

The Writing Process from Start to End Transcript

This is a transcript of the audio seminar, edited slightly for easy reading!

You can find the audio version at www.writershuddle.com/seminars/feb2013

Hi, I'm Ali Luke, and this is the February Seminar for Writers' Huddle, *The Writing Process from Start to End*.

The writing process is a standard way of breaking down all of the things that go into making a piece of writing. Although you'll sometimes hear the steps called slightly different things, there are always these five steps in this order:

- Prewriting
- Writing
- Revising
- Editing
- Publishing

Each of these five steps is important, and each one has the potential to throw up some problems for you. We're going to go through them with a bit of an eye to what can sometimes go wrong at these different stages, and how you can use each stage well, to ensure that you end up with a complete, finished, well-written piece of work.

These stages apply whether you're writing something very short – maybe a blog post – or something very long – perhaps a whole book. They apply to fiction and to non-fiction. So whatever type of writing you're doing, all of these steps will apply to you – though they obviously may apply in slightly different ways and may take place over different time scales, you'll hopefully find that at least some of the material in this seminar will be directly applicable to you and to your work.

Stage One: Prewriting

Stage one is “prewriting”, and I think it’s worth us spending some time on this stage, because prewriting is sometimes where things go wrong before you feel you’ve quite begun – or alternatively, it can be a great opportunity to really lay the foundations for a fantastic piece of writing.

I want us to concentrate on some of the things that happen during the prewriting stage, and what that perhaps might mean for you and for your work-in-progress.

Introducing Prewriting

Prewriting encompasses everything that you do before you begin on your rough draft. Before you write the first sentence of your blog post, or of your novel, or of your book, certain things need to have happened. The most basic of those, for instance, is that you’ve come up with an idea that you’re going to write about.

In some circumstances, your prewriting might be a five minute process, then you get into the writing itself and you dash something off quickly. In other cases, prewriting might take up months or even years for a big project.

Sometimes your prewriting is just for your own use; sometimes it’s being used in conjunction with editors or publishers or other writers. For instance, if you’re under contract for a non-fiction book, you’re likely to have to produce a chapter-by-chapter outline and your editor may well have feedback for you on that. There’ll be some level of hashing out the structure of the book before you get going with the actual writing of it.

Coming Up with Ideas and Finding Inspiration

The first thing that usually happens with prewriting is that you come up with an idea or you find some sort of inspiration.

Some writers find that they have way too many ideas and they don’t have time to write them all, which is a great position to be in, because you’ve got lots of great material to choose from.

Other writers struggle a bit more with coming up with ideas. That might be because they've got a big long-term project like a blog and they feel that they've used all their good ideas, or it might be because they haven't written very much and they're not quite used to this prewriting stage.

One really simple thing you can do to help you come up with ideas or to get inspired is to keep a notebook with you and jot down ideas as they come to you, so you don't forget them. You might find that you're on the bus and you overhear a conversation and that sparks an idea, or maybe you're lying in bed late at night or first thing in the morning and a great idea comes to you for a short story. It's really useful to have a dedicated notebook where you jot down those ideas as they arrive.

You can also use your notebook as a place to brainstorm, so you can set aside deliberate time to come up with ideas for your writing.

Something else you can do, which I know we've discussed in the Huddle before, is to use a writing problem to get you going. You can buy books with lots of writing prompts in, and you can find websites with writing prompts. Some writers find them really helpful and enjoy doing them, other writers find it's not quite for them.

It's definitely something to have a go at, and you may find that a particular prompt sparks off a whole new project or a whole new idea for you. Or, you could use prompts to help you with your current work-in-progress – so if you're working on a novel and struggling to know where to go next, you might find that a particular prompt just jogs your mind and gets you going.

Developing Your Idea

Once you've come up with an idea that you're happy with, you need to develop that idea and start to get a sense of what your piece as a whole is going to be. Unless you're writing something very short, it's usually not a great plan to just run with your idea straight away.

There are a couple of things you can do here.

One is freewriting: this is a stream of consciousness sort of writing. You open up a new document on your computer or you start a new page in your

notebook, and you just write everything that comes into your head about this particular topic or idea. You don't worry too much whether it's coherent, whether it's spelt correctly, whether it's punctuated, and so on. You just write it all down, trying to capture everything as quickly as you can.

