

Get to the Point!

Write Effective Scenes,
Characterization, Plot, and More with
Clustering

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Write effective scenes, characterization, plot, and more with Clustering.

By Lynn Crandall

Welcome to my version of clustering. This handout recaps my presentation but there is also bonus material that time wouldn't allow me to share.

Just a little of my background to start with. I grew up in Michigan not far from Lake Michigan. I thought I would live in my home town forever, but in my late twenties I moved to Illinois where I lived with my husband and family of five children. The kids grew up and now live in Illinois and Indianapolis, Indiana, where my husband and I moved about three years ago. My background is in journalism, but I began writing romance about 20 years ago. I write contemporary, paranormal, and romantic suspense. I'm presently a hybrid author. I released *Touch Me*, a paranormal fantasy romance, in September 2018. It is book one in my Dark Sides series. My romantic suspense series, Aegar Investigations, features sister private investigators and was published by Crimson Romance. My Fierce Hearts series of paranormal romances following the lives of a colony of were-lynxes was published by Crimson Romance. Those titles are now available through Simon and Schuster. I've also self-published two anthologies with other authors, a short story spin-off of the Fierce Hearts series, a holiday novella, and full-length novel. I'm presently working on Book Two in the Dark Sides series and a novella for a Common Elements project. I love writing, and the power of words to inspire, entertain, and touch.

The title to my workshop is Get to the Point. Today I will give an overview of clustering and illustrate the method. I will take you through the process and help you experience the “aha!” of how easily ideas flow to solutions. I will lead you in taking one word or group of words through clustering to the point when each of you will write a short vignette or poem and be thrilled with the results.

Get to the Point

If you're like me, you begin your book project with plenty of research, character charts, and maybe an outline or, more like me, a loose list of scenes broken into Part 1, Part 2, and Part 3. You begin writing. It's a first draft so you know it's supposed to be crap, and you don't worry about getting beyond the hook, you let the story flow. But again, if you're like me, at some point, your editor brain starts talking: I can't do this. This is crap. I don't know what happens next.

You pick up your phone and check your Facebook and Instagram activity, and Amazon ads. Forty minutes later you face your computer again. You finish chapter one and feel okay. You know what needs to happen next and you plow on, writing what to you seems like either crap or maybe you're actually quite pleased. Maybe a love/hate thing with your inner editor rumbles in your head. But your writing time ends and you do what you do afterward—go for a run, meet a friend for lunch, pick up groceries, make dinner, while all the while your story mulls in your mind.

Do you relate to this scenario? How about this one?

While you try to sleep at night, it dawns on you that a scene you wrote feels off. What, you ask, was it supposed to do for the story? Anxiety frets in your mind. It's just the first draft, you

remind yourself, and try to get some sleep. But you wake up early, dying to read the troubling scene if only to confirm it isn't a dud. But is it any good?

That is how writing can go. We write and sometimes it's amazing but sometimes it misses the mark and just fills pages even though you tried very hard to write beautifully. Sometimes you send your completed MS to your editor, certain it is the best book yet, **and** your editor sends it back with comments like "This scene doesn't go anywhere. Cut here because it feels like filler." What if you could bypass all that empty writing and consternation and get to the point? Capture the beautiful writing you're aiming for and make everything move the story along. You can do that with clustering.

