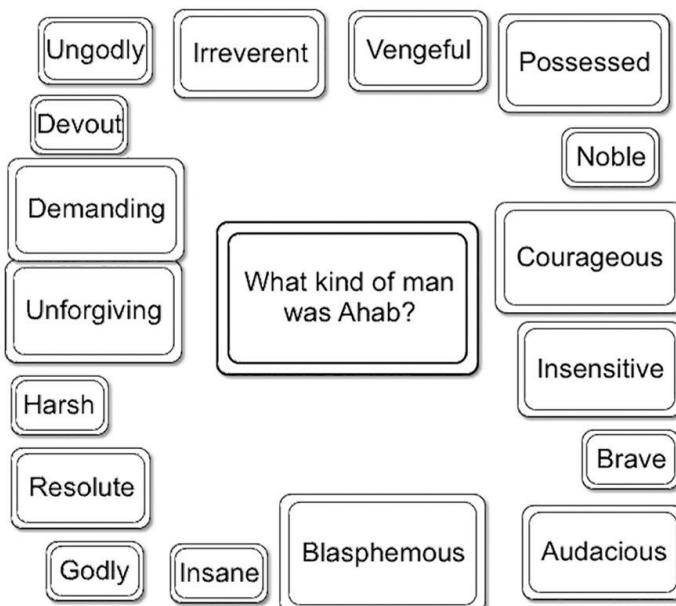
Perhaps you have been working on an essay that will eventually

## Laptop Thinking and Writing

provide a clear portrait of Captain Ahab's personality. Having scoured *Moby Dick* for actions he took and words he spoke that are evidence of character, you created a list of more than a dozen words that you can substantiate with these examples. Later on, you may change your mind and delete some.

Devout	Possessed	Courageous	Insane
Demanding	Irreverent	Insensitive	Noble
Blasphemous	Vengeful	Resolute	Brave
Unforgiving	Harsh	Audacious	Godly

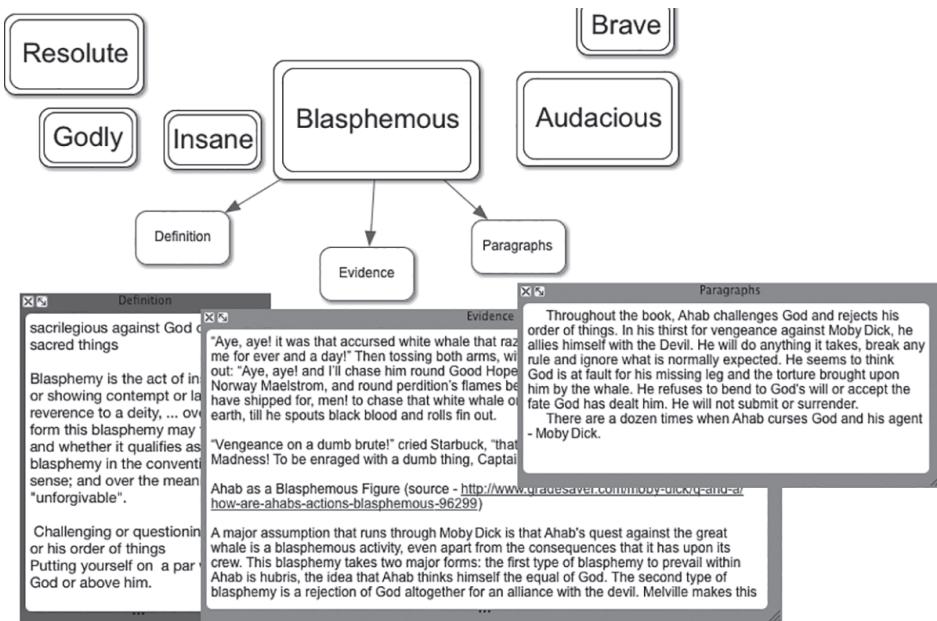
Reviewing the list, you seize upon the first word that captures your fancy. You write a few sentences connecting the evidence you collected to support the word. You do not worry about style. You state the case bluntly at this point. You will clean up the sentences later. There are more than a dozen words to explain and defend. You move up and down the list, picking the words that are easiest to defend. Before long, you have several dozens paragraphs that will later require organizing, rearranging and weaving together into a document that effectively conveys your point of view substantiated with lots of evidence and examples.