Many people find that as they get into the flow of this, the idea starts to become clearer in their mind. They get a sense of where they want to go with it and where they don't want to go. It can be a good way to quickly explore lots of possibilities, without having to commit yourself to one thing or another.

Something else you can do, and this can work well for both non-fiction and fiction projects, is to brainstorm. You can write your idea or topic or even the name of your character in the centre of your page, and then jot down ideas around that which arise from this. That could be sub-points for your blog post, it could be scenes for your novel, it could be aspects of a character – whatever's appropriate for your particular idea and for what you're working on.

There are no rules here with things like freewriting and brainstorming. What's important is that you find a method that's comfortable for you; that lets you get ideas flowing and lets you begin to sift through those ideas and begin to get a sense of the possibilities and of which of those possibilities you might want to commit to.

Sifting Through Your Ideas

Part of this process will be deciding on which ideas you want to use. If you've come up with lots of different thoughts on scenes for your novel, you might find that not all of those scenes are actually compatible with one another – maybe you've got three different versions of the ending, and you need to decide which you want to commit to.

Of course, this sort of thing can change later on in the writing process, perhaps in the rewriting stage, but **you do want to have an idea of where you're going to go before you start drafting.**

If you're writing an article or a blog post or a piece of non-fiction, again, you'll want to sort out which ideas belong in that article and which ideas or thoughts might belong somewhere different.

Ordering Your Ideas

Writers have different approaches to the drafting stage: some people like to go from A to Z, starting at the beginning and working their way through to the end, and other people like to have a more patchwork quilt approach, where they write scenes from the middle of a novel or they write the points from the middle of a blog post or book, and then they work it all together at the end.

Either of those approaches can be effective, but for a real coherence in your writing, you do want to know what order everything will be in before you begin.

You might find that the relationship between characters in your novel changes as the plot progresses, so a scene in the first third of the novel wouldn't necessarily work in at all the same way in the last third of the novel. If you're writing an article, you may need to give the reader some information at the start which will help them understand something part way through.

Deciding on the order for your ideas is important. There might not be one perfect order to put them in – so if you're writing something like a list post on a blog, where you're listing a number of different ideas or tips or ways to do something, it might not be that there's one set order that those have to go in, but you can still look for some logical way to present them. That might be chronological or alphabetical or from the easiest to the hardest, or whatever makes sense to you and whatever will be useful for your readers.

If you're working on a really big project, like a book or a novel, you may find that it's useful to experiment with some different potential orderings during this prewriting stage.

Rather than committing yourself to one specific approach straight away, you shuffle things around and have a think about what possibilities there are in terms of how you order information or how you order different scenes and dramatic points in your plot.

Some writers like to do this with index cards, with different chapters written on each card, and then they can shuffle those around. If you've got software like Scrivener, you can do something similar on the computer; you don't have to physically move bits of paper, you have virtual index cards that you can move and rearrange.

Of course, as I said before, none of this is necessarily set in stone. **There's nothing stopping you changing the order once you've written your piece – but it's useful to have a good sense of where you're going before you begin.**

One of the things that people get stuck on in the writing stage of the writing process is that they perhaps haven't got a very clear plan or structure, and they jump into a novel or even just a blog post with a sense of where the first small section is going to go, but without much idea of where they're going to be going after that.

It's easy to stall and to stop writing and to perhaps not go back to that for days, weeks, months or even years, because you haven't taken the time in the beginning to figure out the bigger picture of what you're writing.

Stage #2: Writing

That leads me on to the writing stage of the writing process, which you might think is the only stage or the most important one. In some ways it *is* the most important stage, because without the actual writing, there's never going to be a finished product.

Although you could get away with doing very little prewriting, perhaps particularly if you've got the ideas in your head already and it's just a case of getting them onto paper, you can't get away without doing any writing! You can get someone else to help you with the revising and editing stages, which we'll come onto later, but when it comes to the drafting process, it's really down to you.

You Don't Have to Be Perfect From the Start

One way in which people sometimes struggle at this stage is that they feel the piece has to be perfect and complete and correct as they go along. They'll

perhaps try to edit sentences as they go, or they'll be afraid of starting, because they feel it's not going to be perfect.

