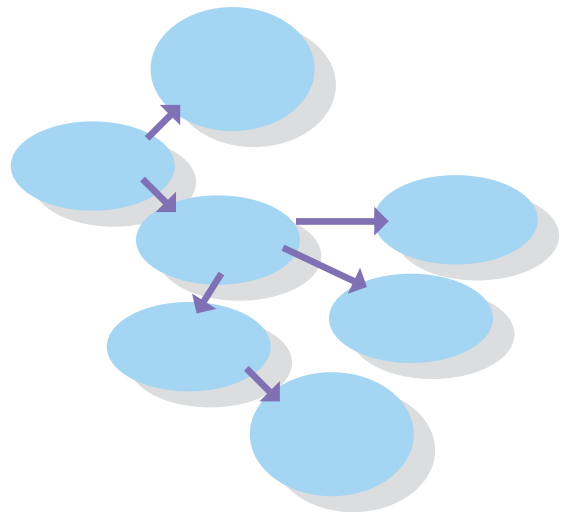




How a simple technique  
can dramatically increase  
your writing speed



By Daphne Gray-Grant

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*If you haven't received this e-book directly from The Publication Coach,  
it's an illegal copy.*

# Introduction

When you sit down to write an article, story or other piece of work, one of two problems often occurs:

- (1) You have dozens of ideas competing for your attention and you don't know where to begin. Thoughts flicker through your mind and disappear. Zip – they're gone! You're like a child at the circus – so many lovely, colourful things are competing for your attention, you don't know where to focus. As a result, you feel lost and overwhelmed.

OR (more commonly)

- (2) You are totally bereft of ideas. You have nothing to say. You despair of ever getting anything written. As you sit down to write, you feel like a labourer trudging through a muddy field—it's as if your boots are being sucked off your feet with each tiresome step you try to take.

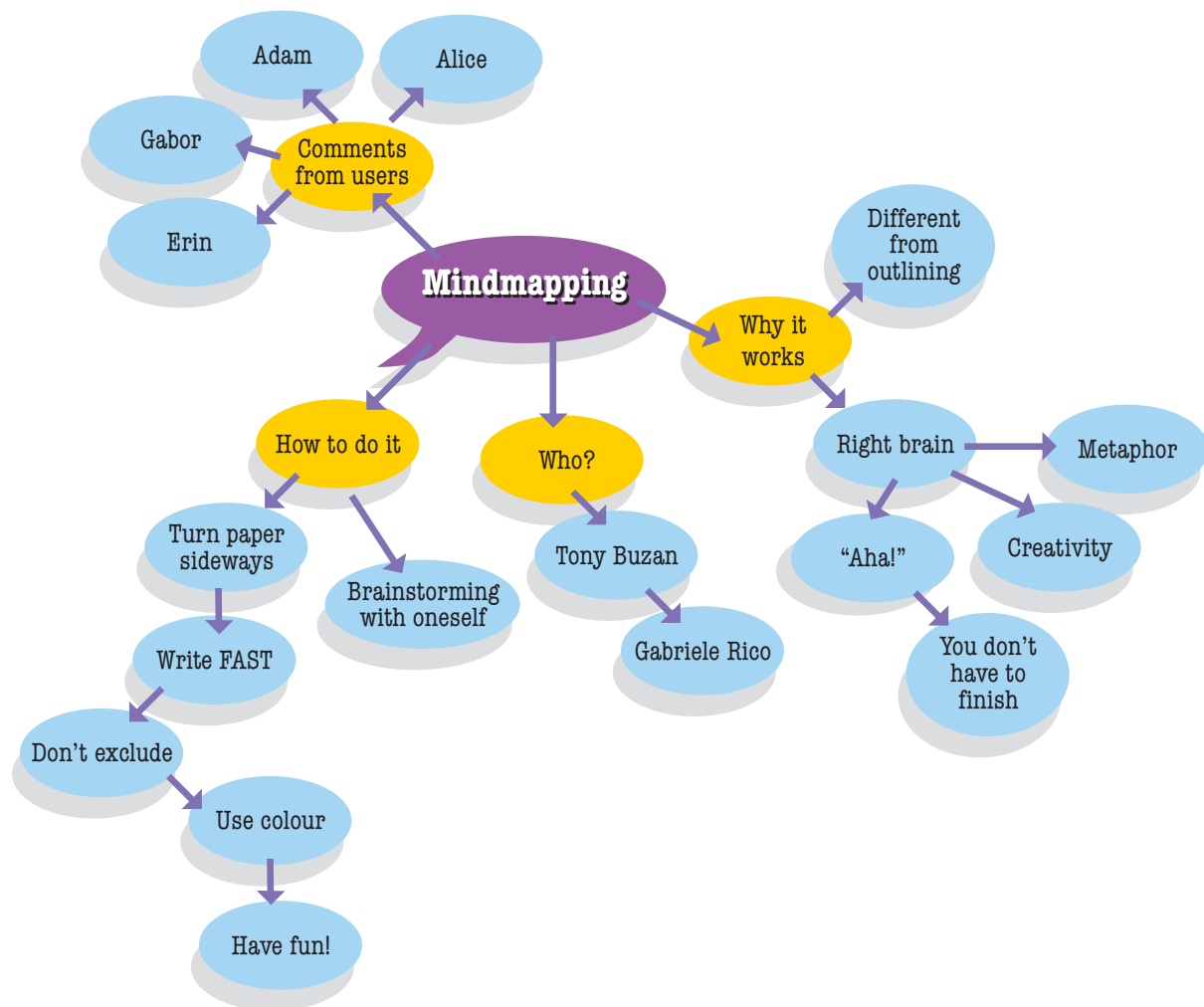
These situations are polar opposites – but, interestingly, they lead to the same result. You can't write.

