Gabriele Rico, author of *Writing the natural way: Using Right-brain Techniques to Release Your Expressive Powers* (2000) reminds us that we don’t have to begin with words. Rico wrote her dissertation about the technique of clustering when teaching students about writing, and although she wanted to write a book on what she discovered, the words wouldn’t come. Rico reportedly sat down on the floor with a big sheet of butcher paper and began her very own cluster. With “natural writing” in the center of the cluster, she covered the paper with associations. Seeing this kind of “big picture” gave her the words she needed. She color-coded the words into the 12 chapters of what would become *Writing the Natural Way*. She went on to create a cluster for each of the chapters followed by one-paragraph descriptions and a one-page book proposal. She did this in one day, sent the book proposal off, and three days later, she had a book contract. That’s a testimonial!

We have used clustering throughout this textbook and we encourage its use in doing on-going data analysis. The theory behind clustering is deceptively simple: Your right, creative brain knows something your left, logical brain doesn’t know. Clustering allows the right brain to “talk” and in the process of doing so, you can make creative and important discoveries. If you are not familiar with clustering, here are some simple steps to follow in using it for on-going data analysis:

- Use a blank piece of paper (the authors of this text like butcher paper and markers but blank 8 ½ x 11 and a pen or pencil will do).
- Write your question, critical incident, a summary word of your data set, or some other word phrase that represents your data in the center of the page.
• Let your brain wander! Don’t try to be deliberate about getting to an “answer.”

Do word associations with the center phrase, branching out to other clusters, and branching, yet again. Let your brain spiral in and around and over itself. Continue doing this for as long as you can.

• Stop and take time to look at the entire cluster. What patterns do you see? What is repeated? Is there a single name, thought, concept, idea, or question that seems to persist? If so, you may want to cluster again.

• Respond to your own cluster by answering these questions:

1. I am surprised ….

2. I have discovered…

3. I wonder…

• Return to the task of writing the on-going analytical memo now that you have “the words.”

If you would like to know more about Gabriele Rico’s work, with additional instruction on clustering, you can find this information at this website: