

The Joy of Writing

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[Note: The text below is based on the PowerPoint slides used in the presentation.]

Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you about the joy of writing. I will make some general observations about the importance of writing, and then talk about why you should write, various ways of writing, my own experience with writing, and my writing methods. I'll say a few words about academic writing, and then offer some closing advice.

Some general observations

Let me begin with some general observations about the importance of writing. Writing allows humans to transmit information, knowledge, values and wisdom from one person to another and one generation to another. Writing can explain issues and ideas that pictures alone cannot explain— we can deepen our understanding of pictures by using words to describe them. Writing can be an inexpensive, universal way to communicate with others. And writing stimulates clear thinking. In his book, *In Defense of a Liberal Education*, Fareed Zakaria said:

For me, the central virtue of a liberal education is that it teaches you how to write, and writing makes you think. Whatever you do in life, the ability to write clearly, cleanly, and reasonably quickly will prove to be an invaluable skill.

Why should you write? There are many reasons. Write to record your journey. Write to share your journey with others. Write as a way to organize your thoughts. Write to influence the thoughts of others. Write as an adventure, an exploration of ideas and their relationships. Write as an art, creating new worlds. Write as a profession, in your voice or the voices of others.

Ways of writing

There are different ways of writing, depending on what you are writing and how you do your best writing. Let's look at two examples of successful fiction writers. Elmore Leonard wrote 45 novels, many of which became movies. He said

that he begins by creating a couple of interesting characters and then follows them around to see what they might do. He said when he starts writing, he doesn't know how it will all turn out. Terry Brooks has written 23 *New York Times* bestsellers during his writing career and has over 21 million copies of his books in print. Brooks takes the opposite approach. Brooks said he starts with a detailed outline of all the characters and events, and then fills in the outline. He knows exactly who is going to do what before he begins writing.

Writing poetry is different. It's an aesthetic challenge. When you write poetry, you are painting a picture, creating an image, with words. You are sharing a feeling, a mood, or an emotion. The rhythm and cadence matter. You pay attention to individual words, their sounds as well as their meanings— both the denotation and the connotation. The goal is to evoke a mood and meaning beyond the mood and meaning of the words themselves.

Then there is non-fiction writing. It is about sharing information and ideas. Some writers gather information and ideas by reading, interviewing others, taking notes, and then reviewing their notes to see what ideas or issues stand out as worthy of further exploration. Other writers start with an outline that seems logical, and then test the outline against what they read and what others say, looking for supporting or contradictory evidence. Sometimes the result is a dead end, so the writer tries a different idea, or a different outline.

In my experience, when you are writing non-fiction, you should go through a period of confusion or disorientation as you try to figure out who, what, why, when, where, and how. You should be confused about which facts support which ideas, and which ideas relate to which other ideas, and in what order you should present your ideas. If you do not experience this kind of confusion, if you do not struggle, you will not be learning anything— you will just be writing down what you already know. And it's more fun to learn things.

Spencer Johnson is the bestselling co-author of *The One Minute Manager* and author of *Who Moved My Cheese?* He was one of my mentors. He said that he didn't write a book, he *developed* a book. He did that by sharing his drafts with people he respected, getting their feedback, revising his draft, and then sharing the new draft with others. He continued to revise books even after they were already bestsellers. I have taken his advice to heart. I always ask others to comment on my drafts.

When do writers write? Most writers set aside time to write when they are most alert and energetic because writing is demanding. Many professional writers get up early and write in the morning. Novelists often write for only two or three hours per day, with a goal of 5 pages per day— which adds up to more than 100 pages per month. Writers schedule their writing time like an appointment with themselves— an appointment they rarely break.

The important thing is to write, even if you don't feel inspired at the moment, even if you aren't sure where your writing is headed. You can revise your draft later. The point is to begin. In the movie, *Finding Forrester*, a reclusive writer coaches Jamal, a talented 16-year-old, to help him improve his writing. In one scene, Jamal sits quietly in front of a typewriter. Forrester tells him to type. Jamal says, "I'm thinking." Forrester says, "Don't think— write!!"

My experience with writing

As you may have guessed, I love to write. I *have* to write. I find writing to be enchanting, alluring, exciting, challenging, and deeply satisfying. I love to sit down in front of a blank page on a writing tablet or a computer screen and imagine what I might create. Writing is a "flow" experience for me. I lose track of time when I am writing.