The diagrams above and on the next page made with Inspiration™ show the advantages of using a mind mapping program during the brainstorming stage. Unlike a piece of paper or a word processor, this program allows you

## Laptop Thinking and Writing

to attach and then hide the evidence you may find to go with each of the character words. You can also attach your first paragraphs as notes.



## Making up your mind



Diagram included with permission of Thinkmap, Inc.

Composing fresh ideas is too often neglected when we first learn about writing in school. The pressure to put words on paper and compose both sentences and paragraphs is generally premature. Pre-writing activities are essential and should be emphasized. Too little attention is devoted to

## Laptop Thinking and Writing

how the mind works and how we might improve our thinking. There are many skills that you can acquire to generate thoughts that will later inspire wonderful sentences and paragraphs.

Is everyone a thinker?

Is everyone a songwriter?

Is everyone a poet?

Potentially, the answer is, “Yes, yes and yes again!”

But this will only be true if natural talents are nurtured.



© iStock - MaszaS

If you listen to young children in the playground or the bathtub, you will often hear them making up songs. They babble and make all kinds of sounds, some harmonious and some not. This natural songwriting could grow into something magical and lovely, but somehow it begins to disappear in most cases as children enter their school years.

“Why?” is the four-year-old’s favorite, often repeated question. At that age, such questioning is intense and insistent, the sign that important thinking is going on. They wonder about everything. But this sense of wonder and questioning often subsides like the songwriting as children start their school years. Why is this?

Drawing and painting by the young can also be magnificent if children are not introduced too early to coloring books and paint-by-number activities that will kill their natural expression.

Lurking in the background is a cultural attitude that holds that only a small percentage of the general population is capable of original thought, creative production or artistic expression. During my workshop sessions, many teachers have reported that they have been discouraged even in graduate

## Laptop Thinking and Writing

school from thinking they can come up with anything new. Professors have sometimes told them that their idea cannot possibly be original so they must find it elsewhere, cite the author and provide a footnote.

This book challenges you to do your own thinking instead of copying and pasting the thoughts of others. Accomplishing this goal requires a combination of confidence and skill. You must feel that your efforts will create understandings that are new and fresh. Even though many thousands before you may have thought and written about Ahab or Paris or the problem you are addressing, you are bringing unique personal insight and creativity to the task before you.

### Synthesis

The act of mixing, matching, combining and altering sentences, ideas and paragraphs is called “synthesis.” It is a skill rarely taught in schools. Synthesis is a change process that leads to the improvement of anything from an omelet or a hamburger to a painting or the constitution of a nation.



© J. McKenzie

- What would happen if we added some cream to the eggs before mixing them together?
- Would the omelet be more tasty with free range eggs?
- Does the person eating the omelet like it dry?
- Are there ingredients like ham, cheese and mushrooms that will make the omelet more interesting?

## Laptop Thinking and Writing

- Is it better to cook the omelet fast and hot or slowly and not so hot?
- Will the omelet taste better if cooked in butter? unsalted butter? oil?

In a similar fashion, you will be playing around with the ingredients of your document. The more you know about synthesis in general, the better you will be able to modify and improve your ideas and your writing. Over time you may add more than a dozen synthesis strategies to your repertoire.

To illustrate what I mean by a synthesis strategy, I will present SCAMPER in this chapter.

