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FREE YOUR INNER NONFICTION WRITER

EDUCATE, INFLUENCE
AND
ENTERTAIN YOUR READERS

A ROTHMAN WRITING SHORT

Free Your Inner Nonfiction Writer

Educate, Influence, and Entertain Your Readers

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Practical ink

1. Write to Think and Learn

Nonfiction writers encounter several problems:

- The blank page staring back at you, taunting you.
- Not knowing what to write about.
- Wondering how to structure this piece so people read it.

You might even have more concerns.

You've been writing for years—maybe even since you were seven or eight years old. Why is writing so hard for you?

Because no one told you this secret: When you write nonfiction, you also think and learn. As you write, you integrate what you think and learn to write more in this piece.

For most of us nonfiction writers, writing is non-linear. We write a little, realize we learned something, and write more based on what we learned. Sometimes, we cycle back to the start, and sometimes we write the end. However, as we write we integrate what we think and learn by the act of writing.

That's because when we write nonfiction, we work at several levels: how to explain the problem(s) first to ourselves, identifying the solution(s), and how to write all of that down so a reader can understand.

That means most of us need to iterate on our writing. If we think and write at the "same" time, what is writing?

1.1 Writing Captures Words

Writing occurs when you move your pen across the page, or your fingers across the keyboard. If you dictate, you move your mouth so a recorder can "hear" you and transcribe that writing later.

Writing requires action.

Here's what writing is not:

- Making or drinking the beverage of your choice, while looking out the window.
- Thinking without moving your hands. I can compose words all I want in my head. That's not writing.
- Research. You might need to research to better understand your topic and how to frame your topic to your ideal reader. But research is not writing.

Outlining and mind mapping might help you prepare to write, to organize your thoughts. However, very few people generate words as they outline or mind map.

Writing means you create new words. That's it. Any other activity might help you prepare to write, but it's not writing.

Writing creates words you can see.

But, you say, you need an outline because you can't write in a linear way. Over your career, you've learned that you need to go back and "fix" your words.

That's totally normal.

Nonfiction writers write from their expertise. That means we integrate thinking and learning *as we write*. That thinking and

learning requires that we iterate—cycle back—and fix our ideas, to clarify what we now realize we know.

Cycling is a normal part of writing and helps you create new words.

Your English teachers—well-meaning as they were—thought you could not create new words without all that preparation. And they often thought that your preparation meant you didn't need to cycle to integrate your new thinking and learning.

There's a lot more your teachers never told you about writing. It's time to reset your writing rules.

1.2 Reset Your Writing Rules

Long ago, your English teachers taught you rules for writing, based on synthesizing information you learned. They thought those rules made it easier for them to read your writing. As long as you synthesized information, those rules worked pretty well.

However, now, you're not *only* synthesizing information. You also analyze, apply, and create new content as you write. That's how you share your expertise in your writing.

Those old writing rules based on synthesis no longer apply to you. You can reset those rules.

Here are some of those rules you can reset:

1. Edit as you write. This is the worst possible advice when you try to share your expertise. That's because as you write, you identify and explore the issues and solutions.
2. Outline before you start writing. Some writers can do this. However, if we're examining the problem and possible solutions, how can we know what those problems and solutions are until we start to write?

3. Start with a blank page. You're supposed to start with nothing and build up from there. Nothing intermediate that builds up your thinking and writing by bits.

These rules don't work for most experts who want to write effective nonfiction. That's why I say we write at several levels at once.

1.3 Nonfiction Writers Write at Several Levels

When I was in university, I studied Computer Science. I was not a "natural" programmer, any more than I am a "natural" writer. But I learned a ton about writing from my experience as a programmer:

- The computer didn't care what I meant. It only "cared" about the code I wrote. I had to use the "right" code, the right words, so the computer would do what I wanted it to do.
- My programs were only valuable to some kinds of users. Not everyone, but specific users.
- I never got the program right the first time. Never. And the larger the problem I needed to solve, the more I had to iterate on the design and the code. That's because I couldn't just *think* through the problem. I had to write a little code to expose the real issues. Then, as I learned about the real problems, I cycled through the features to finish the program.

As a programmer, I spent time identifying the problems, iterating on how to solve those problems, and then clarifying my ideas. I wrote a little code. As I checked it, I realized I missed something. I often changed some of my previously-written code, *and* added more code, not necessarily in the same file. I checked the small bits of code as I proceeded—but I rarely verified the entire program until I was all done.

Your teachers might have told you to separate your thinking and writing, especially with an outline. That approach might work when you synthesize other people's ideas.

However, the more complex the problem, the more writing looks like my programming experience. When I write, I learn what I think by writing the words. The words I already wrote help me iterate on the ideas, refining what I think and checking that my logic flows correctly. I write-to-think *and* think-to-write.

As I write, I realize what I know and what I still need to learn. That thinking and learning informs my next choice of what to write. I can't separate my thinking from my writing—and why I recommend you integrate your thinking and writing.

That's why I wait to edit until I'm all done thinking—for this piece. If I interrupt my thinking with editing, I stop thinking and learning. Too often, I stop myself from writing more words in this piece.