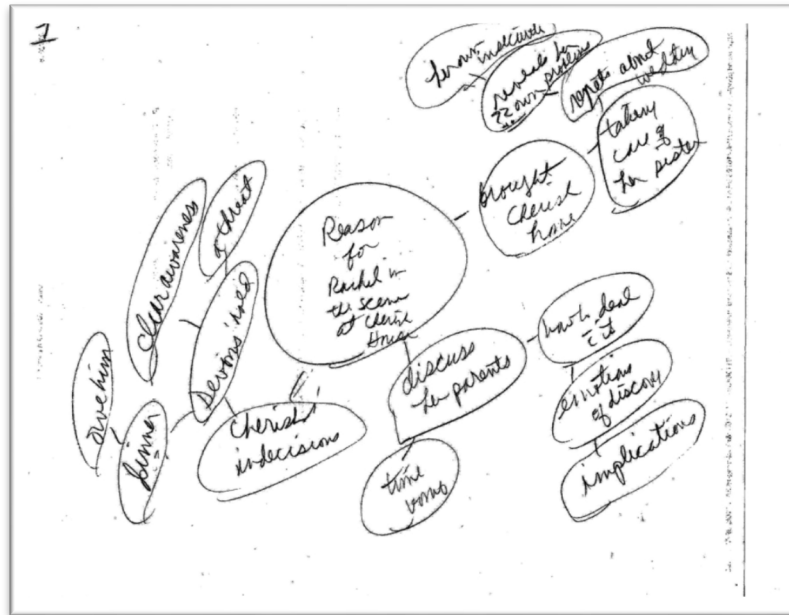
I didn't invent clustering, but over the years of my writing career I have found it be an extremely effective approach to writing, well, anything.

What is clustering? In short, it is a brainstorming tool that quiets the inner censor and engages the creative aspect of the brain, effortlessly. It helps bridge the expertise of right and left sides of the brain to enrich your writing and clarify its importance. No matter what level of writer you consider yourself –beginning or seasoned – you can boost your writing's effectiveness and creativity with clustering.

What can be done with clustering? I use clustering to brainstorm plot, characterization, and scene problems for my novels and short stories. I also use it to strain out clutter in my mind when writing fiction, nonfiction, titles, taglines, and correspondence of all kinds.

Why does it work for me? Clustering is versatile. I can pull out a blank piece of paper and immediately tackle a block while writing a scene. Using a pencil and paper, the process is very hands-on and tactile, which enhances flow of ideas. Like most authors, I compose on a keyboard. But when I encounter a problem or feel my writing is going in an unproductive

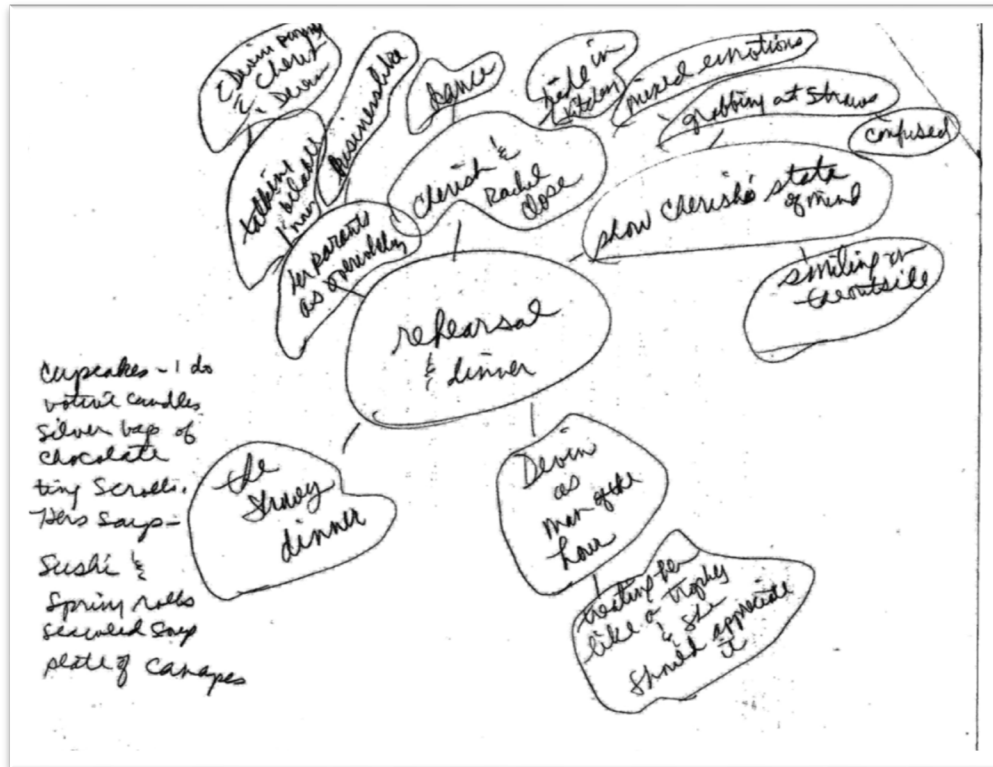
direction, breaking away to cluster with a pencil and piece of paper produces new insights and those magical aha moments. With clustering, we bypass the logical, censoring side of our brain and give voice to the imagery and sensations that the left side will offer. It will find associations and patterns you can put to words on paper that will provide meaning. Here's an example to illustrate the point.