Invented by Bob Eberle and Alex Osborn to help groups become more inventive, each letter of SCAMPER stands for a tactic:

- S --- Substitute
- C -- Combine
- A -- Adjust
- M -- Put to other use
- E --- Eliminate
- R -- Reverse



© iStock.com - bowie15

Back in the 1950s, there were really only three kinds of hamburgers, but today we have hundreds, in part because business people and chefs used the strategies above. Some even eliminated the bun! Others substituted chicken or fish for the beef patty. The list of changes is nearly endless and more

## Laptop Thinking and Writing

importantly, the eating experience was greatly improved.

When you learn these synthesis strategies, your thinking and writing will be more interesting, more varied and more flavorful.

Returning to the Captain Ahab example, once you have written paragraphs for each of the character words, providing evidence from the novel to support your choices, you will start thinking about how to arrange these paragraphs. It is a bit like making a mosaic. Are some of the words more important than others? If you have been using mind mapping software, you will be able to move the words around and test out different arrays.



© J. McKenzie

This same thought process will work well for any question that involves character.

- What kind of city is Paris? New York? Tokyo? Sydney?
- What kind of painter was Georgia O'Keeffe? Marie Cassatt? Elaine de Kooning?
- What kind of architect was Frank Lloyd Wright? I.M. Pei? Maya Lin?
- What kind of business leader was Donald Trump? Carly Fiorina? Michael Bloomberg?

In approaching all of these questions, you will make a list of character words and then seek evidence to substantiate your choices. Eventually, you will arrange your findings like a mosaic. Synthesis will be central to the thought process.

In addition to thinking of synthesis as mosaic making, you can also consider the metaphors of weaving, beading and working on a jigsaw puzzle. In the end, you may end up painting a picture of Ahab, but you will be doing this with words rather than water colors. You can read more on the use of

## Laptop Thinking and Writing

these metaphors in “Puzzling and Weaving toward Insight” at

<http://questioning.org/nov05/puzzling.html>.

You will find additional synthesis strategies at

<http://questioning.org/sum08/bettering.html>



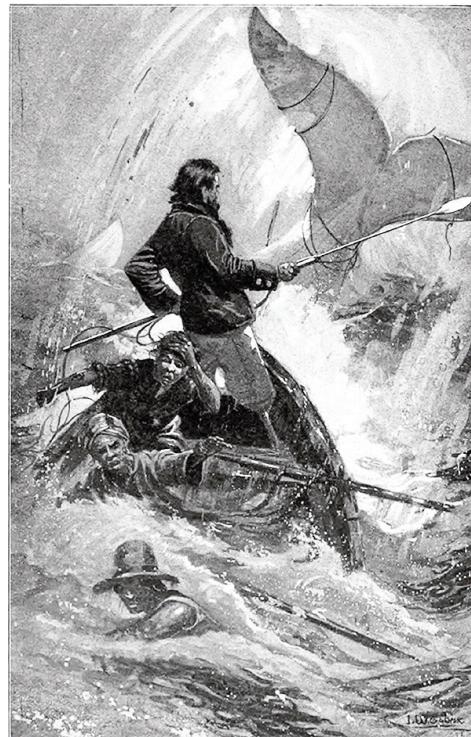
The work you have done collecting words and evidence is like creating a palette. You must convert your findings into a portrait, giving emphasis to those aspects that are most telling — most important.

© S. McKenzie

Even though you have more than fifteen words to define Ahab's character, which two or three capture the most important aspects? Melville was setting up Ahab to fight against God and God's will, allying himself with the Devil in order to get his revenge. Some of your character words would fit many ship captains but would not be central to the themes of this novel.

Whether you are trying to capture Ahab's character or the nature of any other person, city or thing, it is your choice of what to focus upon that will make your document original and compelling.

You will not be content with the mere collection — the copying and pasting — of other people's ideas and views. You will create a new portrait that differs from any painted before you.



Public Domain image by I. W. Taber  
Charles Scribner's Sons 1902 edition of *Moby Dick*