This report you're reading describes a technique for getting around both of these problems. It's called mindmapping, although it's sometimes also known as clustering or webbing.

It will help you write faster, have more fun doing it and produce better results. It doesn't cost a thing. And it's easy to learn. So let's get started.

# What is a mindmap?

If you haven't seen a mindmap before, you're probably curious about what one looks like. So, before talking about the theory, let me show you an actual map. In fact, this is the first one I created for writing this report.



As you can see, it's simply a group of words with circles drawn around them and lines connecting them to other words.

Now you're probably wondering how a few words and squiggles on a page could possibly help with writing. So here's the secret: mindmaps are personal. This map is meaningful to me because each word harbours an association for me. And even if you created a mindmap on exactly the same topic and used exactly the same words (which is pretty unlikely), you would still have different associations for them.

Like snowflakes and human beings, each mindmap is unique.

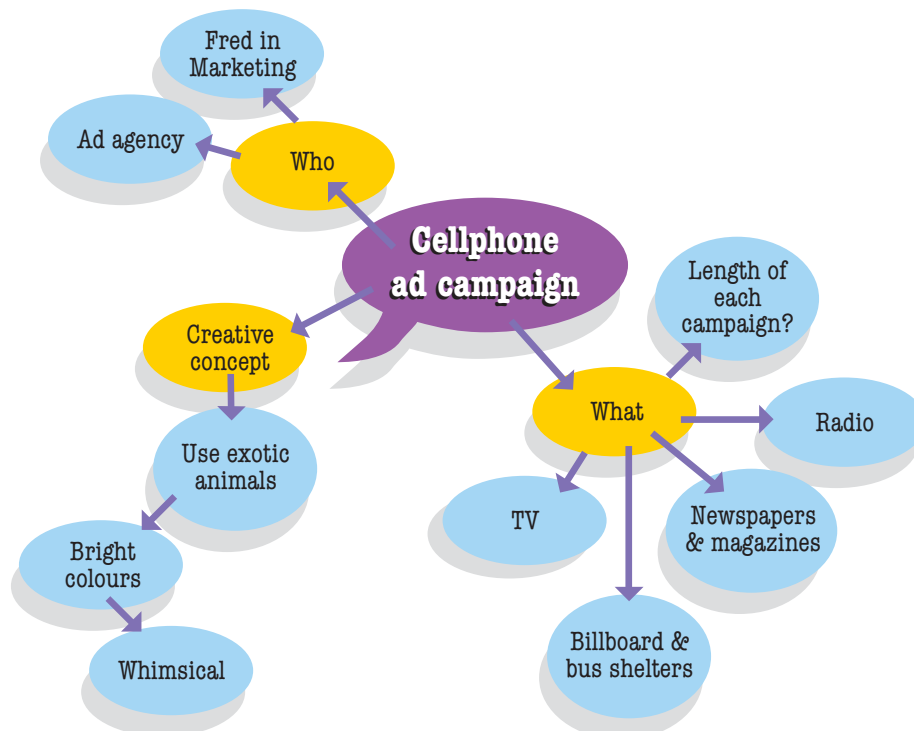
# How can you create your own mindmap?

