Let's reject the knee-jerk assumption: Paperwork is not dull. Time consuming, vexing, and prone to error, yes; but, as chronicled by Ben Kafka, never dull. Paperwork deserves our discretion, but, Kafka argues, it also warrants our consideration, since it holds inordinate sway over our politics and psyche. As proof, Kafka sets his study of paperwork's powers and failures around the French Revolution, when the application of Enlightenment principles became inseparable from the implementation of clerical protocol. Cited in 1788, paperwork—which Kafka defines as documents produced and demanded by the state—became the civil contract's material support. Paperwork enabled modern government both stable and enduring, by shuffling together the exhaustion of standing armies before the law with the preservation of standing in line.

Literature already furnishes characters who dramatize administrative drudgery, from Bartleby to the savage gardener in "Before the Law." One wonders how persistently that other Kafka has dogged our author down bureaucracy's corridors. The Demon of Writing locates similarly vivid office archetypes in France's archives. The hapless victim is Edmé-Étienne Morizot, an unemployed functionary of the Old Regime who—for sixteen fruitless years—petitioned the revolutionary government to restore his position. Accustomed to a world of privilege, where power clustered around personal connections, Morizot was disgraced by the new dispensation of rights, where power was dispersed across departments. The loss of documents thwarted his appeals, and the rotating membership of France's myriad committees constantly redirected his case. Morizot thus encountered bureaucracy's most galling quality: Not only do we wait in line, but often it's the wrong line.

The book's folk hero is Charles Hippolyte Labasne, a clerk at the Committee of Public Safety. During the Terror, Labasne purportedly saved the Comité Français' acting troupe by destroying the paperwork necessary for their execution. Bureaucracy's dispersion of power had granted functionaries a repertoire of resistance: sabotage, logjam, and loading. Labasne's method of surreptitiously stealing documents in batches of wares exemplifies what Kafka calls his "literary-minded version of Derrida's diference." Quills split, ink bloomed, doors shut: The very materiality of paperwork can disrupt its ability to communicate.

From these historical footnotes, Kafka moves on to novel readings of canonical texts. Alexis de Toqueville comes to the United States bemoaning the new country's deficient record keeping. Marx explains how good intentions can go astray when reduced through "the bureaucratic medium." Freud enters the wrong sum on the widower's slip of a Vienneau bank and archly notes the error to an acquaintance with Kafka means to us: to test the hypothesis by photocopying an image of the bank slip, included in the book, and reconstituting the episode ourselves.

Kafka acknowledges that paperwork studies are familiar fancies for academic audiences. In the United States, it's a subfield of book history, which reconstructs the aggregate of press, paper mills, and wagon routes that facilitated knowledgeable's production and distribution. In Europe, recent influential volumes by Bruno Latour and Cornelia Vismann place bureaucracy by lavishing attention on its rubber bands and binder rings. The concept that Kafka introduces is the psychic life of paperwork, instead of dwelling on its technical details, Kafka listens to paperwork's surrounding "chants," the compulsive jokes and complaints that, to a trained ear, reveal bureaucracy's emotional impact. Kafka betrays a psychoanalyst's preoccupations with desire when he repeatedly asks, "What do we want from our paperwork?"

By pledging to a psychoanalytic model, Kafka—whom I describe as "the in-house historian in a media-studies department"—is covertly quarreling with a figure whom heattributes only once: Friedrich Kliner, the recently deceased father (or creepy uncle) of German media theory. In an essay adapted into the book's second chapter, Kafka was less coy about his target, head-on refuting the notoriously terse opening of Kliner's Gramophone, Film, Typewriter. "Media determine our situation." For Kliner, "so-called Mass" is the epiphenomenon of recording and transmission technologies; psychoanalysis simply exaggerates the human mind into a media apparatus. Kafka has the patience for this brand of antihumanism. He insists that subjects don't lose their agency to media—whether that "media" be film or files—but remain ruled by an unconscious and animated by an interior life. Yet passages in Kafka's book call out for a Kliner-type reading. When in 1826 the French critic Flirtant Charles imagine clichés as "man become a piece of writing furniture, a telegraph of administration," can't we discern the precursor to our own apprehensions that mobile-office technology has reprogrammed our conversation, memory, and, indeed, desire?

A telling discrepancy between The Demon of Writing and its previously published excerpts occurs in the closing discussion of Paperwork Explosion, an IBM-sponsored film directed by Jim Henson in 1967. The incessant refrain of Henson's short is "Machines should work, people should think." Kafka concludes his book by responding, "People should think, but this day and age, they seldom have the time," whereas in an earlier essay he asserted, "People should think, but they seldom do." Saying paperwork makes us busy is a less provocative than suggesting it stifles our thoughts. Perhaps Kafka petitioned the stronger claim because thoughtlessness is Hannah Arendt's principal charge against Adolf Eichmann, the embodiment of bureaucracy's dehumanizing effects.

That said, The Demon of Writing's core virtue is Kafka's fidelity to his theoretical model. "What do we want from our paperwork?" imagines an innovative approach to modern bureaucracy, though it hardly dispels the paranoid rejoinder, "What does our paperwork want from us?"

Such a blurb, I love to think, is not just for the archival. It's not just for the academic. It's for the general reader. It's for public thinking. It's for the thinking public.