



By Jason Criss Howk

Over the last decade, I was privileged to publish my ramblings in many different outlets from scholarly journals to [slick mass media periodicals](#)—large and small, paid and unpaid, known and unknown. On top of that, in the age of the internet many of my published articles have been shared and republished in other outlets, some even translated into other languages and reissued.

All that to say, I have learned a lot about publishing and writing everything from books to tweets, and I want to share what I have learned with you. My purpose is simple; many are intimidated by writing to publish and I want to help you get past that fear. You just need a process....and a topic.

Everyone has something they can share with other humans, you are a specialist in something or you have learned a valuable lesson in your life that is worth sharing. So, write

about it. The world works best when diverse thoughts are examined publicly, civilly, and thoughtfully. We hear plenty from the same people...please join the discussion.

Step 1. Get inspired!

To write you need a topic. I get topics when I read, when I listen to others speak about ideas, or when I watch TV, movies, etc. But, maybe one of the best ways to get inspired is to find solitude and reflect on what's important in your life or the world. For example, I was inspired to write my most recent article, [Sir Solitude](#), after listening to Mike Erwin talk for the day about solitude and how it can make you a better leader as he explained his book [Lead Yourself First](#). Don't worry about using someone else's idea, but make sure you credit them in your writing.

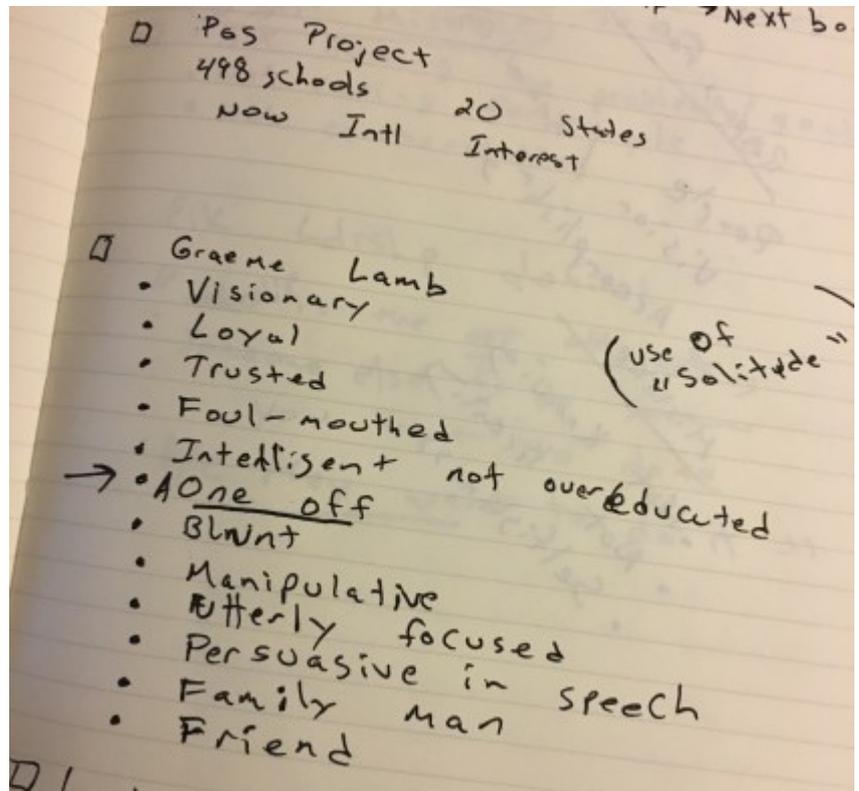
For me, the best writing topics are not forced. Mine come after the periods of solitude like the kind described in the Sir Solitude article. You might find solitude in many places...running, walking, sunbathing, or staring into a bonfire. Wherever you find it, just take time to reflect on a topic or question you have encountered in life. Some of the best ideas come to you when you least expect it, and they grow in your brain until you unpack them. They are like that suitcase no one wants to unpack after a long trip that just sits there. You might find that the coolest souvenir was actually stuffed in that bag.

Step 2. Draft

You have to pick a style that works for you. There is no perfect way to draft your thoughts...but do realize that it's a first draft. The final product might look the same or it might be radically different. Here is the technique I used to write my last article and often use.