One of the best things about mindmapping is that it's so simple.

Take a blank piece of 8.5 x 11-inch paper and turn it sideways. (This may sound picky, but it's crucial. Turning the paper so it sits landscape fashion will give you more “room” to write all around your central idea. This will help make your mind feel open and expansive.) If you're creating a mindmap for a long piece of writing – such as a book – you might even want to get a large piece of blank newsprint or butcher's paper and stretch it across your office or dining room table, so you can really spread out!

Write your subject or central idea in the middle of the paper. For example, if you're writing an article on the advertising campaign for a new cellphone, you might write: “cellphone ad campaign.” Draw a circle around this phrase or idea.

Now, just let your mind wander. Each time a word or association pops into your head, write it down and draw a circle around it. Link it to the word/phrase that inspired the thought by drawing a line to it, as you can see in the example here:



If you have lots of ideas, this process will be very fast. If you have only a few ideas, you'll likely start slowly (okay, maybe very slowly), but you will pick up speed as you go. But whatever you're feeling, be sure to keep these simple rules in mind:

**Don't judge or evaluate.** Every idea is acceptable. Just write them all down on the page. Reassure yourself that if you don't like some of the ideas, you can always cross them out *later*. But "judging" while you're mindmapping will cause you to choke. Instead, you should simply write down your thoughts as fast as you possibly can. If you find your mind going blank, don't panic! Just keep your pen moving by drawing empty lines, colouring in the circles or doodling.

**Don't limit yourself to just the facts.** The words and phrases you write down should also include feelings, images and metaphors. These will help make your writing more interesting, colourful and lively – and will help inspire you to *want* to write.

**Don't structure.** Apart from drawing links between related ideas, don't classify or organize. That's separate work and it should come later.

**Don't over-think.** People sometimes wonder if each thought must be distilled to a single word. No! Some people like to use single words; others use phrases or sentence fragments. While a mindmap is meant to be succinct, it doesn't need to be curt. Do what suits you best.

**Be creative.** Use different coloured pens or pencils. Include drawings or doodles. Your brain likes to be amused; keep it happy while you're working.

It may have occurred to you that mindmapping is similar to brainstorming. Indeed it is, and you might even want to think of it as brainstorming with yourself.

In fact, for many articles, I find it's useful to create *two* mindmaps – one before I do any research or interviews (so I know what to research) and a second one when I want to take the information I've collected and actually write.

How do you know when your mindmap is done? Keep putting words on the page until you've filled it OR until you feel like writing your article, story or report. What usually happens is that you will get to a certain point in your map and you'll think, "Now I know what I want to say."

Some people call this the “click,” the “shift” or the “aha!” moment. Mindmaps can be used for many purposes (more on that later), but the “aha!” experience is what renders them so valuable for writers. I find it’s the “aha” that makes me *want* to write. When the “aha” strikes, I feel like a horse at the starting gate, straining at the reins, waiting for the starter’s pistol. *Let me get going!*

Compare this to writing from an outline. Outlines usually carry a sense of duty and obligation. I find it’s far too easy to become obsessed with putting X number of words in each category, instead of feeling energized or inspired. The outline may organize, but it also enervates, leaving me with the depressing thought that I have an awful lot of work to do.

I must confess, I’ve become so addicted to the “aha” experience that I now use mindmaps even for very short articles (fewer than 300 words). I frequently don’t even finish the map – instead, I just stop when I hit the “aha.”

As a result, I now have a box full of half-completed mindmaps. But that’s okay. They’ve done their job.

# Why do mindmaps work?

How can something that's as simple as a mindmap possibly make such a big difference to anyone's writing? Funnily enough, that question was easier to answer 30 years ago – when we believed we understood the brain better than we actually do.

You may recall the research from those early days of brain research. Remember the talk about the “left” hemisphere and the “right” hemisphere? As a result of some interesting studies on people who were epileptic, scientists thought they had discovered that the two sides of our brains operate completely differently. At the time, they said that the brain worked this way:

| Left hemisphere              | Right hemisphere      |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Logical                      | Emotional             |
| Sequential                   | Simultaneous          |
| Responds to detail           | Responds to the whole |
| Good with syntax and grammar | Good with images      |
| “Sees” in words              | “Sees” in pictures    |

Common sense also seems to support these conclusions. Think about the long list of your friends and acquaintances. You've probably noticed that the “artistic” or “creative” ones are more often left-handed, a trait that occurs in only 10 percent of the population. My brother-in-law, who is an architect, tells me that when he was at architecture school, fully 80 percent of his class was left-handed! (This appears to make sense when you realize that each side of the brain controls the opposite side of the body. Thus, all those left-handed architects could be thought to have greater access to the right or so-called picture side of their brains – a useful trait for someone who designs buildings.)