This is a cluster for my latest book, *Love and Cherish*. Clustering ensured the reason for one of the characters to be in a scene was clear and solid.

I have a pet peeve in writing, it's called the handy dandy dinner scene. You know what I'm talking about. Bringing two characters together across a dinner table seems like a perfectly natural device to employ in terms of characterization and plot. But, often the handy dandy dinner scene turns out superfluous. I'm guilty of writing those types of scenes, and in writing *Love and Cherish*, I stopped mid-scene and started clustering. I had put my hero and heroine in a unique setting eating a unique meal. They were chatting. But was the story progressing? No. I

was in my logical, defining the setting and the food mode. I needed to get to the point and define my goals for the scene; illustrate the main characters' close relationship with her sister; show her misery with her circumstances; and highlight the troubles with her parents and her fiancé.



To write an effective scene, writers need to remember to include at least one Essential Element: plot point, or character's goal, or action that advances the plot or heightens tension. Every scene also needs at least two Important Elements: character development, a cause of character conflict, an effect of character conflict, raise stakes, reinforce stakes, or character motivation. Additionally, a good scene can reveal Bonus Elements: character backstory, world building, tone or mood, theme, or foreshadowing. (<http://blog.janicehardy.com/2012/01/fundamental-check-do-your-scenes-have.html>) It's so easy to get lost in words and phrases and accomplish nothing with a scene. Clustering enhances the ability to get to the point.

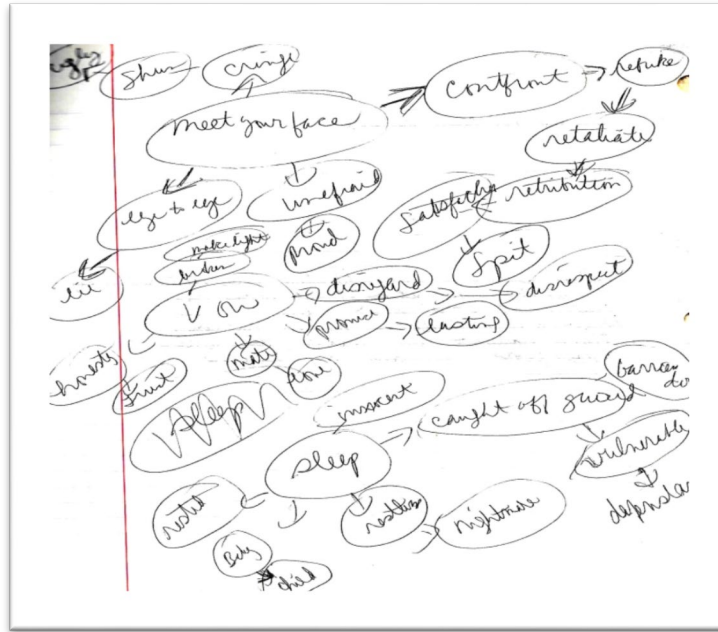
Now, before we get down and doing, I need to just touch on the marvel of our brains. I'm sure you've all learned that the two sides of our brain operate differently. The left side is literal. It thinks in terms of logic, classification, definitions, order. The right side interprets. It thinks in novelty, sensory concepts, images, and patterns. Roger Sperry, a Pulitzer Prize winning scientist specializing in brain research, was quoted in *American Psychologist* magazine: "In effect, the left-brain person is a scientist, the right-brain an artist."

