



by Catherine Putz and Tobias Switzer

You finally decided to write. You've got something to say, and it's burning you up. Maybe nobody is talking about it, or the national security establishment is just getting it all wrong. Tired of sitting on the sidelines as other people blather on uninformed, you're ready to set the record straight. You know intimately what they've only read about in reports or saw once during a scripted dog-and-pony show through a conflict zone. Diplomacy and deterrence don't work like that. Sanctions and special operations don't work like that. That weapon system isn't a trillion-dollar waste of money; it's the cornerstone of US security.

Sitting down with some coffee and your laptop, you imagine what *they* are going to say when your masterpiece appears in [Foreign Policy](#) or [The New York Times](#). Thirty minutes go

by. Then, an hour. Damn the blinking cursor and damn the blank page! You've got to go to work now. That night, you make another attempt, but the blank page mocks you. After a few grueling days, it's getting more difficult to wake up early to write — what was it you were going to say, anyway? After trying for a couple of weeks with not much to show except bleary eyes, you give up, leaving the blank page behind.

If this is you, I feel you. That was me, too. After a few abortive attempts over the years to write and publish, I all but gave up. Last year, though, I decided to give it one more go. But I knew I needed to do something different. I needed help. After years of trying on my own, I started working with a coach.

If you want to write, but you're struggling, get a writing coach.

Starting last summer, I've met virtually with my coach, Katie Putz, weekly, to talk about my ideas, review my drafts and strategize pitching ideas to editors. When my motivation or self-esteem sagged, Katie would kick me in the rear and keep me on task.

Since we began working together, I've published pieces in six different outlets, including a report, several essays, and a couple of op-eds. Katie and I've surprised ourselves at how successful this project has been. Throughout the year, we've talked about why this coaching relationship worked and how other people struggling to contribute to the national security conversation might benefit from a writing coach, as well. What follows is our conversation about why a writing coach makes sense, what benefits it brings, and why writing is a team sport.

KATIE: Let's talk about what you were looking for in a potential coach and then we can talk about what you've gotten out of this process.

TOBIAS: One of the reasons I wanted to commit to a coaching relationship was to have accountability and not just wait until I had something written to pitch to an editor like you. I

was afraid because I was out of the habit of writing. I didn't have structure or scaffolding in place. I needed a little more structure.

KATIE: It is really easy to not write.

TOBIAS: Right? A month or two or six goes by, and all you have are a couple of sentences on a piece of paper. But knowing I had to get something to you by Tuesday or Wednesday, so we could have something to talk about on Thursday was helpful. Otherwise we'd meet and just stare at each other, and I was going to waste your time, my time, my money, and the opportunity.

KATIE: We have to have structures that can simulate motivation if we just don't have it in us that day. That's why when people have a gym buddy, they're more likely to go workout. If you have somebody that you are personally accountable to, someone who expects you to be there, you're more likely to follow through.

This also allows us to get away from perfectionism as a stalling tactic. The idea that something has to be perfect before showing it to someone else. When you have a regular scheduled meeting you have to show whatever it is, however it is at that time. When people write, they often are hesitant about sharing a work in progress, but if you're trying to get published, the reality is that someone else is going to edit it no matter how perfect you think it is.

Once you decided to improve your writing, how did you decide that a writing coach was what you needed? And when you started looking for a writing coach, how did you go about that process, what qualities were you looking for?

TOBIAS: Yeah, great question. A while back, I listened to a podcast with [Atul Gawande](#), a surgeon and writer for [The New Yorker](#). He'd already been practicing surgery for at least a decade but he realized that his skills had stagnated. Gawande was more than good enough

to do his job. But in order to get better, he realized that he needed a coach, somebody who would give him one-on-one attention and feedback. Once you're a board certified surgeon, there's no more external feedback other than a massive failure like "I killed the patient." But Gawande knew that there's all sorts of nuances between good surgeons and great surgeons.

After thinking about him, getting a writing coach made sense to me. You want to bench press a bunch of weight? You get somebody to teach you to do that. You want to lose 10 pounds? You get someone to help you. In a lot of other situations, apart from writing, I think people know that a coach, an advisor, a trainer, or another person can help them.

