

The Writing Process

Advice from
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The Writing Process is Hard

Why can't I write?

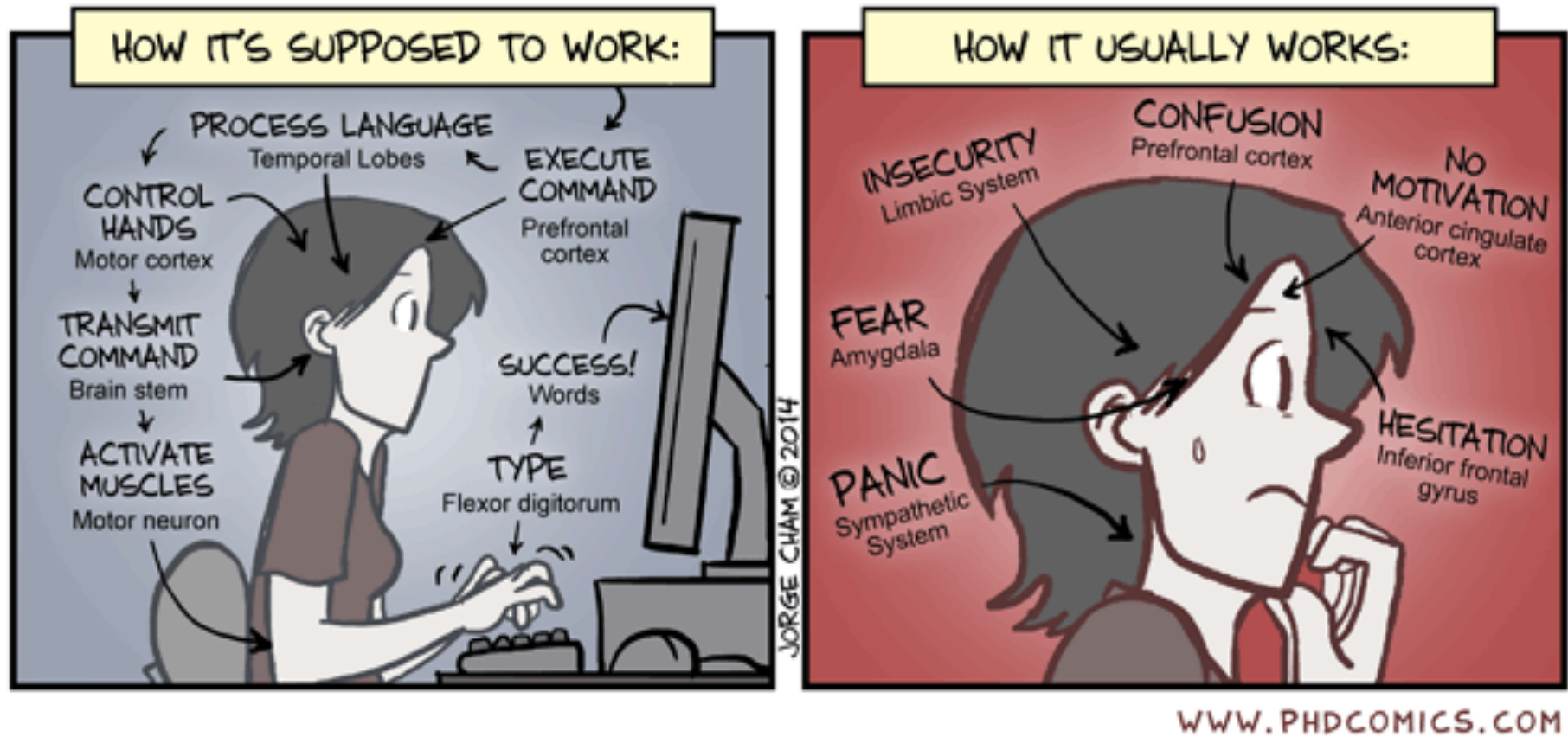


<http://www.phdcomics.com/comics.php?f=1733>

Why Can't I write?

