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FREE YOUR INNER NONFICTION WRITER

EDUCATE, INFLUENCE AND ENTERTAIN YOUR READERS

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Practical **ink**

3. Write for Your Ideal Reader

Do you know your ideal reader? If you're like me, you might write for several kinds of readers at different times. However, each piece has one ideal reader. Other readers might benefit, but aim each piece at one kind of reader.

How can you do that? Start with empathy.

3.1 Empathize with Your Readers

Consider this: Your readers are unaware of your perspective or information. Or they want to understand something important. That's why you write—to share your experience and expertise with these people.

That means that readers might ask ignorant questions. However, most readers are not intentionally stupid, bad, or wrong. They are unaware. That's why I recommend you empathize with these people.

What about the readers who vehemently disagree with you? I like to think about them as people with different data. Their experience does not match mine. Maybe they cannot imagine my perspective, even though I offered examples. Or, they might just want to pick a fight with me.

There are always readers who disagree with you or tell you you're wrong. That's fine. While your information might be correct, they might not be able to accept or understand it yet. Or, they cannot imagine you might be correct.

However, most readers want to understand your information. They want you to educate, influence, and entertain them.

The more you empathize with these readers, the more likely you are to reach them. Maybe not the first time they read your writing, but if they keep reading what you write, you will reach them. Eventually. You can grab their attention and keep them in the piece.

If you ever start to blame, ridicule, or mock your readers, stop writing *this* piece. Instead, write for yourself about why you want to insult your readers. This is an example of going meta, writing about why the problem exists, instead of the problem itself. You might realize you need to write for a different reader.

What about satire or parody? In my experience, there's a fine line between satire and mocking the very people you want to reach. Some readers might even experience the satire as blame, ridicule, or condescension.

Write what you want. Then, decide if the piece offers the value to your ideal reader.

Use your empathy to write about what matters to your readers.

3.2 Write About What Matters

When you identify what matters to your ideal reader, you answer the "So What" question. How do you know what matters? Consider the problems your readers need to solve. Write about those.

Here are three ideas to understand the "so what" question:

- What problems do people speak with you about? Or, what problems do you see?
- What questions do people ask you to solve?
- When your readers need to make decisions, what questions do they ask?

All of those questions might help you see what matters to your ideal readers.

When we write nonfiction, we often want to influence people to consider alternatives, or make reasoned decisions. Writers help the decision-maker see the problems and the effect of those problems on other people.

Answer the "So What" question for your readers.

Imagine you can't leave a review online for a product you bought. Let's eavesdrop on the internal written conversation between the software person and the manager who decides what to do next. Remember that there is a time delay of at least an hour between these pieces of writing:

Software person generates a problem report: "We need to fix the pop-up for the reviews. It's not working. Customers are complaining."

Manager writes: "Can they still leave a review?"

Software person replies: "Sometimes. But it's inconvenient."

Manager: "Leave it for later."

The initial problem report did not describe what matters, the "so what," to their managers.

Instead, what if the second half of the conversation starting with "sometimes" went this way:

Software person: "Sometimes. With our most recent changes, we made it inconvenient for most reviewers to leave reviews. That's because we changed how the browser works. Since we made those changes, we've noticed 50% fewer reviews each month. We know reviews—positive or negative—drive buying. I wonder if we lose potential customers if we don't fix it."

Manager: "Oh, that's bad. We want more customers and more revenue. Fine, go and fix it."

In this case, the "so what" is about customer ease of use, attracting future customers, and revenue. If you know why this issue or problem matters to your ideal reader, you can write to inform them.

I know of three primary ways to frame what matters to your ideal readers:

- Risks, current concerns. Risks tend to use "away from" language, things the ideal reader does not want.
- Benefits, possibilities for future growth. Benefits tend to use "toward" language, what the reader does want.
- Options to consider as the reader weighs your arguments.

All of these possibilities can educate or influence your ideal reader. Let's start with risks.

3.2.1 Reframe Risks

In their classic *Strategic Selling: The Unique Sales System Proven Successful by America's Best Companies* MIH85, Miller and Heiman use the idea of helping people see the discrepancy between their current reality and the possible future. The person might have trouble—risks, or might have growth opportunities—benefits.

Let's start with risks.

In the earlier vignette about the ability to leave reviews on a site, the second explanation focuses on the risks of leaving the software as is. The writer wrote about ease of use, the need for more reviews, and the risks of losing potential customers.

Notice that the writer did not write, "You were wrong in your previous decision." Very few people ever want to admit they're wrong. Instead, focus on the how the current situation will influence the future.

Part of that focus might be for you to discuss what the ideal reader will lose. Consider both tangible and intangible costs. For example, in the software problem report above, the software person might add, "The sales before we made this change were x, and last quarter, after the change, they were y."

Intangible costs might include customer ease of use or goodwill.

Risks have implicit costs. You might need to make them explicit, with away-from language.

Once you explain the risks, discuss what matters with benefits.

3.2.2 Show Benefits

Benefits allow you to show the ideal reader possible growth opportunities—a vision of the future.

Show, with anecdotes, stories, and data how the reader might benefit. Your ideas might:

- Save the reader money or time.
- Create new opportunities for the reader or their customers.
- Make their work or lives easier in some way.