Each side of the brain has an expertise, but when they work together rather than in conflict, writing is original and evocative. And since during the process of clustering, you, a unique individual, are pulling from yourself, your voice shines. Clustering is the bridge that allows the collaboration of both areas of expertise. It eliminates or reduces inhibitions. Also, by bypassing the left side's need for order and following rules, the clustering process lessens tension and resistance to new thoughts. According to Sperry, when the right and left sides of our brain work together they resonate, engendering physiological harmony in us. As you continue to cluster various aspects of your writing activities, you naturally grow in your ability to access vivid, purposeful content.

This lateralization of brain functions is a commonly held belief, but more recent research suggests it is too simplified. Regardless, clustering facilitates accessing vivid images, fresh thinking, and in essence taps into the strengths of creativity and logic in a productive way.

Back to clustering. I'll give you an overview of the process and then we'll do some clustering and writing. Clustering helps get to the point of what we need in writing *anything*.

Select a word or phrase that is at the core of your endeavor. Then allow the words to come out and write them, circle them, and continue with associations until you get a feeling of readiness



Here is the poem I wrote from this cluster.

In my restless sleep, in my nightmares, you
 catch me off guard and haunt my mind. It
 angers me that you broke a promise and were
 far less than my naïve mind knew. But what
 angers me far more is that I continually
 confront you and spit in your face, but only
 when you disrupt my dreams.

During this cluster I was honest and exploratory. This simple cluster and poem turned out to be truly therapeutic. I learned something about myself within the context of a troubling situation.

So now it's your turn. This time, pick a word or phrase that has significance to you in some way, then let words drop onto the paper until you feel your insight settle on a concrete solution.

When you feel a sense of direction, write a poem or vignette.

So how did that go? What kinds of feelings did you experience during the clustering and while writing?

If you didn't get a sense of direction or focus, no worries. All is not lost. Here are some tips:

1. Appreciate wonder.

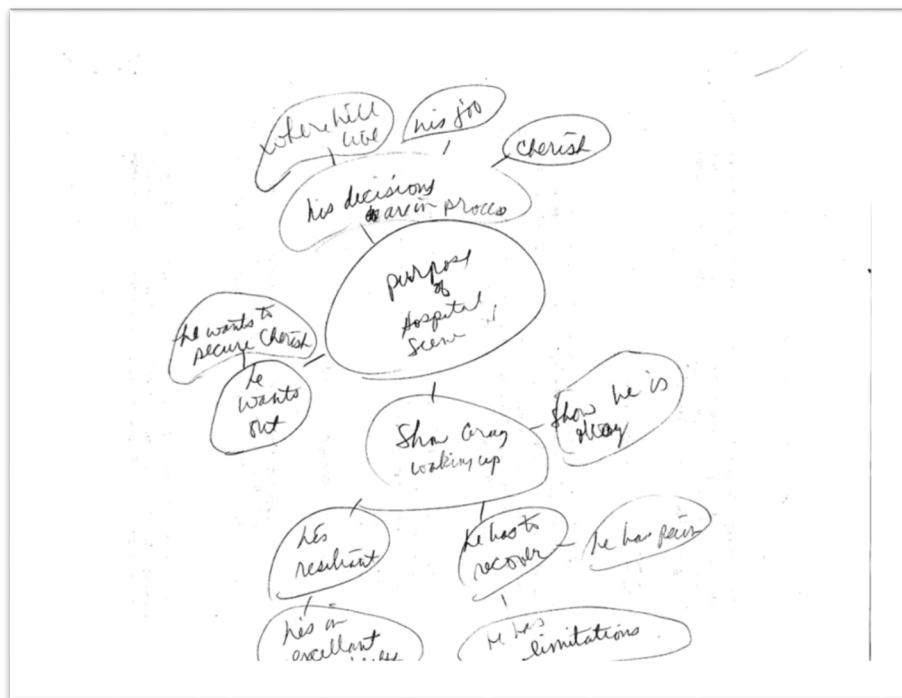
Wonder bypasses the need for the right answer. Wonder elicits curiosity, intuition, active mind. There is no logic or right or wrong when you're in a state of wonder. Open yourself to the bliss of wonder: I wonder what color the sound of raindrops evokes. I wonder what it's like to look up into the sky and see three moons. Is each one a different color? Does that have a purpose or is it simply beautiful? Wonder facilitates new insights and recognition of a new, possibly exciting, pattern that leads to purpose and meaning. Allowing wonder and capturing associations that form a pattern elicits a natural desire to complete the picture by writing. And your right side brain helps you do that. It's so exciting!