I started by mentally seeing the need for the article and then jotting down a few key words

and concepts I thought would be in the piece. Once those key thoughts were written in my notebook (that I always carry), I let the idea go where it wanted as I sat through the rest of the seminar. My mind used various times during the day to organize the concepts I thought I would write. A lot of that is subconscious and unplanned editing.



So, in short, I mentally decided the main points, wrote down some notes, reflected on the topics, set it aside for a while, and my brain mentally edited for a whole day and through the night as I slept. Sometimes I reflect for a week or a month. Some very good writing gets done before you ever open a Word document.

Step 3. Write!

I am a big fan of just jamming on the keyboard and getting every thought out of my head onto my word processing document so I don't lose anything. So, 24 hours later, I just stood at my desk, put fingers to keyboard and wrote; hardly looking at the words on the screen and never-ever stopping to fix spelling. This is not the "proper grammar phase" for me. I only worry about getting the semblance of sentences onto the page. Every time a thought pops into my head that doesn't have anything to do with the sentence I'm crafting, I page down and toss that thought at the bottom to reorganize later or maybe delete.

Some people prefer a slow process of fine tuning every phrase and sentence from the beginning. For me, that results in lost thoughts because my brain already wrote the piece...I'm just getting it out. That is what I save for the next step. In my writing phase I am only worried about getting everything out of my head before I get ultra-focused on any particular part of the piece. It should look like a hot-mess of red underlined words, bullet points, and some very long sentences as well. That's OK...it's a draft.

Returning to my recent article, I only spent 15 minutes writing the Sir Solitude piece.

Step 4. Edit yourself

This is the longest phase for me. It's where I like to really spend my mental energy. The key sub-thoughts are there, so now you just weed out the useless words and organize the sentences into a good story that explains your big thought. Most importantly, you have to make it readable to your audience. Make it something they want to read, and can read. So, edit it into something you would like to read. It's always good to have a trusted person read it after you edit yourself to ensure your message is clear and its enjoyable to read. I have some brutally honest friends just for this task. I buy them lots of adult beverages at times.

How to edit. I like to start by reading each paragraph, beginning at the bottom to ensure they don't have unrelated sentences in them. If you read anything beginning to end, your brain will correct a lot of flaws as you read and you won't see your mistakes (thanks Brett Sylvia for the technique). This is also when I fix spelling and the use of wrong similar words (their/there, where/wear, personnel/personal etc.)

Once I have moved the random thoughts to the bottom of the document (I never delete them, you might want them later) I save the draft and reopen in version 1.2. Now you can start from the beginning and ensure you have an introduction, middle, and an ending. Ensure each sentence is as short and uncomplicated as possible. Make sure you make your point(s). Ensure you have removed or added all the other ideas you had about the topic that

make sense, or didn't make sense.

It still isn't perfect, but now is a chance to see if your trusted colleagues think it's worth publishing widely or if it's just something to clean up and share with friends or publish on a blog.

Step 5. Publish, or don't

So, now you have a decision. Do you submit this to an editor and publisher to get it out into the larger world, share it locally, or just file it away? Often my writing is just a thought exercise, a way to reflect on an idea during a moment of writing solitude. Once a month, I try to write something worth sharing with a larger audience. Once I decide to publish I reach out to a trusted publishing venue and send them a copy and ask if they want it.

In my recent case, I turned to Joe Byerly at *From the Green Notebook* because I figured it would fit his publishing outlet theme and I like his editing method. He lets writers use their voice, doesn't nitpick pointless minutia, and publishes it quickly. If your time is limited, find a quick editing and publishing team, others can slowly suck your energy from you.

Working with Editors

All editors are all different and every publishing outlet is seeking a particular kind of work. That means what you wrote should be sent to someone who: A) wants it and B) is a good person to work with. You and the publisher might be a good fit, but you and the editor (s) might not be or vice versa. That is OK. You are the customer and you don't have to buy what the publisher or editors are selling. They are looking for your work to make their media outlet look good; never forget that it's your work. Don't let them change your ideas or thesis. Don't let them change too much of your unique verbiage and style.

Now if you need to make a living from writing, you will have to make some compromises or

find a very good editing team that makes you feel good about the final product. Find a Max Perkins (he was the amazing/patient editor who worked with some of the most creative, well-known, and difficult writers of the 1900s). Read about Max and editing [here](#).