Of course, the reality is that nothing you write and nothing I write will ever be completely perfect. It will never be as good as the image we had in our heads of how great our novel was going to be or how brilliant our blog post was going to be – but it's obviously not going to exist at all unless we do power through this writing stage, and then we make it as good as we can, even though it won't be perfect.

Try Not to Edit As You Write

At this stage, it's a good idea not to worry too much about things like spelling and grammar and punctuation. I know you might be thinking that's shocking advice about writing – but the important thing here is that you get the words onto the page, you get down what you're trying to say, in the best form that you can without fretting it over too much.

If you make a typo or a mistake or a typo and it bugs you, delete it or change it – but don't spend hours writing one sentence and deleting it and writing another sentence and so on. Sometimes you need to push through a rough bit of writing in order to get to the next bit. Once you're into the flow, it often gets easier.

I know I've sometimes found that I'll be in the process of writing and I'll feel like it isn't very good, or I'm not saying things very well – but when I come back to that at a later stage, I think *that's better than I remembered*. Obviously, there are some flaws that I'll need to correct, but it can be quite hard to judge your own work while you are creating it.

The creative and critical parts of our brain do need to be separated in this process. If you're constantly second-guessing and judging yourself, it's very hard to get into that state of freedom that you need in order to be creative.

Making Faster, Easier Progress with Your Draft

These are some practical things that can really help here, if you're struggling with the writing stage, or if you just want to become more relaxed and more efficient at this stage in the writing process:

Setting aside some focused time to concentrate. Although I'm a big fan of snatching whatever minutes you can in order to write, it's really good if you can also find some slightly more focused time, when you can concentrate.

Thirty minutes is quite a good length here; it gives you long enough to get past any initial struggles with the writing and to get into the flow of your piece. Most of us can manage to find thirty minutes a few times a week – whether it's in your lunch hour, or you get up a bit early and write before work, or whether you use thirty minutes at the end of the day. Whatever time it might be, you can find thirty minutes to sit down and really make some progress on your writing.

Going somewhere without interruptions. I found this particularly helpful when I was just starting to establish myself as a writer, and just beginning to get some good writing routines in my life.

For a lot of writers, it's hard to focus when you're at home, because there's the TV or the internet or there are family members or housemates or pets, or all sorts of distractions around you. Either you're going to end up distracting yourself – so you're struggling a bit with part of your writing and you think *I'm going to get up and make a coffee* or *I'm going to check something on the internet* – or you're being interrupted by other people, when you're really getting into the groove of writing, which can be very frustrating.

If you are struggling with this, I'd really recommend finding somewhere outside the home where you can write – maybe a library or a coffee shop, or if it's nice weather, outside in the park. Anywhere that you can sit with a notebook or a laptop and have some time to yourself for you and your writing.

If that's not practical, or if you prefer to be able to write at home, then try to find a dedicated corner of your home that you can use for your writing. Maybe a whole room isn't going to be possible, but maybe you can put a small desk into the corner of your bedroom, and that's going to be a better place for you to write than in the kitchen or in the sitting room.

If you're writing straight onto a computer, then it's a very good idea to switch off any programs that are likely to distract you. Don't have Twitter or

Facebook or Skype or anything like that running when you're supposed to be writing.

Something that can be really good for concentration levels is switching off your internet connection. Perhaps you find yourself tempted to stop writing every few sentences to see what's happening on Twitter or to check the news or whatever it might be. If that's happening, then switching off your internet connection, even just for half an hour, can be a good way to really get some focus and to press on with the writing stage, so that you can really get into flow.

If you stop and start a lot as you're trying to write, you'll find that it's harder to actually do the writing, and the end result will be a bit disjointed – or not as smooth, or as rich, or as deep as it could be if you're really focusing and concentrating.

Don't Try to Concentrate for Too Long at Once

Something else to say about this is not to overdo it. Writing does require a lot of energy and concentration, especially at this stage of the process, where you're creating something from nothing: you're taking your plan and you're turning that into a piece of work, whether it's a blog post or a short story or an article or a novel or a book ... you are forging that from your own mind.