2. Accept that there is no right or wrong in clustering. You're just going to try it. There are no failures.
3. Before you start clustering, grab your piece of paper and beloved writing utensil and pause. Close your eyes. Sit still and breathe deeply, in and out, several times. Open your eyes and write a focusing word or phrase in the center of your paper. Just write whatever words follow until you feel the shift and recognize a pattern forming and the direction to write in. Notice that happening. It will. Don't think about it, feel it.
4. Write. Don't think, just write.

So, let's do another clustering. I'll give you a word but you can pick your own if you prefer. The word is **Balance**. Release your mind. If your left brain tells you this is silly or it won't work for you, reassure yourself, that is normal and breathe. If you can't think at all, just doodle and let yourself be okay with that. Begin!

With these exercises we've been getting accustomed to the process of clustering and practicing being receptive to a direction to take in the writing of a poem or vignette. When we use clustering to write correspondence, the direction is used in writing an email, for example. Or we cluster to gain clarity for a scene so we can then we write a scene that gets to the point.

This is a cluster I did to make sure when I wrote the scene it had clear purpose. This is from Love and Cherish.



Doing this cluster helped me show how the two main characters' relationship was progressing.

Here is bonus material I didn't deliver in my workshop.

Cluster the statement: You hurt me. Don't force any particular words, just let words and thoughts flow freely. If you feel resistance, which would sound like "I can't" "This won't work", "I'm the only one not writing," just keep making lines and circles and put down words and connections

without thinking anything about it. Allow the focus to emerge and write your poem without intention of making it fit a form.

The clustering enhanced the ability to be in the character's experience and hopefully this exercise puts you in touch with a visceral understanding of being hurt from the character's POV.

As I mentioned, the clarity one can get from clustering is useful for correspondence. Let's have a little more fun. I want you to really let loose your imagination. Imagine you are the leader of a multi-author project. You're heading a group of authors all contributing to a book bundle.

During the process there is a little difference of opinion between you, the leader, and a less experienced writer in the group. One afternoon you find an email in your inbox from this writer with the subject line, "pissed and disappointed." The author then lists things you've done wrong or failed to do regarding the project, all in an outraged voice with expletives. All her complaints are simple misunderstandings on her part. There is confusion on word count, cover design, how names were listed on Amazon, deadlines, and roles, etc. She is unhappy and even remarks her husband was unhappy.

So now, settle into your open minded, grounded self, find a phrase or word that fits the imaginary situation for yourself, and cluster. Then use your cluster to write an email that responds to her claims, shows respect, but is leaderly and direct. A response that gets to the point and is based on your values.

How do you feel about your response? Does it fit your criteria for productive communication?

This situation happened to me. I'm not going to share the emails but clustering before responding helped me clarify my goals, which included not to appear weak by offering apologies for things I didn't do but was accused of; be forthright but not unkind; support my assertions with explanations; and let it go. Clustering helped reveal what I wanted to say. It helped me avoid pure defensiveness on my part and cleanly address the issues.

