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# The Art of Book Writing

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Now that I have written three books, and had the latest one *I.A.M.\*A Common Sense Guide to Coping with Anger*, selected by the Behavioral Science Book Service book club, some people are beginning to regard me as a writer. On my better days, I even think of myself as being one. Consequently, when I am asked how to write a book, I am no longer startled, and can manage a decent response.

The first thing I tell people is that writing is not easy. It takes persistence and effort, not merely intelligence or inspiration. The first time I tried to write something book length was as a college sophomore, and it was precisely that: sophomoric. Dozens of later attempts were equally unsuccessful, usually ending in several badly written pages that were quickly discarded in the circular file.

Only when I discovered that what I put on paper was never going to be as good as what was in my imagination that I decided to get on with the writing. Instead of giving up in disgust, I continued my scribbles. I eventually turned out a product that looked like a manuscript.

In the writing game, it seems that there are some well-established truths. The first is that to write, one must write. As painful as it may be to put words to

paper, one must do so on a regular basis. There is simply no other way to acquire the requisite skills.

Second, editing always takes more time than writing. Mistakes need to be fixed, not brooded over. Virtually any thought can be expressed in many different ways, so improvements are always possible. Falling in love with the first words that come along is wasted energy.

As to the process of writing itself, for me there are several stages. In some ways writing is like sculpting. You start with a ligature onto which you throw some clay. You do some preliminary shaping of your materials, after which you refine the shape. Along the way there are inevitable problems and missteps and these must be corrected by either minor or major surgery.

Eventually you get to the point where you smooth the surface. Where originally you were concerned with the over-all concept, toward the end it is the trivial detail with which you are consumed.

Given the fact that I am a sociologist who writes about the theory and practice of sociology, I am most concerned with my message. I ask myself what facts or hypotheses I want to convey and then spend years making sure I have these right. I do whatever research or reading is necessary,

but do not contemplate writing until I'm fairly sure where I want to go. It seems silly to attempt a book when I have nothing worth saying.

This first stage is helter-skelter. My ideas constantly collide with one another, and with those of the people with whom I communicate. This is very much a learning period, so I want to be open and flexible. This is also a period of note taking. I have a pad by my bedside and often wake up in the middle of the night with an inspiration. I am also a walker and this turns out to be an ideal activity for thinking things through.

The second stage involves organizing my ideas. Books are complex undertakings, which, if not carefully organized, quickly become rambling, bloated affairs that no one in his or her right mind would read. To be persuasive, thoughts must be clear. They must be logically connected, not too redundant, and precisely stated. This, however, entails giving structure to enormous quantities of data. This is where many prospective book writers give up.

Once again, for me the organizing process takes a lot of time and can be quite stressful. It is full of uncertainties that do not always have an immediately-

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apparent resolution. Indeed, sometimes I get stuck for months or years. At such moments I am usually not sure if I will ever succeed. Often, this is a time for shuffling scraps of paper, constantly shifting notes from one pile to another.

Finally, there comes the writing itself and here I must find the correct voice. Who is my audience and how do I want to speak to them? Should I be technical and academic or folksy and personal? Since there is no perfect answer, and even if there were, I might not be able to achieve it, this too is a time for trial and error. In the end, I just jump in and find out what happens.

Because I am a morning person, most of my writing is done at home before I begin my teaching day. I sit in front of my computer and try to be myself. I have learned that if I don't like what I'm doing, most likely no one else will either. I also need quiet, but nowadays, for some reason, I usually have the radio tuned to country music. Not that I listen, but it seems to sooth me. Some days, of course,

are better than others, but the idea is to persist until something useful emerges.

Up to this point, most of what I do is done alone—(oh, by the way, did I mention how lonely writing can be, because it can)—it is only now that I try to find out if what I've been working on has any value. It is here that I pester friends and colleagues for their reactions, risking the destruction of my personal relationships. While I always tell myself not to take criticism personally, that I should allow myself to learn from it, in truth, it invariably hurts. The only solution I know is to give myself time for the sting to go away, and then to go back and make the necessary changes.

It is here, also, that being a teacher helps. It is only now that I am prepared to share my ideas with students and to receive their feedback. Usually their reactions surprise me, but they are an ideal vehicle for refining the organization of my writings and its mode of expression. I firmly believe that if my students don't understand what I am saying, or if they think it foolish, readers

will have a similar response, so I take their comments very seriously. This, of course, entails another round of soul-searching and word-smithing, but it is worthwhile.

Yet, even this is not the end, for books require publishers, and publishers do not always recognize the merits of what we writers produce. Sad to relate, I have my share of unpublished manuscripts. But if I am lucky, and a good publishing house gives me a contract, there is more editing to do, this time with a professional editor. In many cases it can be another year before everyone agrees to the final shape of the book.

I get fatigued just thinking about the process, but I love having books in print. The possibility of influencing how people regard important issues is exhilarating. It is also hard, frightening and lonely work. But book writing can be as rewarding as teaching. Indeed, it is part and parcel of the same thing, hence for those of us who love learning and love sharing what we learn, it can be a blast.

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perature. Working in groups of three or four, students were given two weeks to complete each project and each student was required to submit a carefully written report of the results. In several instances, I was surprised to find that a group had conducted their experiment beyond what was assigned and had arrived at more detailed results than what I had expected.

In discussing this approach with colleagues at other institutions, I learned about the *Consortium for Ordinary Differential Equations Experiments (CODEE)*, a group of faculty at

colleges and universities who design and use computer experiments in teaching differential equations. I have contributed an article based on an experiment which I designed to a newsletter which they publish quarterly. Also, I plan to attend a regional workshop which they will sponsor this summer through support from the National Science Foundation.

Overall, I believe that my summer project has resulted in providing the necessary foundation for a revitalized differential equations course which will continue to evolve and improve.

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We would like to invite you to participate in this important exchange of ideas by submitting to the Spring issue.

Articles may cover your research or teaching practices, or explore your philosophy of teaching. Submissions should be sent to Richard Welch by May 1.