Of course that's something that you can't concentrate on for hours at a stretch. **It's much better to work in a focused, concentrated way for half an hour or for 45 minutes and to then take a break than to sit there for three hours struggling and slowly losing motivation and concentration because your brain is just worn out.**

Hopefully, you get through the writing stage of your project, and that might have taken you an hour or a couple of hours for a short blog post; it might have taken you several years for a novel or a book. Whatever your project is, there'll be a point at which you've finished the first draft.

You might find that there are some very rough bits in there, some things that you know you want to change; you may even have a few little gaps where perhaps you need to check some facts or you need to go back and insert a

scene into your novel. You might want to make some major cuts, like you're going to take out a character, and so on. But you've got something that takes you from the beginning to the end of your plan and, however imperfectly, covers your idea, whether that was the idea you originally had or a slightly modified version of it.

Stage 3: Revising

Every writer, at this point, has to revise their work. **However long you've been writing, you're not going to produce a perfect first draft.** For experienced writers, working on short pieces, you might find that your first draft is pretty close to what you want it to be – but you still need to go through the steps of the revising phase, to make sure there aren't any changes you want to make at this point.

One way that this stage is sometimes summed up is with the A.R.R.R. approach. It stands for Adding, Rearranging, Removing and Replacing.

Adding

Adding means that you think through anything that might be missing from your piece of work. If you're writing an article, for instance, have you covered everything that the reader will realistically expect to learn within that article? Perhaps you'll find that you need to define a few key terms, or you need to add a bit more of an introduction, or there's a particular point you meant to make and for whatever reason, it didn't quite make it into your plan, and so on.

You might want to go back to any notes you made in the prewriting stage, particularly if you're a bit under your word count, or if you feel your piece is not as long as it should be. That way, you can potentially add in some things that you initially weren't sure about, or you hadn't quite decided on.

Many writers find that they don't really need to add very much at this point. **It's often the case that you find you're cutting more than you're adding – so don't be surprised if you don't necessarily have anything to add to your piece.**

Rearranging

Even if you plan quite carefully, you might still find that you want to do some rearranging once you've written your piece. Perhaps your ideas became clearer during the writing; perhaps you decided to take a slightly different angle as you were working on that draft.

This could mean rearranging some paragraphs in an article or a blog post. It could mean rearranging big sections of the plot in a novel, or reordering the way that you've structured a book. Ideally, you're not going to be doing loads of rearranging at this point, if you did have a reasonably solid plan – but it may be the case that you do need to do some rearranging.

If that happens, just make sure that you think through the effect that rearranging different parts of your work will have on the rest of it. Obviously, if you move forward a scene in your novel where there's a big confrontation between two characters, then there may be some other scenes that in the light of that have to change.

Removing

Sometimes, an idea might not quite work out, or you've gone over the word count for your article, or you've tried a couple of different versions of something to see which you were going to stick with ... and you may need to remove something from your draft.

This is a good point to really consider what belongs in the work and what doesn't. Decide what makes it complete, and what is superfluous or a bit of a tangent – or something that, if you cut it out, will make the whole piece better.

This may not have a lot to do with the strength of the material itself. It could be that you've written something really good, but it just doesn't belong in this particular piece of work.

That can be a tough situation to face – what I usually do, if this happens to me, is save the part that I cut out somewhere safe, then I can come back to it in future either if I change my mind and want to use it in this particular piece, or if I want to write a different piece that can incorporate it.

Replacing

It might be that you want to see this as a combination of removing and adding. **Sometimes you'll find that there's a particular part of your piece of work where *something* needs to be there, but it shouldn't be what's currently there.**

Maybe you need to change a particular detail, because a stronger one would make the piece work better. Maybe you've got a character in your novel who isn't working, but you do need some character to fulfil their role in the plot, so you're going to replace them with a different character. Perhaps the introduction to your piece isn't doing the best job that it could, but you still need an introduction, so you're going to replace it.

With all of these areas of revision, it can sometimes be hard to see what is working and what isn't working, when it's your own writing. If you belong to a writers' circle, or if you want to post in the critiques forum in the Huddle, that can be a good opportunity to ask other people for feedback. *Is there anything I should add? Is there anything I should remove? Is there anything I should rearrange? Is there anything I should replace?*

That way, you can get a sense on a big picture level of anything that's not quite yet working in your piece of writing.

Stage #4: Editing

It's important that we separate editing from revising, because there's two distinct phases here.