Get comfortable with an editor and let them get comfortable with you. The editor should be making you a better writer, pointing out confusing passages, and ensuring your unique individual voice and style gets to print. The editors and publishers are supposed to be helping you, not the other way around. If you lose faith in an editing process, just look somewhere else. To summarize that relationship: you write, editors/publishers help you, and the audience wins. It's really that simple. If an editor is fighting you instead of helping you, move on and don't look back. Don't let them stop you from writing again. If you are a good writer, your audience will let you know.

Step 6. Don't read the comments...but keep improving

Are you a good writer? You really have to judge for yourself. Many of the best writers and works you love today were hated in their time by the critics, readers, and even publishers. So, don't read the nasty comments that are often written by people who lack the bravery to go through the publishing process themselves. Listen to your trusted friends, colleagues, and civil critics when they point out holes in your logic. Take criticism with a grain of salt. If you are taking a stand, there will always be someone on the other side of the argument.

In the case of "Sir Solitude" the feedback was nearly 100% positive. In those rare moments take some reassurance that what you write matters to other people. It likely means you chose a great topic. It also might mean you have not screwed-up the prose on that piece. So enjoy moments of positive feedback and don't get bogged down when it's rude. Just keep writing and damn the critics outside the arena.

How do you get better at writing? Write...a lot. I sometimes save my papers that were trashed by teachers, mentors, and editors and read the notes. I reflect on how I could have

explained it better. But the most important thing I do to improve is to keep writing. In short form, long form, and even a tweet, you can improve your skills by seeing how well people get your meaning on the first try.

You can join some writing clubs and guilds. Basically, if a support group works for you, use it, if it doesn't, skip it. I really enjoyed joining the North Carolina [Writers in Residence](#) Program at the [Weymouth Center](#) for the Arts and Humanities. It offers solitude for published writers for 2-weeks every year. You stay in the same mansion where a NC author lived and where his author buddies stopped-in to party. You can sit by the fireplace that Thomas Wolfe slept in front of, drink a beverage on the same balcony that Zelda and F. Scott did, or use a room named after Max Perkins. It's also home to the [NC Literary Hall of Fame](#), so you can write at Boyd's standing desk while Maya Angelou watches you from her portrait.

The real ways to measure your writing are to assess: 1) do you get published, 2) do you get good feedback from readers, 3) did you get your message through—did folks get it?

Don't sweat the other stuff.

Just keep practicing, start a blog, send out tweets, and even share your articles on venues like LinkedIn to see if they get a reaction. Whatever you do, don't stop writing just because a critic says they don't like it. Critics have a place and some might even have a valid criticism, but don't listen to the ones that make a living trying to silence voices they don't like. Keep writing.

Step 7. Help create new writers.

The other task you have as a writer is to help others. These opportunities can come in many forms and will help improve the diversity of thought available to readers today and tomorrow. I spend a lot of time reading other people's drafts and telling folks about

publishing venues. You can introduce people to editors and even co-author papers or articles to get people started. Also, don't hesitate to be a contributor to a multi-author book or to add your ideas to a group document that lists none of the authors at all; like a national security strategy, policy white paper, or important speech. Your name doesn't always need to be in the credits to be an author. If asked to join an editorial staff for a little while or even to just proofread a document, be a team player and lend a hand. It's easier that way...there are plenty of selfish writers, be a selfless one. You can even give away your ideas for articles if you lack time to write it. Give it to someone who can cover it better than you.

My most useful resources for writers and editors I have read more than once:

[Ernest Hemingway on Writing](#), Ed. Larry W. Phillips

[That Summer in Paris](#), Morley Callaghan

[Max Perkins Editor of Genius](#), A. Scott Berg

Jason Criss Howk is an educator, [podcast host](#), and [author](#). His works range from academic papers, to Op-eds, articles, interviews, and even a book. They have been published and republished in places like From the Green Notebook, CNN, Real Clear Defense and Politics, Small Wars Journal, Old Stone Press, US Army War College PKSOI, Fast Company, Task & Purpose, Parameters, Clarion, Strategy Bridge, Naval Postgraduate School, Army Times, Fayetteville Observer, Observer (newspaper, NYC), US News and World Report, Dispatches from Pinehurst, Divergent Options, The Foreign Service Journal, FAOA Journal of International Affairs, The Pilot newspaper, The Hill, and many others.

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