Over the past fifty years, I have written skits, short stories, hundreds of poems, a mediocre novel, a dozen short books, a hundred magazine and newspaper articles, several law review articles, a number of academic papers and conference papers, and more than a thousand speeches or workshops. On the job, I have written countless memos, position papers, reports, and grant applications.

In my Junior year in college I studied poetry as one of 12 students in a seminar taught by poet Robert Lowell. Lowell was winner of the National Book Award. He was appointed the sixth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, and he won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Lowell said you could tell a good poem from a bad poem as clearly as you could tell who won a tennis match.

From 1969 to 70, the end of my junior year through my senior year, I wrote more than two hundred poems. I often read and wrote poetry 40 hours a week. I loved every minute. I wrote prose poems, or concrete poetry, quoting dialogue and setting scenes, mixing sights and sounds. My favorite poets were earthy American

poets like Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Carl Sandburg, and William Carlos Williams.

From 1970 to 1974, I lived overseas, two years in England and then two years in Japan. Instead of keeping a diary, I wrote letters home to my family, describing my thoughts and my activities. I wrote hundreds of pages of single-spaced typewritten letters. I did it again from 2012 to 2015 when we lived in Singapore. I also wrote letters describing specific adventures, such as crossing the Soviet Union in 1972, the three weeks we spent traveling in India in 2013, and the month we spent in Africa in 2016.

Most of my writing has been motivated by the desire to share ideas with others. I wrote two books for high school student leaders while I was in college. The first was *The Silent Revolution: Dynamic Leadership in the Student Council*, published in 1968 by Harvard Student Agencies—the book that included the Paradoxical Commandments. The second was *The Silent Majority: The Problem of Apathy and the Student Council*, published in 1969 and republished in 1971.

We sold or distributed 25,000 to 30,000 copies of the that first book, *The Silent Revolution*, between 1968 and 1972. What I did not know until much later was that people were lifting the Paradoxical Commandments out of the book and putting them up on their walls, and sharing them with friends. The Paradoxical Commandments spread all over the world, until millions of people had used them. They have been published in hundreds of books, and included in commencement speeches, blogs, and websites. They have been shared by people of all faiths in 100 countries. A big moment in my life occurred in 1977 when I learned that Mother Teresa had put the commandments up on the wall of her children’s home in Calcutta. That’s when I started writing and speaking about the Paradoxical Commandments again after 30 years had passed.

I finished a new manuscript on the Paradoxical Commandments in 2000. It turned out that Wally “Famous” Amos was using the Paradoxical Commandments in his speeches. When he found out that I wrote them, and that I had a new manuscript about them, he introduced me to Roger Jellinek, who was working for Inner Ocean Publishing on Maui. Inner Ocean published the first edition of my book right after the 9/11 attack on the United States in 2001. Then the Inner Ocean staff went to the Frankfurt Book Fair and sold the rights to 23 publishers around the world, including Penguin Putnam in the United States. The Penguin Putnam edition, *Anyway: The Paradoxical Commandments*, was published in 2002 and became a national bestseller. More than 150,000 copies have been sold. It was

followed by *Do It Anyway* in 2003, *Jesus Did It Anyway* in 2005, and *Have Faith Anyway* in 2008.

I have a passion for servant leadership, and over the years I have published several books on that topic. *The Case for Servant Leadership* was published in 2008, with a new, revised edition in 2012. It became a national bestseller, with more than 50,000 copies sold. It was followed by *Servant Leadership in the Boardroom: Fulfilling the Public Trust* in 2011, *Questions and Answers about Servant Leadership* in 2012, and *The Ethical Advantage of Servant Leadership* in 2013.

I was saddened by the Enron and other corporate scandals that occurred between 2001 and 2003. I started drafting a manuscript addressing business ethics. I published it many years later, in 2012, under the title, *Morality and Morale: A Business Tale*. It is the story of a young manager who has to make an ethical decision. He calls on various people for advice before he makes his decision. The main message is that when morality is high, morale is high. Doing what's right is an intrinsic motivator, a source of energy which supports higher performance.

Soon I will be publishing *The Christian Leader at Work: Serving by Leading*, which is the Christian version of *The Case for Servant Leadership*. The book seeks to integrate Scripture with secular research and experience. It took me approximately a year and a half from the first drafts to the final text, along with work on the footnotes and the bibliography, graphics and page layout, and permissions to quote others.

