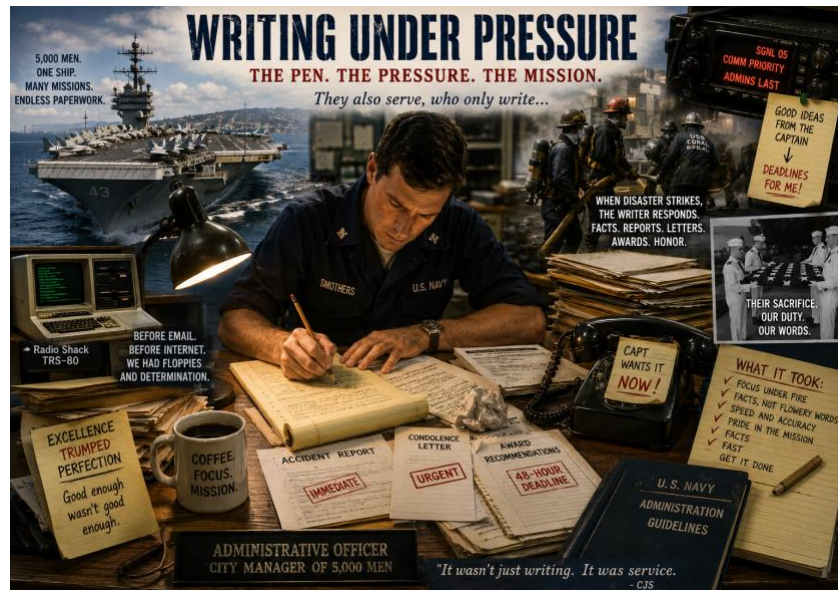


Memoirs: Writing Under Pressure
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Those of us who write a lot and have made a living at it know the meaning of writing under pressure. That usually involves writing to a deadline and most often for either a demanding editor or boss. In my case it was usually a boss, and the nature of the writing was the business or administrative variety.

They also serve, who only write...

My most pressure-packed moments were in the military environment when I was a Navy administrative officer afloat when things had to be done quickly before the ship left port. Those were the days before e-mail. When the ship left the pier, the only communication we had was dedicated to those who ran the ship, usually by radio or dispatches through dedicated satellites. Administrators had to wait in line, and usually at the rear.

Dual floppy drives worked as well

In the days before the internet and networking where the best we could do was use dual floppy drive Radio Shack TRS-80 dinosaur computers to automate some of the crushing workload, I worked as an administrator on several Navy aircraft carriers. My final posting was USS Coral Sea from 1982 through 1984. My shipboard job was similar to

that of "City Manager," but my "city" was a large afloat community of over 5,000 men. Also, this small "city" moved from one place to another and often.

Just keeping up was impossible

As an Administrative Officer, I learned the true meaning of writing under pressure. In the busy world of aircraft carriers, things never go as planned. The normal workload was, in a word, overwhelming. Just keeping up with the mail and sending in operational and administrative reports to the Captain's boss filled up everyone else's time.

Then there were those periodic eruptions of "good ideas" from the Captain, which took priority and inevitably threw a monkey wrench into an already teetering effort to stay ahead of the blizzard of paperwork and reports.

Stuff rolled downhill and stopped at my desk

Typically that pressure would roll downhill to me when the Executive Officer (the Captain's second in command) would call me and say something like, "The Captain wants us to write up some award recommendations recognizing those guys on the firefighting group that put out that fire in the engine room yesterday. Stop what you're doing, and get on it, now!"

Never mind that those firefighters did not work for me and that I had no clue of the facts in the incident. Those firefighters worked for the engine room supervisor, who did not specialize in descriptive prose required to document the special recognition. In fact, just ask your average engineer to write anything but a boiler feed water salinity report, and he turns two shades of gray. After a while, I did not even ask. I simply did the writing myself after gathering facts from those in charge.

Obituary writing under pressure

Then there was the day I was on duty as Assistant Command Duty Officer while next to the pier in San Francisco. We had three sailors working down below in an unoccupied compartment cleaning the oil and sludge from the surface areas. The problem was that they were using a (forbidden) toxic chemical to do the job and the space was unventilated.

To make a sad story short, one of the men died from the fumes. The other two were rescued by some quick-thinking people above the apartment, including one officer who just happened to be in the area. I ran to the scene as the men were being helped from

the compartment. The young dead man was removed by stretcher, and I shall never forget his open dilated eyes staring into nothing.

My immediate role in all this was as principal scribe and report writer. I wrote the accident report immediately after the incident. I wrote the dispatch reporting the man's death to the Navy Department. The Captain, who happened to be on the ship at the time, wanted a quick letter of condolence to the parents, which I had to write for him.

The next day, the Captain wanted award recommendations for all the rescuers, including the dead sailor, who it turned out actually went back to help his friends. All this had to be done within 48 hours so that the parents could be given a memento of the Navy memorial service.

Was it channeling or structure? Both, maybe.

It was during those years that I developed a writing technique that completely bypassed outlining or brainstorming. I liked to refer to this technique as the "stubby pencil" method. With an 18-inch tablet of yellow lined paper and a number 2 soft lead pencil I would find a quiet place (usually my bunk room) and begin writing. Often I would have one of my men shuttle the individual pages to the typist to meet urgent deadlines.

I did have one advantage going for me: I knew that what I produced had to conform with military guidelines, and the writing style required was neither flowery nor poetic - just factual and comprehensive. Thinking back to the hundreds of writing projects I did, I can recall that pushing a number 2 pencil rapidly over a yellow-lined pad was somewhat slower than running my fingers over a computer keyboard.

But there was something different, almost electric, in that writing process. Sometimes, I almost felt as if I were channeling. It is a process I have not been able to duplicate on the modern computer screen, and I honestly cannot explain why. The process, like my youth, is gone forever.

Excellence trumped perfection

Perhaps it was the pressure and the unrelenting demand for technical excellence that made second-best unacceptable. Nowadays, with spelling and grammar checkers and the fast and forgiving productivity of my word processor, I no longer have the yellow lined sheets filled with my left-handed scrawl to remind me of the good old days of the "stubby pencil" method of writing.

On the other hand, there were times my modern trusty laptop would have prevented some long hours of coffee-drugged writing while the Captain thought up his next "good idea."