- You're not good at it yet. No one likes to do things they suck at. → NEED TO PRACTICE
- You don't know what to say.
- You don't know how to say what you want to say.
- You *thought* you knew how to say what you want to say, but it's not actually working.
- You are not prioritizing time to write.
- Emotions

THE NEUROBIOLOGY OF WRITING



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Outlines → make writing more efficient

- Partially answers “what do I want to say?”
- Clarifies “work still to be done” and gives you a long lead time to get it done
- Can get high-value input from collaborators at an early stage.
- Reveals structural problems *early*, before investing time writing.

What do I mean by “structural problems”?

Are you....

Explaining things in the wrong order?

Explaining too much at the same time?

Missing information?

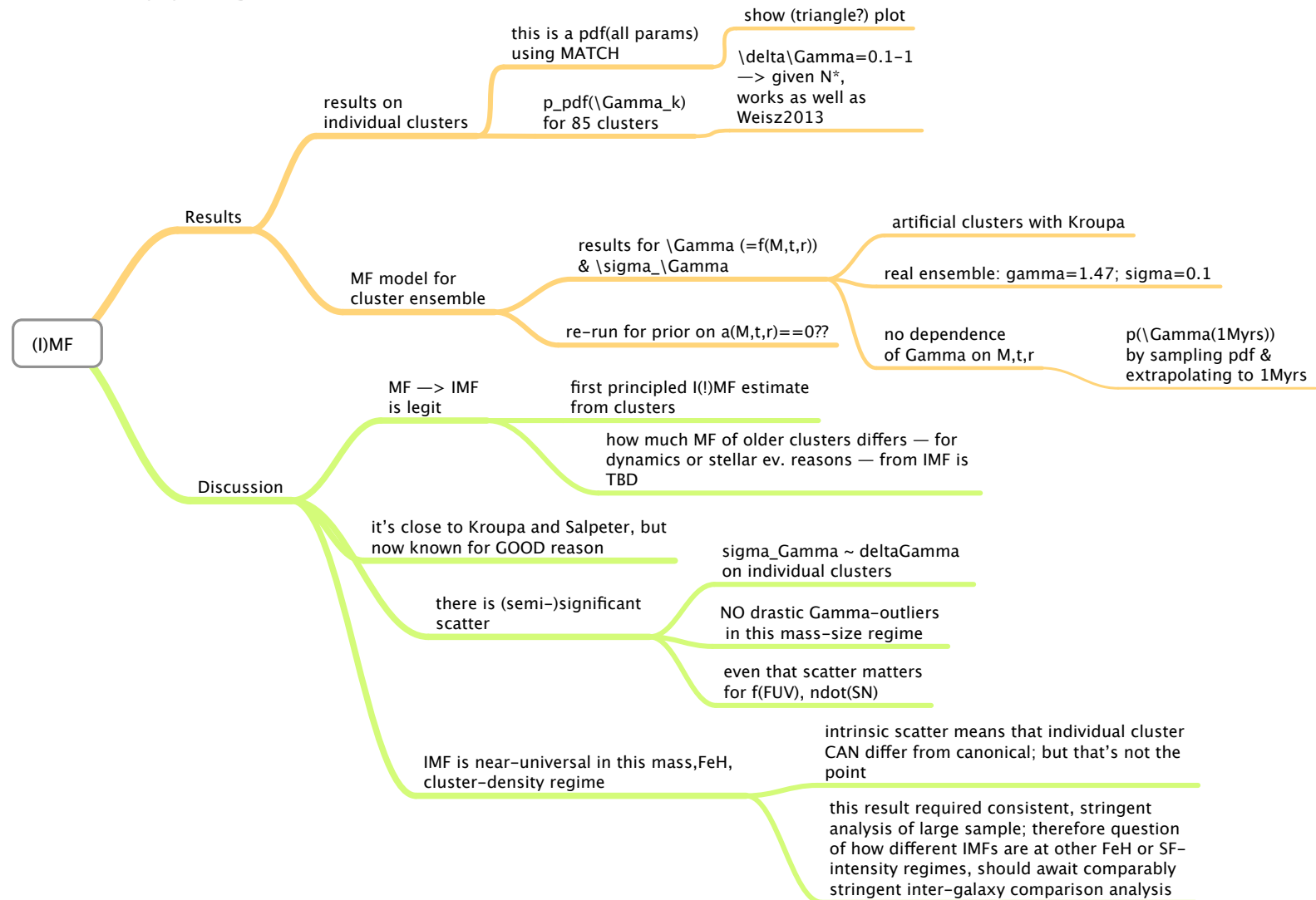
Motivation unconvincing?

Line of argument confusing?

Structural Problems

- You can't just tweak words and sentences to fix these.
- You have to move or cut entire paragraphs and sections.
- Easy to fix EARLY before text is written.

Mind Mapping



<http://mindnode.com>

Has free trial. Paid version lets you drag & drop nodes.

Prioritizing Time to Write

- ~ 200 words per paragraph,
- 1000 words = 5 paragraphs

How long will it take to generate a first draft ?

At a rate of 5 paragraphs per week (1 paragraph per day)

<u>#Pages</u>	<u>#Words</u>	<u>#Paragraphs</u>	<u>#weeks for 1st draft</u>
~5	5,000	25	~ 1 months
~10	10,000	50	~2-3 months
~15	15,000	75	~3-4 months

FACT: If writing is hard for you, you will always avoid it, and it will never get done, and you will always feel bad.

Schedule it so it happens

At what time of day & at what location are you:

Most effective at writing? Least likely to be interrupted? Least likely to freak out*?

*Julianne wrote her thesis from 7pm-2am, after drinking a glass of wine, because she was too wound up otherwise

Schedule it so it happens.

Schedule no more than a 1 hour chunk, and don't aim to write more than ~200 words*.

*If you do write more, great! Ride that train! But don't set a goal that sets you up to feel bad.

When you stop writing...

...*always* have a plan for what you want to write in the next session*.

*And write it down in bold-face/color in the document. Future You will thank you.

What is the First Draft?

- Not a complete draft
- Not a polished draft
- Not a perfect draft
- Get your thoughts down
- Do not stop to plot or calculate. Use “##TBD##” and move on

“The first draft of anything is shit”

— Ernest Hemingway

Proposal vs Papers

- Both are about the “Story”
- Both Require awareness & management of “readers expectations”
- DIFFERENCE: tone, goal, structure

Paper

- 1) the reader is already sold.
They read the abstract
and chose to keep going
- 2) The reader would like to
be convinced of your
results

Proposals

- 1) the reader has no choice but to read
it. They are probably sick of reading
by the time they get to yours
- 1) The reader is looking for reasons not
to be swayed.

Proposals & the Narrative

- At least 2/3 of proposal ideas quality as “Good to do”
- This isn’t enough : telescope time & \$\$\$ are always more limited than the supply of good ideas.
- You need to move from:
“Good to do” to “Must be done”
- This requires a really strong story, backed by a really strong argument, explained with impeccable clarity.

I. Crafting a strong story.

1. Topic X is important and interesting.
2. But.
3. This is how we will address “But.”

A proposal is best viewed as an argument that leaves the reader believing that #1 & #2 are true and that #3 is the best way forward.

Your goal with #3: Put words in the reviewer’s mouth that they can parrot back to the committee.

The Narrative – For a proposal this usually centers around a question →
“the problem”

You have devised a program that will show that :

Molecular cores in the Monoceros molecular cloud have a power-law mass distribution with a slope similar to the IMF.

Q: What is the story?

Possible stories:

- “How do stars form?”
- “What is the substructure within molecular clouds?”
- “Is the substructure within molecular clouds driven by compressive or solenoidal forcing?”
- “What is the origin of the IMF?”

Your section 1 would be completely different depending on your choice of story !!