Sounds good in theory, doesn't it? But some relatively new technology has allowed scientists to measure exactly where brain activity occurs, and they now tell us that the brain is a whole lot “messier” than the theory supposed. Left versus right sounds great, but the reality is, our brains are more like popcorn machines. Those kernels (synapses) are flying in every direction!



So why did I tell you this long convoluted story if it isn't true? The answer is simple: as you sit down to write, it's useful to imagine that your brain is neatly divided in two. In other words, it's a good metaphor. Writers often tend to see writing as "one task." In fact, it's a number of distinct jobs – including researching, creating and editing. Just as it is impossible to be enthusiastic and depressed at the same time, so too it is impossible to create freely and edit wisely at the same time.

Over the next 20 years, scientists will undoubtedly have a lot more to tell us about exactly which parts of the brain are responsible for what. For now, it's probably enough to know that when you edit or polish your writing, you're using one part of your brain, and when you sit down to create, you're using a different part. And mindmapping can help you find and use that creative part.

# What people say about mindmapping

Sometimes corporate writing doesn't feel very creative. So you might be tempted to think that mindmapping is meant for fiction writers, who not only have the luxury of "making things up" but who also have licence to include all sorts of colourful images.

While of course mindmapping is a great tool for such writers, it's equally valuable for non-fiction, business-oriented writing. Here is what some dedicated business mindmappers have to say.

Alice, who is a human resources consultant based in Endicott, New York, uses mindmaps for writing, note-taking and leading seminars. "A mindmap seems clearer to me than an outline could ever be," she explains. "One of the biggest benefits is that mindmaps let you figure out your hierarchy afterwards. Sometimes when we figure out our hierarchy first [as in outlining], we can go down the wrong path for a very long time and not understand why it doesn't work."

Alice also appreciates the concision of a mindmap, because it allows a large number of often-complex ideas to be captured on a single page. In fact, she likes to create her mindmaps electronically (using specialized software) and put them on one side of the screen, while she writes on the other side. "I can write directly on the keyboard and have everything I need right in front of me," she says. "It simplifies my writing a lot."

Adam, a teacher and writer in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia, says he often uses mindmaps to write articles. "Just this morning, I wrote down the title and the general direction for my latest e-zine – and the stories and the metaphors started coming out right away."

Adam majored in writing in college, but he didn't discover mindmapping until long after graduation. "I started playing around with it," he recalls, "and it naturally made its way into my writing." He likes the non-linear nature of the technique and finds it particularly useful for longer projects, such as workbooks or manuals, "where I can't hold everything in my head." He also appreciates the depth of mindmapping. "It lets you get as close to 3-D as possible without virtual reality," he says.

Gabor, a marketing specialist based in Budapest, Hungary, is another fan. "I have a bi-weekly e-zine which used to be torture to write," he says. "Once I figured out mindmaps, it became immensely easier. I used to have writer's block. I would sit down with my fingers on the keyboard and think, 'Now what? – how should I start this?' That has just disappeared."

Gabor credits the change to a move away from linear thinking. “With a mindmap you don’t have the restriction of thinking things must be in chronological order. The order is unimportant.” He is now able to write a 1,000-word article in about 45 minutes.

Erin, a consultant in Denver, Colorado, has had a similar experience. Introduced to mindmapping by a friend about six months ago, she has dramatically increased her writing speed. “You have the ability to generate all these seemingly random thoughts and bring them into the whole,” she says. “This way, you write down ideas and you’re not limited. Outlining didn’t do me a bit of good, because I always ended up veering away from the subject.”

And, ironically, it’s the loose and freewheeling structure of a mindmap that helps Erin to focus better. “It keeps all my thoughts organized and clustered,” she says. “When I’m using it and have multiple ideas on one topic, it keeps those in nice little condensed areas. It’s really helpful in organizing my thoughts.

“With mindmapping you can take an idea and branch it into many different directions. You don’t get confused or muddled up as you might with an outline.”

