

FOLLOW A WRITING GPS

At times, writing can feel like birthing a Volkswagen to me (I've even used that metaphor on occasion to describe writing this book). The writer Andre Dubus has described writing as inching your way along a very dark, very long tunnel: you can make out the next few feet in front of you, but you're not quite certain where you'll end up or when you'll get there.

What helps with the uncertainty and enormity of the task is to start with some kind of process to guide the way.

When I was in middle school and learning to be a better writer, though, the focus was purely on the end product. My teachers emphasized the final paper versus the rough drafts and scratch notes that preceded it. In other words, they were more interested in seventh-grade Ann's delivering an essay on *The Red Badge of Courage's* Henry Fleming than they were in *how* that essay came to be sitting on their desk at all.

Or so it seemed at that time. Maybe process was part of the curriculum (*Ms. Dolan, if you are reading this now, please clarify for me*). But I don't recall much emphasis on the necessary checkpoints along the way to that final piece— the beacons that guide the entire effort.

Process is one of those things that in many parts of life I consider hopelessly boring and mind-numbing. Like peeling the skins of raw tomatoes. Or scrubbing dirt from beets. But in writing, process is necessary, because you *need* a road map to get you to where you need to be.

Essentially, it's a kind of writing GPS that gets you from discombobulated thoughts to a coherent, cogent piece of writing that others can understand and appreciate.

What follows is the 12-step process for any new, longer text you might produce— blog posts, e-books, white papers, site content, and the like. It's the process I use to write any blog post that appears on MarketingProfs or AnnHandley.com, and I use it to create my monthly column in *Entrepreneur* magazine. Also, I've used it to cobble together the bones of video scripts and presentations, as well as longer memo-style emails.



You'll notice that some of the themes here are also discussed elsewhere in this book. Serving the reader and not the writer, for one. Finding credible sources or data to support your point of view, for another. And creating The Ugly First Draft (TUFD).

But having a big-picture view of the process, or an outline of it, is useful. As we'll talk about in The Ugly First Draft section, good writing takes planning and preparation; it doesn't just emerge, fully formed, out of the head of Zeus. Or your own head, for that matter.

(You can dig further into some of the 12 steps, as noted. Or you can simply rely on this *CliffsNotes* version. Your call.)

1. *Goal.* What's your business goal? What are you trying to achieve? Anything you write should always be aligned with a larger (business or marketing) goal—even an individual blog post.

The key here is that you care about what you're writing: you can try to fake it, but your readers will be allergic to your insincerity. Why does that matter? Because if you don't care about what you're writing about, no one will.

Let's say your goal is this: I want to drive awareness of and interest in the launch of our incredibly cool new collaborative editing software because we want to sell more of it.

2. *Reframe: put your reader into it.* Reframe the idea to relate it to your readers. Why does it matter to them? What's in it for them? Why should they care? What's the clear lesson or message you want them to take away? What value do you offer them? What questions might they have? What advice or help can you provide?

My friend Tim Washer of Cisco refers to this reframing as giving your audience a gift: how can you best serve them, with a mind-set of generosity and giving?

To get to the heart of this reframing, I ask: so what? And then answer, because. Repeat the so what/ because query and response string as many times as necessary, until you've exhausted any ability to come up with an answer. Or until you're questioning things best left to the philosophers. As in:



I want to drive interest and awareness in the launch of our new collaborative editing software.

So what?

Because our new text editor makes it stupid easy in three specific ways for those of you without a geek gene to easily collaborate from remote locales, without overwriting each other's stuff or losing earlier versions.

So what?

Because that's a pain to deal with, and it causes a lot of frustration and suffering for collaborative, virtual teams.

So what?

Because pain... it hurts. And suffering is... umm... bad.

You get the idea.

Express your reframed idea as a clear message. In this case, something like this:

Our new text editor makes it stupid easy in three specific ways for those of you without a geek gene to easily work together from remote locales, without overwriting each other's stuff or losing earlier versions, which makes for happier, less frustrated collaborators. And you'll get your work done faster, with less wasted effort.

Then put that at the top of the page, like a bonfire on the beachhead, to remind you where you're headed.

3. *Seek out the data and examples.* What credible source supports your main idea? Are there examples, data, real-world stories, relevant anecdotes, timely developments, or new stories you can cite? (See specific advice about using data in Part IV.)

Don't discount your own experience; at the same time, don't rely exclusively on it. Use yourself as one of your sources if you have relevant experience (many



writers in the *New Yorker* do so frequently; see Rule 17). That works, because “the more personal you are, the more universal you become,” says Chip Scanlan, Poynter.org's writing advice columnist.