Revising is when you make quite sweeping changes to your piece – things like cutting a whole chapter or adding a whole chapter, changing characters in a novel, changing the examples you're using in a blog post and so on.

Editing is when you make much smaller changes. You might want to call this "close editing" or "line editing" and some people will call this stage "proofreading". It's up to you exactly how you think of it and what terms you want to use – but the basic distinction is that the revising stage is where you make big changes and the editing stage is where you make little changes.

The logic for the ordering here is hopefully fairly clear. If you make the big changes first and then the small changes, you're less likely to end up wasting your time than if you try to make all of small changes first, only to cut out two chapters that you've edited meticulously.

When you get to the editing stage, you should hopefully have everything that you want to say in the right order – so all of your content is in place. There's nothing that you're going to make any big changes to from this point on. While you're editing, you want to go through your piece line by line. You're not thinking of it at the level of whole chapters or scenes or even paragraphs here; you're thinking of individual sentences and phrases and words.

You want all of those sentences and phrases and words to do their job as well as possible. You want your sentences to be clear, you want the phrases to be well-chosen, you want your words to be the words that are best for the job.

Editing Your Sentences

A couple of good things to look out for on the sentence level are:

- Whether any of your sentences are hard to understand. If you've got a very long, convoluted sentence, rewrite it, make it clearer.
- Whether your sentences are grammatically correct. This means things like making sure that your use of tenses is correct; if your story is told in the past tense, then it needs to stay in the past tense and not suddenly slip into present tense for no good reason.

Editing Your Words

When it comes to words, look for ones that you might be able to cut out to make a whole sentence stronger. You may find that you've used more words than you need – this is quite common in a first draft. You may also find that you've used the same word several times within a sentence or paragraph.

Although you can get away with that for some very common words like “the” or, if you're writing dialogue, “said”, there are other words that if you have them repeated two or three times within a couple of sentences, they're going to start to jar. It's a good idea to look for a synonym you could use, in those cases.

You'll also want to look at spelling – whether you've made any typos, whether there are any errors, perhaps words you weren't sure how to spell when you were working on the first draft.

This is a very good point to check that your spellings are correct for the market that you're writing for. If you're in the UK and you're writing for the US market, you may decide that you don't want to write a whole first draft in US English, but you now need to go back and take the "U"s out of words like "colour" and "favour" and have an –ize instead of an –ise ending on words like "optimise" and so on.

Don't Trust Your Spell Checker

Don't trust your spell checker to pick up spelling mistakes. I'm sure that's obvious and well-worn advice by now, but **spell checkers (a) don't pick up on every mistake and (b) will sometimes attempt to convince you that something's wrong when it's actually correct.**

If Microsoft Word, or whatever software you're using, tells you that you've got something wrong, double-check – don't just assume that you have got it right and that the program is wrong! – but don't always take the program's word for it. If you're not sure, it can be a good idea to ask a writer friend to have a quick look for you.

Editing Your Punctuation

Also on this level of things, even smaller than words themselves, are punctuation marks. Make sure that you use these correctly and consistently. For instance, if you're using double quotation marks, then you should consistently use double quotation marks and not switch to single ones.

If there's a particular aspect of punctuation you struggle with – some common ones here are things like apostrophes – then make sure you read a good guide on those, practice using them, and just be particularly aware of those when you're editing.

One useful tip for editing is to print your work out, or to at least change the font on the computer (or perhaps turn it into a .pdf if it's a Word document) and then read it through carefully, line by line, word by word. It's very easy on

a computer screen to let your eyes glide over the words a bit, perhaps because we're all so used to skimming and scanning content online. Just having your work in a different format for editing can make it a lot easier to spot mistakes or things that aren't quite as polished as you'd like them to be.

Stage #5: Publishing

We're onto the final step of the writing process, and sometimes this is the quickest step, sometime it's the one that takes the longest! If you're writing, say, a blog, the act of publishing your work is quick and straightforward: you hit the Publish button. You might find that this stage involves things like uploading and formatting your post – but it's perhaps going to be one of the fastest parts of the process.

If you're a novelist and you're submitting your work to agents, then you might find that the publishing process takes a depressingly long time. It could be that you have to send out a lot of submissions; perhaps you get a lot of form letters. Some authors may find that they write a novel in a year or two, and it takes another year or two (if not longer) to find an agent and a publisher and get that novel out onto the bookshelves. Even if you haven't written a whole novel or a whole book, it can take time for it to be published.