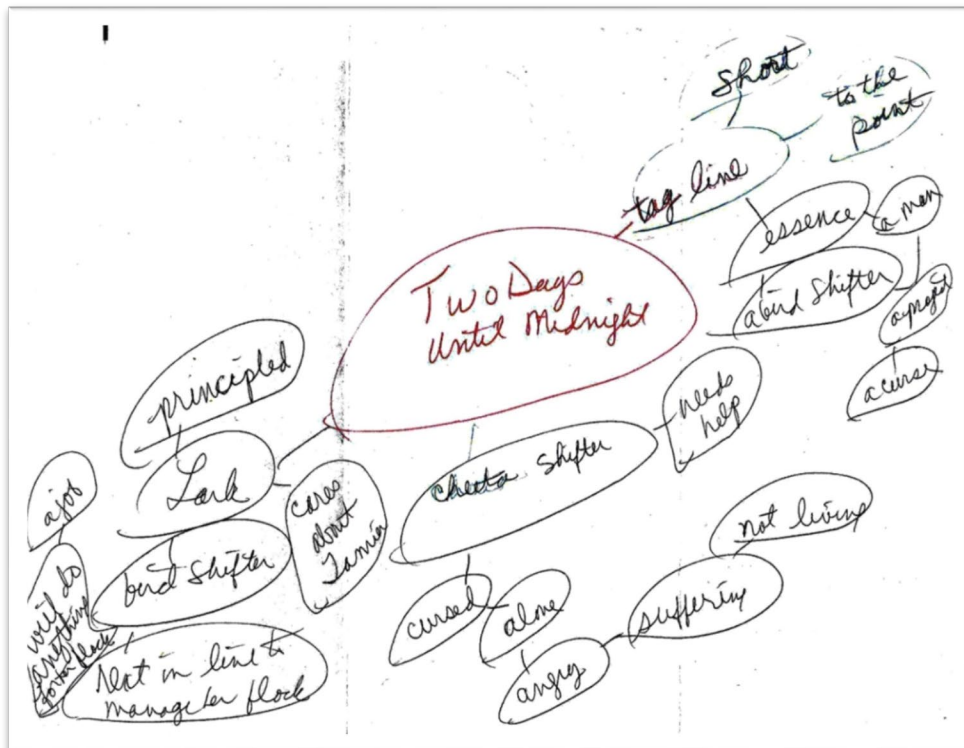
Moving on, I told you clustering can be used for all kinds of things, now we can look at writing a tag line. One that is focused not unfocused.

For my novella *Two Days Until Midnight* I started with a book blurb.

Bird-shifter Lark Ellis has spent her life shielding her true identity. Now, to protect her flock's habitat she's taken a job that pits her mission against her secret and her integrity.

Reclusive billionaire architect and CEO of Global Environments Tamier Rein lost his freedom and his dreams the day a Society assassin cursed him and changed him into a were-cheetah. Imprisoned by uncontrollable transing, he faces a devastating condition of his curse on the Autumn Solstice.

Lark risks her identity and all she holds dear to help Tamier as their relationship develops into a promise of true love. As the deadline looms, Tamier must let her teach him to live or lose everything in two days.



I clustered further to pare it down to a tagline. By clustering, I found primary points of the story. *A bird shifter. A reclusive billionaire. A project that brings them together. A deadly curse that threatens to separate them forever.*

A bird-shifter. A reclusive billionaire. A project that brings them together. A deadly curse that threatens to separate them forever.

TWO DAYS
UNTIL



Midnight

LYNN CRANDALL

From the anthology *At Midnight* by
Lainee Cole, Lynn Crandall and Rena Koontz.

Okay, write your title in the center of your paper and circle it. Let all impressions and words out and write them down according to associations. You know your story and though it's complex, it can be narrowed down to a kernel that is attention grabbing and hooks readers.