# Advanced mindmapping techniques

Once you've mastered the basics of mindmapping, you might want to try some of the following strategies:

**Develop your own special shorthand:** For example, when an idea strikes you that seems particularly important or interesting, write it in capital letters, or underline it or put an exclamation mark or asterisk after it. You might even develop some special symbols of your own. Over time, this shorthand will not only make your mindmaps easier to grasp, but it will also make them richer and more layered.

**Use mindmapping for note-taking:** When you're researching an article you're writing, you can also use mindmaps to take notes. (This process also works very well if you're taking notes at a lecture or a workshop.)

**Instead of just one, do a series of mindmaps:** If you're writing a longer piece – an article of more than 2,000 words, say, or a report – start with a “master” mindmap to determine the basic architecture or structure of what you're writing. Then, once you've done that, create secondary mindmaps for each of the subsequent chapters or sections. And, as I mentioned earlier, it can be very useful to create one mindmap before you do your research/interviews and a second one after the research is complete.

**Put your mindmap onscreen:** As Alice suggested in the previous section, putting your mindmap onscreen can help you keep everything in front of you while you're writing. You can scan your handwritten map and view it as a jpeg or you can acquire some relatively inexpensive mindmapping software and automate the whole process. Then you can split your screen – writing on one side and viewing the map on the other.

**Use mindmaps for project planning:** Are you producing a new publication? Developing a communications strategy? Or simply organizing the next edition of your regular publication? Mindmapping is a fabulous tool for planning all aspects of any project. Because it's not linear, like a to-do list, you'll be less likely to forget something important.

**Use mindmaps with groups:** If you're leading a workshop or strategy session, enhance the group's creativity by putting the notes (or recording ideas from a brainstorming session) on a mindmap rather than a traditional flip chart. You'll need bigger paper – and more wall space – but you'll get better results for your effort.

# Resources

If you research mindmapping, a couple of names keep popping up. The main one is British popular psychology author Tony Buzan, who is responsible for popularizing the word “mindmap.” But the concept has been used for hundreds of years and appears to date back to the philosopher known as Porphyry of Tyros. He lived in the third century, around the time the compass was invented in China.

Much later mindmapping pioneers include Allan Collins and M. Ross Quillian, who became well known in the 1960s. The idea to use mindmaps to help specifically with writing is sometimes attributed to New York writer and editor Dorothea Brande but more often to the American academic and writer Gabriele Lusser Rico, although she prefers the term “clustering.”

## Books

Mindmapping is so simple, it's not really necessary to read an entire book on the subject. But if you are interested and want to learn more, here are several titles you might want to check out:

*Writing the Natural Way*, by Gabriele Lusser Rico (ISBN: 0874779618). First published in 1983, this writing best-seller was reissued in 2000. Offering chapters on rhythm, images, metaphor and revision – and bursting with examples of “clusters” and the writing they inspired – this book is the classic text on writing and mindmapping.

*The Mindmap Book: How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential*, by Tony Buzan and Barry Buzan (ISBN: 0452273226). Reprinted in 1996, this book will tell you all you want to know (and perhaps more) about mindmapping. Warning: it's not dedicated to writing but explores how the technique can be used for a wide variety of tasks including note-taking, planning and studying. Tony Buzan is practically a one-man cottage industry promoting mindmapping. He has written more than 50 books on the subject.

## Software

If you fall in love with mindmapping, there are four good reasons to consider acquiring some specialized mindmapping software:

- If you find writing by hand painful, slow or laborious (or if your printing is just really messy), it will help you create mindmaps faster.
- If, like me, you're no artist, it will help you “pretty up” your mindmaps by allowing you to add photos and drawings from a software “library.”

- If you're the type of person who "thinks" better with a keyboard than a pen, it will make the job easier and more fun.
- If you create a lot of mindmaps, it will make them easier to store and file.

While word processing programs such as MS Word can be useful for brainstorming and note-taking, they don't really lend themselves to the graphic side of mindmapping. And although graphics software programs such as Corel Draw can certainly help you create beautiful mindmaps, they will require a lot of extra work on your part.

By far your best bet is to try some of the specialized software that's readily available. Most mindmapping software is not expensive – and at least one program is free. Many cost less than \$150 US (some less than \$75), and not one is more than \$300 US at the time of this writing. Most offer a choice of versions including "professional," "educational," and "basic." If you're going to use the software just for writing (and not for group brainstorming or project management), then a basic version should be more than adequate.

