
How to Write Well Under Pressure

by Bill Lampton, Ph.D.

Picture this: You have reached the final two hours of your work day. Your pace has been steady, and you have accomplished plenty. Then your supervisor walks in, hands you a thick stack of paper, and says, "Here's a list of activities from every department head, covering the last quarter. I need for you to consolidate these reports, and include your recommended next steps for each department. Bring your written analysis to me at 8:00 tomorrow morning, so we can review it before the Board meeting at noon."

Sound familiar? I imagine so. It's quite common for the boss to issue a writing assignment that puts you under extreme time pressure. During my two decades in management, that happened to me plenty, just as it does to you.

While your initial response might border on panic, you can accomplish what you need to by remembering these suggestions:

(1) Ironically, the less time you have, the more productive you are likely to become. You know you have to finish the job now, so the time pressure changes from a threat to an advantage. You feel an adrenalin rush that primes your energy, just as a football team makes a miraculous play to score in the last twenty seconds of a sixty minute game. When it's "do or die," you usually do.

(2) Note that every other important job carries time pressures. The broadcaster gets only half a minute to skim a breaking news story she must announce instantly. The CEO's assistant warns him that a major stockholder is on the phone to complain about a new company policy. Clearly, you do not stand alone in your demand for last-minute preparation.

(3) As a skilled writer, you don't need a day, week, or month to generate a five or six page document. In fact, if you have a month, you will probably write it all on the last day anyway, because you know that's all the time you will need.

(4) Sometimes, excessive rewriting and revising can weaken your writing. Your first draft might lose emotional punch as you water it down. Also, too much haggling over content saps your creativity. I encourage my writing seminar participants to edit and revise thoroughly, and then stop when they feel drained.

(5) Only the finished product counts. Just because you work on a document six hours instead of two hours doesn't guarantee that your work will be three times more valuable. Focus on the task and on desired quality, not on the ticking clock.

(6) Remember instances when you wrote well under pressure. You met your deadlines, and wrote top-quality material. You still have that ability.