My Writing Methods

Let me tell you a little about my own writing methods. I offer them as an example of how just one person does it. You will want to find the methods that work best for you, which may be different than the methods that work for me.

When I write non-fiction, I like to start by exploring facts, ideas, and their relationships. This was a problem when I was in the 10th grade at Roosevelt High School. We were required to write papers for our English class. Our teacher, Mrs. Lee, required us to turn in an outline of our paper for her to review before we wrote our papers. I could not create an outline before exploring the ideas. I didn't know, in advance, how the facts and ideas were going to relate to each other. I had to do the research, and basically write the paper, before I could create the outline.

The good news was that when I turned in my outline, I was mostly done writing my paper.

I write by aggregation and revision. I start by sketching out ideas, questions, and issues that I think may relate to the topic. Then I read sources, taking notes and adding ideas. Then I see how my new notes and ideas relate to the ones I started out with. Then I build the text, constantly adding, revising, moving sections, adding sections, and deleting sections. Before we had word processing, I did this by physically cutting and pasting paragraphs on pieces of paper.

My aggregation and revision approach is something like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, except that it is a *new* puzzle, with no picture on the box to check myself against. Also, some pieces will fit in more than one place, so I have to decide which place is the most appropriate in terms of the logic and flow. Sometimes I cut sentences or paragraphs from the text but keep them “at the bottom,” at the end of the piece, to remember that I can still use them if I find the right place for them in the final version.

My goal as a non-fiction writer is to write clearly. I do my best to be logical, presenting information and ideas in a way that is easy to understand. I try to write simple sentences in an active voice. I work on smooth transitions from paragraph to paragraph and idea to idea, so the reader knows where she or he is in the text while reading it. As I mentioned earlier, I ask others to read my writing to see if it is logical, clear, and understandable to them. My goal is to get the message through to others. If it is not getting through, I need to revise it. I am an advocate, not a literary stylist.

Writing requires pruning. That may mean cutting your most cherished ideas and your most exquisite phrases because they no longer belong in the paper, article, book, or dissertation. Here are two examples. Two-thirds of the first Paradoxical Commandments manuscript had to be cut, and one third of my doctoral dissertation had to be cut. In some cases, ideas I *started* with are not included in the finished work. New ideas have replaced them.

One simple way to improve your writing is to put the piece away and pick it up again later. I have been able to write a speech or paper in a short period of time. But the quality of my writing is better when I can write a draft, put it away for a week or two, then come back and look at it again with fresh eyes. Sometimes I can't understand what I wrote before, or why I wrote it the way I did. That's a

good reason to make revisions! When the piece looks okay each time to my fresh eyes, I know I am getting close to clarity and a final draft.

The number of revisions depends on what I am writing. When I was writing poetry in college, I wanted to share the emotional impetus, or the original impression, that stimulated the poem. After the first few drafts, I could improve the technical aspects of the poem, but I began to get further and further from the emotion or image. I learned to stop revising after the first two or three drafts.

Writing non-fiction is different. When I write short books, I know that revisions can continue to make the book better, so it is hard to stop revising. In a sense, I never finish a book, I just stop writing it. By the way, I consider each change in the book to be a new draft, even if it is only a few lines or a short paragraph. I create a new Word file for each draft, in a numbered sequence. Typically, I go through 60 drafts before I stop writing.

When do I write? During my senior year in college, I read and wrote poetry almost every night between 7:00 pm and 2:00 am. Now I do my best work in the morning, before noon, when I feel most energetic. I work best when I have no interruptions and can take breaks at natural stopping points in terms of the writing. I can only write four to five hours a day. I love writing, but it is demanding, and I need to rest.

To me, writing is a craft. It is mostly perspiration, plus some inspiration. Even when I don't feel "inspired," I can work on the logic, the facts, or the flow. I can continue researching, taking notes, plugging holes in my knowledge or strengthening the argument.

Inspiration for me comes in terms of specific insights and connections that are new to me and perhaps to others—the "aha! moments. Sometimes, it is more than that. The most inspiration I have ever had occurred when I was writing a book on the vision of Habakkuk. I wondered what it would be like if Habakkuk had a vision of a conversation with God in today's times, 2600 years after his vision that is recorded in the Bible. On my way to the YMCA one day, large blocks of dialogue came to me. It was a dialogue between a Christian and God. The dialogue seemed to be writing itself. I did my best to get it all down.