What's involved in the publication process will obviously depend a lot on what type of work you've produced. **On the broadest level, you'll either be hoping to have your piece published by somebody else, or you'll be hoping to have it self-published.**

Of course, you might be writing just for your own personal enjoyment – maybe in a journal or something of that nature. This is absolutely fine, and means that this stage of the writing process doesn't specifically apply to you. (Although it may be that, in future, you decide that something you'd originally written just for your own enjoyment is something that you want to get published.)

Publishing and Self-Publishing Both Require Work

On the assumption that you are writing for an intended audience, so you want to either be published (in a magazine, a book, or so on) or you want to be self-publishing, then there'll be several steps involved.

One of these will often be to get your work into the right format for publication. That might mean double-spacing your manuscript, if you're sending it off to agents. It could mean submitting your copy to a magazine or a website in whatever format they require.

If you're self-publishing, there'll be more for you to do at this stage yourself – or you can pay a company that works with self-publishing authors to help you. Let's say you want to self-publish a novel in ebook form: there'll be work to do that involves getting that book onto Amazon or another online book store.

That means that it is important to allow yourself some time for the publishing stage of the writing process: don't assume that it's only going to take an afternoon or a day, give yourself extra time. This particularly applies if you're telling your friends, family or blog readers that the book is coming out on a certain date.

Stuck Just Before Publication?

Some writers do get a little bit stuck at this stage. They'll have a finished manuscript; they've revised it, they've edited it, it's polished, it's ready to go ... but something is holding them back from actually having it published.

Maybe they don't want to submit to agents or to magazine editors, or whoever's appropriate in this case, because they're afraid that the piece will be rejected. That can be a really tough fear to overcome. I know I found it hard to start sending out work when I was a slightly younger writer.

But what I have found is that **the more often you send out your work – whether it's an article for a magazine or a short story for a competition or a guest post for a blog – the easier it becomes.**

I've been rejected an awful lot of time. You might want to take a look at my post [What it Feels Like When Your Writing is Rejected – and How to Bounce Back](#), where I've written about rejection (and where you can see a photo of some of the rejection letters I've received).

It *is* a painful thing as a writer to produce something and then have it rejected, because it feels in some ways like a rejection of you, even though it's not intended to be. I think every writer struggles with this, and **the only way to get past it is to bite the bullet and to submit things anyway.**

Self-Publishing Options

Of course, if you prefer, self-publishing is becoming a much easier option in today's digital world. It's also become a more legitimate option than it perhaps was ten or twenty years ago.

If you're struggling to get pieces accepted by magazines, or if you're not quite ready to submit in that way, then maybe you want to start a blog on that topic instead. If you have a novel and you're finding it difficult to place it with an agent or publisher, you may want to self-publish it. Some writers believe that self-publishing is the best way forward and that it gives writers much more control over their work, more freedom and potentially more money as well.

Again, there is a danger with self-publishing of not proceeding as quickly as you might. Perhaps you've got a finished manuscript, but you're held back because you're struggling with the technology, or because you feel nervous about presenting your work to the world. Again, I think everyone feels this way, and all you can do is make progress and perhaps ask yourself, if you're stuck with the technology, *what's the next step? Is there a book I could read, or a blog post I could read, that would help me? Or, can I hire someone to help me with this?*

If you're waiting for the perfect time to launch your novel and embark upon a huge marketing campaign and so on, then maybe you have to tell yourself there's never going to be a perfect time. Perhaps the best thing you can do is set yourself a date and work towards it for publication.

So ... that's the writing process, in a nutshell, and I hope that you found the seminar useful and that some of what I've said has struck a chord with you.

Maybe there's a particular step within the writing process that you've struggled with or that perhaps you've been missing out or not giving sufficient weight to, and by looking at that again and addressing that, you can move forward more quickly and more easily with your own work.

As ever, please feel free to discuss this seminar in the forums. We've covered things at quite a broad level, so if there's a particular topic you'd like me to go into more detail on in a future seminar, please do post that as an idea in the [Suggestions Forum](#).

I wish you the very best with your writing, whatever you're working on, all the way through from your first idea to final publication.