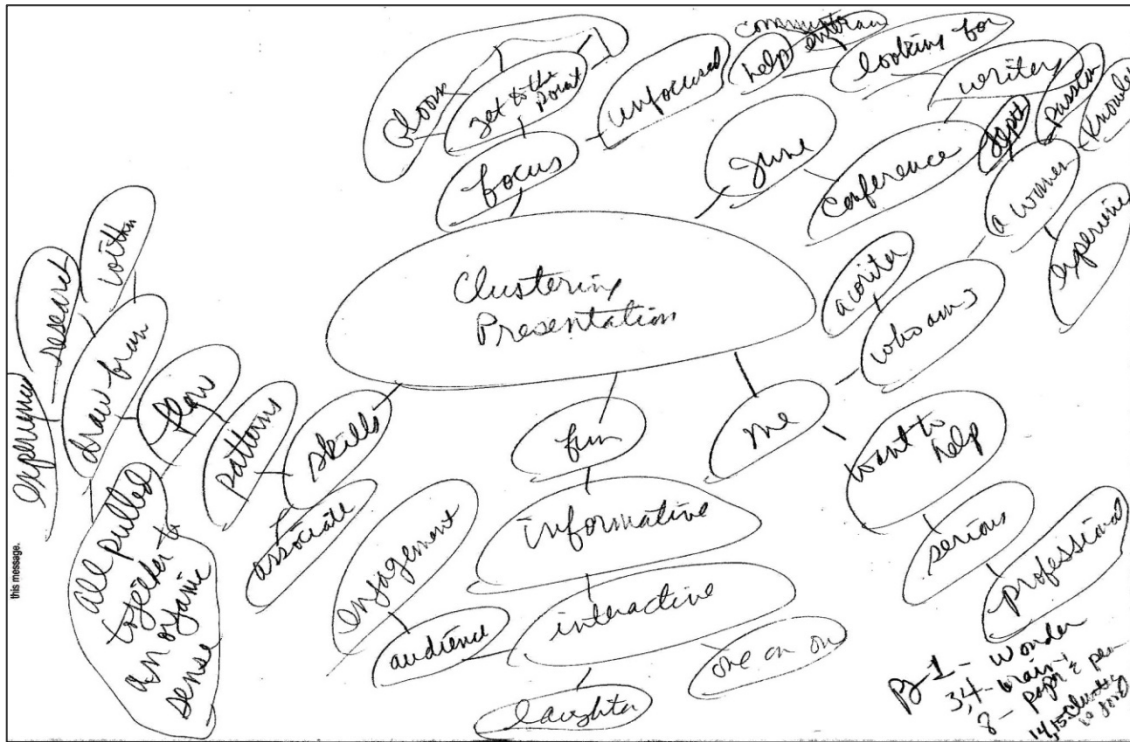
The more you cluster, the better you'll get at allowing associations to find patterns that inform quality writing. It will become nearly effortless.

With this next exercise I'm going to turn you into a poet.

Cluster the statement: You hurt me. Don't force any particular words, just let words and thoughts flow freely. If you feel resistance, which would sound like "I can't" "This won't work", just keep making lines and circles and put down words and connections without thinking anything about it. Allow the focus to emerge and write your poem without intention of making it fit a form.

I hope you enjoyed the process. The clustering enhances the ability to be in the character's experience and hopefully this exercise puts you in touch with a visceral understanding of being hurt from the character's POV.

In closing I'm going to show you how I clustered this presentation before I started preparing it.