Sometimes, a piece is very emotional for me. An example would be *Missing the Last Train*, a short story about a man who has lost his focus on the most meaningful things in life. Working too late on Christmas Eve, he misses the last

train home, and is stuck overnight at the train station with his bag of presents for his children. The station attendant invites him into his small office, and shares "The Four Rules" for finding meaning in life. When the man boards the first train the next morning, he knows that "The Four Rules" are the Christmas present he needed most.

Academic Writing

Let's talk about academic writing. The purpose of academic writing is the search for truth—to advance truth and our understanding of the truth. The logic must be strict, because we are attempting to establish what is true. The rules are strict regarding attribution of sources, because the sources should be credible and part of our own integrity in the search for truth is to recognize the work of others. Footnotes and bibliographies are important as verification of the arguments we are making. Style manuals such as Turabian are important because they force us to track down our sources and check them to make sure they are accurate. Footnotes and bibliographies help others to follow up on our research and learn more for themselves.

This is especially important for writing at the graduate level. Graduate schools are professional schools, preparing students to enter their chosen professions. Writing is a key to effective performance in many professions. A graduate degree should indicate that the student knows how to research and write on a professional level.

Some advice

Now, some closing advice. When you write, you need to be motivated, and that usually means you should write about something that you care about—an idea, a question, or a puzzle that interests you. How do X and Y relate to each other? What happened to Z and why? Is ABC what it appears to be? As an example, I started writing *The Christian Leader at Work: Serving by Leading* with the simple concept that Christian leaders should start with the way *Christ* is, not the way the *world* is.

Next, keep the organization of your topic as simple as possible. Try to have just three parts: (1) beginning, (2) middle, and (3) end. At the beginning, state the thesis, issue, or question. In the middle, discuss it, examining the facts and theories. In the end, come to a conclusion. Acknowledge that there may be more than one view, but take a position and explain why you took that position. Another

way to think of the organization of your writing is the old advice: tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them.

Make sure you guide the reader through your piece. The structure of your paper should be clear to the reader. Leave markers on the trail so the reader knows where she or he is going. It can be as simple as “first, second, third, in conclusion.” Or you can explain that author X says this, but author Y has a different view, and then tell the reader what you think. Or you can describe the strengths and weaknesses of one position, then the strengths and weaknesses of another position, and finally the strengths and weaknesses of your own position. Whatever you do, make it easy for the reader to follow.

Now some advice about deadlines. Academic writing for a course means writing under a deadline. Start early, because you don't know how long it will take to write the paper— it is hard to estimate how long the period of researching and confusion will take. Also, you need to approach the paper with fresh eyes as often as possible, which means having time *between* writing sessions. If you have papers for more than one class, start on them all— and put the most effort first into the one that is due *last*. If you spend all your time on the paper that is due *first*, you will end up behind the curve on the rest of the papers. Don't expect inspiration every time you sit down in front of your computer. Be a craftsman, open to inspiration but not relying on it every day.

When should you write? Write when you are most alert and energetic. Schedule your writing time like an appointment. Set aside several hours at a time for writing— time that will not be interrupted so you can concentrate and remember how ideas connect with each other. Don't leave anything to the last minute— save time for proofreading before you turn in your work.

Writing under a deadline can be stressful. Actually, some stress is good, but too much is not. Too much stress occurs when we feel overwhelmed— we don't have enough time, information, insight, or skill to do the job. You will feel less stress if you are truly interested in your topic and enjoy learning and writing about it. You will feel less stress if you have set aside enough time to do a good job. And you will feel less stress if you are making progress, reading, taking notes, sketching out ideas, and building your confidence— a benefit of starting early.

In closing, writing is important for transmitting information between individuals, societies, and generations. Writing also stimulates clear thinking. There are many reasons to write, such as recording your own journey, and seeking

to share ideas with others. There are different ways of writing and different forms of writing, such as fiction, poetry, and non-fiction. Writing may involve a lot of aggregation and revision, as well as putting a piece aside so you can look at it later with fresh eyes. Writing is a craft, and is mostly perspiration, plus some inspiration. Find topics that motivate you, keep the organization simple, and guide the reader through your piece. Plan ahead so you can meet deadlines. Write when you are most alert and energetic.

Writing is an important skill, so I hope you will become a good writer. Even more, I hope that you will discover the *joy* of writing. Writing is an activity that you can enjoy throughout your career and personal life. I hope you will!

Thank you!