Assume that your readers are unaware of the benefits. Otherwise, they would have already put your ideas into practice. Introduce the ideas so the reader can say, "Aha! Now I understand."

Sometimes, you don't need people to change—but you do want them to consider more options, so they can be more flexible. You can choose either away-from or toward language for options.

3.2.3 Consider Options

Help the reader realize there are more options, not necessarily based on risks or benefits.

Not all nonfiction requires that people change. Sometimes, we want people to consider a different perspective or other options.

Personal essays are an example of writing that tends to ask people to reconsider their actions or beliefs without asking for the reader to change. Personal essays offer insight from the writer's experience and perspective. Writers offer those insights freely, without asking for the reader to change.

All three of these ideas—risks, benefits, options—invite your readers into your writing. When you write about what matters and speak your reader's language, the reader is ready for what you propose.

One more thing about what matters: see if you can offer your reader three options for what matters when you write.

3.3 Organize with the Rule of Three

You might have noticed something about this book: I often use three options for lists. And when you see subheadings, you'll see three pieces of content.

I used the Rule of Three as an example to show you how you might organize your writing. For example, you might want to offer three risks, benefits,or options in a given piece. Or, you might want to offer two benefits and one risk.

What's so great about the Rule of Three?

- People see patterns when you offer three items[1].
- Most of us can only remember three items at a time.
- In addition, I follow Weinberg's Rule of Three: *If you can't think of three things that might go wrong with your plans, then there's something wrong with your thinking* from Weinberg's *The Secrets of Consulting* WCO14.

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[1] https://www.inc.com/bill-murphy-jr/how-rule-of-3-makes-people-listen-better-remember-more-understand-what-you-have-to-say.html

Writers and consultants have a lot in common. We offer alternatives for our readers, to rethink how they work or live. When writers offer multiple alternatives, readers are more likely to believe the writer. Especially if writers use Weinberg's Rule of Three in this way:

- One alternative is a trap.
- Two alternatives is a false choice—a dilemma.
- Three alternatives offer a real choice. In addition, it's a way to create more alternatives.

What about more than three options? Are more than three options useful?

Maybe.

People don't remember much, even when they read a relatively short piece of writing. Most people can remember three items according to *George Miller's Magical Number of Immediate Memory in Retrospect: Observations on the Faltering Progression of Science* COW16. A few people can remember four items.

However, you might overwhelm your reader when you offer more than three options[2]. If you have more than three options, consider how you might organize all those ideas into a series.

Instead of lots of options in one piece, offer your ideal reader three alternatives and make each alternative matter to them.

And, if you have a distinct choice, be honest about that choice, instead of trying to drive your reader to *your* choice.

Now, use everything you know about your reader and what matters to hook the reader with a problem.

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[2]https://www.inc.com/bill-murphy-jr/the-us-marine-corps-uses-rule-of-3-to-organize-almost-everything-heres-how-learning-it-21-years-ago-changed-my-life.html

3.4 Hook The Reader with a Problem

People read nonfiction to see how they might solve problems. Start a piece by sharing the problem as a way to set the context, so the reader can see if this piece is for him or her.

Here are three ways to hook the reader with a problem:

- One Startling Sentence
- Hey! You! See! So!
- A story that shows someone similar to the ideal reader in a setting.

Each of these possibilities sets the context for the reader and invites the reader into your thinking.

Let's start with One Startling Sentence to invite the reader in.

3.4.1 One Startling Sentence

I no longer remember how or when I discovered Kent Beck's *One Startling Sentence,*[3] but I am thrilled I did.

One Startling Sentence consists of a four-sentence paragraph in this order:

- First sentence: What's the problem?
- Second sentence: Why is this problem a problem? (Note: this is what matters to the reader.)
- Third sentence: The startling sentence.
- Fourth sentence: Implication of the startling sentence.

Here's an example where my ideal reader is a technical leader, but not a senior manager. That reader works where she's supposed to multitask all the time.

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[3]http://wiki.c2.com/?OneStartlingSentence

> "Are you a leader who's supposed to work on or with many teams? Too often, you feel as you get more behind every day instead of making progress. You don't have to fall behind—you can manage your personal project portfolio. Learn to show your boss(es) all your work and have the challenging "No" conversation."

The startling sentence is: "You don't have to fall behind—you can manage your personal project portfolio."

This opening is just one possibility. "Hey! You! See! So!" offers an alternative.

3.4.2 Hey! You! See! So!

I also don't remember when I learned this approach to an opening. A colleague whose writing I enjoyed explained it to me. He had learned it earlier—possibly from Gerald M. Weinberg.

Bob Dotson, the longtime journalist, discussed this in a video[4].

- *Hey!* get the reader to pay attention.
- *You!* is why the reader should care about this issue—what matters.
- *See?* is the one or two facts that you have—that no one else has.
- *So…* is why the reader should care.

Here's an alternative opening:

> "You have too much to do and you feel as if you're falling behind daily. But you can make progress once you convince your bosses that you *can't* do more work.

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[4]https://youtu.be/K0Rp9kP8gVs