COMMONPLACE FILE

As a writer, I'm constantly coming across scraps of information that I know I'll need later. A visit to Thomas Jefferson's home at Montecello gave me a partial solution to my information glut. Jefferson, like many in his day, kept a "commonplace book" in which he recorded virtually everything that happened to him from when plants bloomed to politics.

So I started a "commonplace file" with Microsoft Word. For months I stuffed everything into giant files figuring I could use Search to find things in my digitized mess. But I had this nagging feeling that I could get better organized. (Don't we all.) Then it occurred to me that I could use Word's Outline function to create a kind of quasi-database, a computer age improvement on Jefferson's commonplace book.

The idea is simple. Use different outline levels to create categories and subcategories from the broadest to the most specific, somewhat like a filing cabinet with drawers, sections and folders. For instance:

Organizing Information

- Make the most general category a Heading 1 style and use lower level heading for subcategories. Use as many outline levels as you need. The actual information is then entered as text. Here's one example

Gulf War

Patriot Missile

Specs and Costs

Range 40 miles. Cost per missile: $1.7 million.

Organizing Correspondence

- Make the broadest category either date of the letter or the

person written. For example:

October Letters

Friday, Oct. 4

John Smith, Gadget Inc.

Dear John,

You products are junk and your salesmen are jerks. We never want to do business with you again.

You get the point. Now when you need to look up something, open the Commonplace file and turn on outlining. Locate the category you're interested in and click to expand it. You can even use Search to look though the levels of outline shown on the screen and Sort to put them into order.

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