Please note, I'm not endorsing any of the software here – in fact, I'm not even going to tell you which one I use. After interviewing many people, I've concluded that most of the software is pretty good and pretty similar. Once people try a certain product, they tend to stick with it, mainly because the keyboard manoeuvres become automatic very quickly and it's a hassle to learn new ones.

Almost all of the suppliers below provide free trials (ranging from 15 to 30 days) that you can easily download from their websites. I encourage you to try several to see which one you like best. I've listed your choices in alphabetic order:

Curio (Mac platform only): <http://www.zengobi.com/>

Freemind (a free Java-based tool): <http://www.mapyourmind.com/freesoftware.htm>

Inspiration <http://www.inspiration.com>

MindManager <http://www.mindjet.com>

MindGenius <http://www.mindgenius.com>

MindMapper <http://www.mindmapper.com>

VisualMind <http://www.visual-mind.com>

## Conclusion

Mindmapping may feel a bit awkward and weird when you start using it. But you will soon find it a valuable tool for speeding up your writing (and maybe even organizing your life).

The secret is to use it regularly – make it a habit. Several times when writing this report, I felt “stuck.” Once, I even caught myself staring into space. “D’uh,” I thought quickly, “I need to create another mindmap.” I did. And soon I was unstuck and ready to write again.

You might be interested to know that in addition to working with corporate writers, I also occasionally teach a much tougher audience – preteen children. There, mindmapping frequently turns so-called reluctant writers into much happier, more productive ones. At least as far as kids are concerned, it’s a little bit of fairy dust.

I won’t claim that mindmapping will solve all your writing woes. It won’t. It’s just one technique among many that you can use to write faster and better.

But it’s a darn good one.

### 8 ½ Steps to Writing Faster, Better

Want to take your writing to the next level? I’ve developed a start-to-finish system that will help you boost your writing speed while improving the quality of your copy. This self-guided instruction book is available in a basic version (e-book) and a premium version (e-book, print copy and extra goodies such as my popular booklet *72 Ways to Beat Writer’s Block*). For details or to order, please visit the [Publication Coach website](http://www.publicationcoach.com).





## About Daphne

### **My veins run with ink**

I grew up in the newspaper business. Literally. My family owned a weekly newspaper and I worked there from the age of 16, eventually running the place. It was not fun, but I learned the hard lessons — about meeting deadlines, managing people, juggling tight budgets and fighting with banks.

Eventually, I escaped to the land of daily newspapers. Why does the expression “from the frying pan to the fire” leap to mind? My first boss was a brawny Scotsman, who had hands like hams, a mind like a razor and a set of lungs like a bull. (We called him the Tartan Tornado.)

More hard learning but lots of fun in the intense orbit of daily journalism. I ran the features department with 14 of the most interesting, creative people you could ever imagine.

### **Time for a change**

Then the upstairs office called. They wanted me in corporate communications. I jumped in with some trepidation and learned to navigate those choppy waters. Talk about a challenge... Producing corporate pubs for a group of journalists was like being a cobbler to a bunch of shoemakers.

That chapter wrapped up when I decided to have kids. You see, it just wasn't your typical childbirth deal. As late-blooming thirtysomethings, my husband and I discovered we were expecting triplets. Imagine the shock! The two girls and a boy were born early and healthy. But clearly it was high time for more on-the-job flexibility. Hello, self-employment....

### **The birth of fast**

Although I'd worked in demanding, deadline-driven jobs all my life, now I had a reason to work harder and faster. Between work and home, I had enough challenges to keep me busy 43 hours a day. I developed tools to deal with a lifelong case of writer's block. I produced a corporate newspaper in less than two days a week — replacing a person who'd taken five days. Without really meaning to, I had taken the skills I'd learned in daily journalism and turbocharged them for the corporate world.

### **How do you do that?**

People started asking me: How do you do that? How do you write so fast? How do you stay so organized in a job with constant interruptions? How do you produce publications that get results? And so, the Publication Coach was born.



## Next steps

Mindmapping is just one of the tools you can use to increase your writing speed.

If you'd like even more tips and techniques, subscribe to my weekly newsletter by going to <http://www.publicationcoach.com>

When you're there, you can also check out the free articles – I post new ones every week.

And if you have any questions or feedback, please be sure to contact me:

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Thanks for reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Daphne Gray-Grant". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and slightly larger than the others.