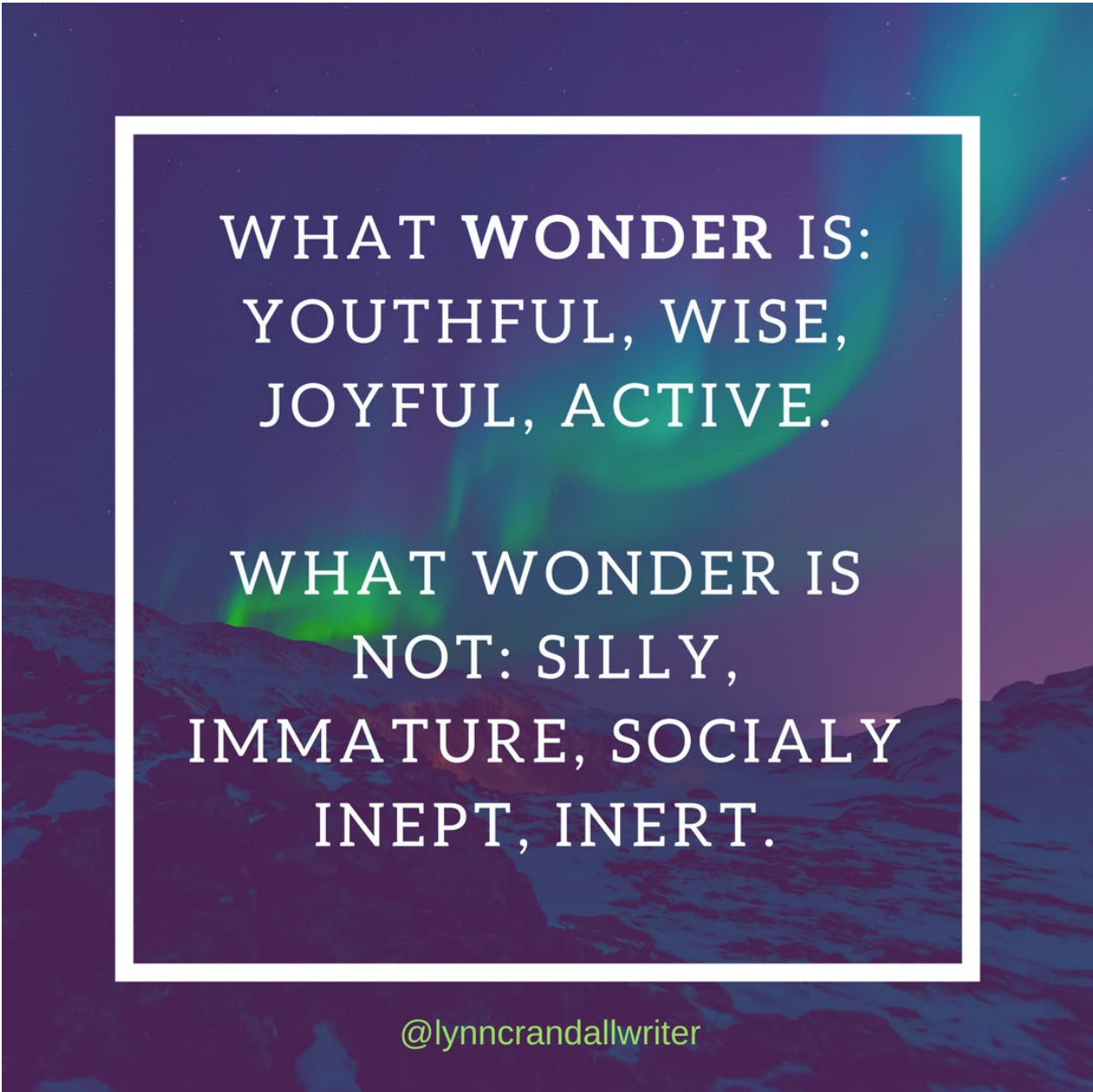
I hope you can see that this cluster informed me in many ways, specifically who I am and my purpose for presenting, focusing on who I would be talking to—writers looking for information to improve their writing. Additionally writers who want to have fun and are part of a community, so a sense of excitement in getting together in this room. Wanting to make it interactive rather than a passive lecture. Now that you’ve sat through the presentation, you can see how clustering helped me bring it all into a form. I hope you benefited.

Lastly, as I said two or three times now, I didn’t write the book on clustering. This workshop was an overview of the process, how it works, and why it works. This has been an overview of my use of clustering. But there is much more to discover about the process in the in-depth book *Writing the Natural Way* by Gabriele Rico.

One more thing: I’ve included a Wonder graphic for you in this handout. I hope you find it inspiring.

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The background of the entire page is a photograph of the Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights) over a dark, rocky landscape. The lights are in shades of green and blue, dancing across a deep purple and blue sky. The foreground shows dark, silty rocks.

WHAT WONDER IS:
YOUTHFUL, WISE,
JOYFUL, ACTIVE.

WHAT WONDER IS
NOT: SILLY,
IMMATURE, SOCIALY
INEPT, INERT.

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