And that's why the simple rules you learned in school don't work for nonfiction writers who want to share their expertise. Sharing our expertise is not simple—it's a complex activity.

It's time to change how you write.

But first, let's discuss fear and why you can rethink how you feel about your writing.

1.4 Fear Paralyzes Writers

Nonfiction writers have all kinds of fears. They often name these fears as "writer's block." Here are some common what-if fears:

- Someone else wrote what I want to write?
- My writing isn't very good?
- People will judge me when they read my writing?
- I'm wrong?

- I haven't read all the research?

You might have other fears, but let's start with these.

1.4.1 Someone Else Wrote This Already

I wish I could tell you that you are writing something unique. No. Someone else has already written what you plan to write.

However, I encourage you to write anyway. Why? Those writers don't have *your* experience and expertise. If you write from your experience, you will finish a piece with a different angle than everyone else. Don't worry about someone else's writing. Worry about your own ability to explain your expertise.

In addition, it's possible your ideal readers have not read what you have. You can convey that information in a way that addresses your readers' concerns.

When people tell me they have writer's block, they often write me a long email about the fact that they can't write.

Notice, they wrote that email.

Our fears exist and they can hold us back from what we want to accomplish. However, if you're like most people, you can still capture words somehow. That's writing.

Writer's Block is a Different Name for Fear

Let's talk about "Writer's Block" for a minute. Do other activities block you? For example, do you ever have Walking, Speaking, or Eating block? (I'm not talking about people with psychological or other disorders. I mean us relatively normal people.)

I choose when to walk, speak, and eat. Just as I choose when

> to write and what to write about. If you realize this piece of writing scares you, consider going "meta" and writing about what scares you.
>
> Recognize when fear blocks you. You have options, including changing which piece you choose to write now. But you don't have writer's block.

Recognize when you experience fear. Acknowledge that fear so you don't allow that fear to paralyze you into not writing.

If you write from your expertise and experience, you can control your fear that someone else wrote what you want to write. When you use your expertise and experience, you make that topic your own.

What about wondering if your writing is any good?

1.4.2 Is Your Writing Is Good Enough?

What does "good" writing mean to you? If I can understand a piece of writing, that might be good enough. I'll suggest more ways to make your writing understandable in Chapter 4.

But, writers are terrible judges of our writing. Especially just after we finish a chunk of writing. When Mark Kilby and I wrote *From Chaos to Successful Distributed Agile Teams*, we met every day and wrote for an hour. Some days the words flowed. We could barely keep up with our ideas and how we understood them. We felt great.

Then, there were other days. We said to each other, "The writer might not have shown up today." However, when we reviewed those words the next day, we could not tell the difference from the days where the words flowed.

You might not be satisfied with your writing—yet. That's fine. Use the ideas in this book to become a better writer. And remember, the

more you practice, the better your writing will be. If you reset your writing rules, especially about editing, you will learn what makes you a better writer.

The next fear is what people will think of you.

1.4.3 You Care What Other People Think

When you write, people will have opinions of you and your writing.

However, you can't control what other people think of your writing or you. You can only make your writing as good as it can be. People will judge you by your writing. They will also judge you by your haircut, how you speak, where you live, and much more.

People have judged me for what I didn't write. (They thought I wrote exactly the opposite of what I did write.) They've judged me for what I did write. (You're a woman, how can you write that?)

Instead of worrying about what people will say, consider how to share your expertise in ways that invite people to your writing. I'll discuss this more in Chapter 3.

The well-known physicist, Richard Feynman wrote a book called, *"What Do You Care What Other People Think?"*. If you write something people don't agree with, they might stop reading what you write. Or, they might read more of what you write and offer you comments.

Understand what you know, write as well as you can, and publish. Don't allow other people to prevent you from writing.

The next fear is about being wrong.

1.4.4 You Might Be Wrong

You might worry about being wrong. That's a good thing to worry about. You can manage that fear by reading—and writing—a lot about your topics. And by asking for feedback and checking

references. And if you get it wrong, you might be able to change the piece even once you publish it.

For years, I wrote a monthly column for the now-defunct *Software Development Magazine.* I wrote one column about project buffers. I wrote it down wrong in my column. I didn't realize I was wrong until I read the print version of the magazine.

Oops.

I wrote to the editor, explained what I'd done, and attached the updated, corrected version. I also asked her to post the updates with a small apology. I felt stupid. However, I didn't die. I still wrote the next month's column.

I did not let fear change my writing—except to check my facts better.

Sometimes, you fear you can't write yet because you haven't read all the research.

1.4.5 You Haven't Read All the Research

Let's assume you have specific expertise. Take a minute and write a list of what you read daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly to build and maintain that expertise.

Is it possible someone else wrote something in your area of expertise and you don't know about it yet? Absolutely.

Should you wait to write your piece because you haven't read theirs? No, absolutely not.

You might have heard of "analysis paralysis." That's the equivalent of trying to research "everything" in your field.

You can't possibly read everything, *and* do your job, *and* write to educate, influence, and entertain. Choose wisely and write.