“The writer who uses herself as a source and resource has the greatest chance of connecting with the largest audience,” Chip points out. “[A]sk yourself: What do I think about this story? What do I know about it?”

You'll want to research your topic, of course. But “the smart writers I know start out by tapping into their own private stock first,” Chip says.

In our example, ask: Is there research that quantifies the problem? Who else has dealt with catastrophes or successes? Could you talk to those people or organizations to get their firsthand horror stories and advice?

Also, what's been your own experience?

4. *Organize*. What structure helps communicate your point? Some options are a list, a how-to guide, and a client narrative. Organize the outline or general architecture that suits that type of story best. (See Rule 8.)
5. *Write to one person*. Imagine the one person you're helping with this piece of writing. And then write directly to that person (using *you*, as opposed to using *people* or *they*).

Connect your reader to the issue you're writing about (again, why does it matter to him or her?), perhaps by relaying a scenario or telling a story. Put your reader (or someone just like him or her) into your story right up front—because you want the reader to recognize and relate to an issue. (See Rule 17 for more.)

6. *Produce The Ugly First Draft*. *Producing The Ugly First Draft* is basically where you show up and throw up. Write badly. Write as if no one will ever read it. (Stephen King calls this “writing with the door closed.”) Don't worry about grammar, complete sentences, or readability. Don't fret about spelling or usage. You'll tackle all that later. For now, just get that TUFDF down.

By the way, this show-up-and-throw-up phase is often where many bloggers



end the process. But you won't do that— because you have respect both for your writing and for your reader.

7. *Walk away.* Walking away is self-explanatory. You don't need to actually go for a walk, of course. Just put some distance between your first draft and the second.

How much distance depends on you. I try to put a day between my own (usually spectacularly ugly!) TUF D and the next step, because that amount of time seems to let my thinking season and mature. I feel better prepared to slap those words around a little, willing them to shape up on the page.

I don't always have the luxury of that long a fermentation period— and if a piece is tied to a news story you might not either. So work with what you've got. But at least try to get out of the building— maybe grab a coffee or a slice of pie or something.

8. *Rewrite.* Shape that mess into something that a reader wants to read. In your head, swap places with your reader as you do so. (See Rule 10.)
9. *Give it a great headline or title.* See Rule 69 for more on writing irresistible headlines.
10. *Have someone edit.* Ideally, the person who edits your piece will have a tightgrip on grammar, usage, style, and punctuation. Like a bona fide editor. (See Rule 24.)
11. *One final look for readability.* Does your piece look inviting, alluring, easy to scan? With short paragraphs and bold subheads? Are your lists numbered or bulleted? For the most part, chunky chunks of text feel impenetrable and don't convey energy and movement. In other words, bulky text doesn't look like much fun to read. (See Rule 25.)
12. *Publish, but not without answering one more reader question: what now?* Don't leave your readers just standing awkwardly in the middle of the dance floor after the music stops. What do you want them to do next?
 - a. Check out other resources?
 - b. Sign up to hear more?
 - c. Register for an event or a free trial?
 - d. Buy something?



Consider the order of the steps in this outlined writing process merely a suggestion. You can toss them around and follow them in any order you wish—perhaps you like to barf your first draft onto the page incoherently (Rule 6) and *then* organize your writing into something more cogent (Rule 4). That's fine; it's completely at your discretion. There is no one way to write, remember?

(The only order I wouldn't suggest is backward, because that's just dumb.)

Ann Handley.

[*Everybody Writes: Your Go-To Guide to Creating Ridiculously Good Content*](#)

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WEEK THREE - QUOTES

1. The success of most things depends upon knowing how long it will take to succeed. - Charles de Montesquieu
2. Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know men. - Confucius
3. No one means all he says, and yet very few say all they mean, for words are slippery and thought is viscous. - Henry Brooks Adams
4. The less we know the more we suspect. - Henry Wheeler Shaw
5. What one man can invent, another can discover. - Arthur Conan Doyle
6. There is no knowledge that is not power. - Ralph Waldo Emerson
7. Once we know our weaknesses they cease to do us any harm. - Georg Christoph Lichtenberg
8. It is to be remarked that a good many people are born curiously unfitted for the fate waiting them on this earth. - Joseph Conrad
9. Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored. - Aldous Huxley
10. If you have knowledge, let others light their candles with it. - Winston Churchill