KATIE: I find it fascinating that we don't always think of writing as a skill to be improved. Going back to something you told me once: you thought you wrote well enough, but *those* people, the ones who wrote great things...they were just on a different level and there's no pathway from where you were to where that class of writers are. We treat writing skills as an innate talent and that's what stops a lot of people from pursuing the pathway that *does* exist from mediocre writing to excellence. We seem to teach people that writing is this mystical art that you're either good at or you're not, but that's not reality.

TOBIAS: I misunderstood writing. I'd always believed that writing was a talent you're born with, not a skill to be learned. I didn't understand until recently that there is a process to becoming a better writer. Feedback is a huge part of improving your writing, though, and it's hard to get once you're out of school and writing on your own.

If I'm trying to lose 10 pounds or get in shape or whatever, I can get on the scale every day. I can see if what I'm doing is working. I can see if there's progress.

KATIE: It feels more real.

TOBIAS: But that doesn't exist with writing. I can write a blog post today and write a blog

post tomorrow, yet I can't tell if I'm a better writer. Maybe there's a point when you start moving up the skill ladder that you can evaluate your own writing, but where I was, I couldn't see it for myself. That's hard. There's no one challenging you and giving you feedback to get better. I needed an outside person to help me.

And I only have so much goodwill with the people I know. I won't have friends anymore if I'm asking them to look at the sixth or seventh draft of something. Also, if they're too personally invested in my topic, then people are going to start pushing their perspective instead of just reading it for clarity and organization.

We never strongly defined the coaching role, but it's more than just an editor. Whether I have something to write or don't, we're still working together. You're still there to motivate me to get the idea out or talk it out, or at least start the process.

KATIE: There's this spectrum of people who guide us, or teach us: there's teachers in school, there's professional mentors, and there's coaches. There is definitely overlap in these roles, but differences exist in our individual relationships with each.

The only coach currently in my life is my boxing coach. I pay this man to throw punches at my head, and then let me throw punches at his. He compliments me on how smooth I am, how precise my jab is, then he tells me how to throw harder or move smarter. He challenges me, but it's also an ego-stroking exercise: Someone telling me I am strong and can, indeed, do this. Someone, literally, always in my corner.

That's the form of coaching that I adopted. My attitude was: I cannot make you a better writer, but I can help you become one on your own. The way that I thought this relationship would work is that you would have to do all the work, but I'm here to support you, I'm here to challenge you. I'm here to provide structure and insight when you need it, and when you don't need it, I'm here to cheer you on — "Yep, let's keep going."

TOBIAS: You were very good at encouraging me to write, just getting that cycle going and not worrying about if it was good enough to show anyone. A coach is invested in the success and wants it too. My friends and family already love me. They don't care if I learn to write or not. A coach does. You did.

KATIE: We all need a nudge, sometimes, and I think this is where having a dedicated coach or a writing partner or just somebody who can push you past that hesitation is helpful. Otherwise, it's easy to write a thing and then never show it to anybody. Or even easier to write nothing.

TOBIAS: I also needed someone who had experience writing in national security outlets. There are lots of types of writing—long-form journalism, short stories, poetry—so you probably can find a coach for every single one of those different things. But if we're talking about writing to national security professionals, that requires somebody who knows that space. You were able to guide me through that terrain.

Had you considered coaching a writer before? Were you afraid I was going to ask you to ghostwrite a bunch of articles?

KATIE: Before I talked to you, I was a little concerned that a ghostwriter was what you wanted. I've got my own writing to do! But you genuinely seemed as if you wanted to do the work and that was important. I was never going to do the writing for you.

In my full-time job at [The Diplomat](#), I work with many writers, some for many years now. It's fast-paced and news-focused. While I hope I've had a positive influence on writers who have worked with me there, I can't spend too much time on any single one.

Coaching appealed to me for a few reasons. I enjoy being a bridge connecting people who have experience or expertise, in your case, military experience, with a larger audience which doesn't always speak the same language. Your crowd loves jargon.

I also simply like doing things I've never done before, challenging myself to grow.

TOBIAS: Cleaning up the jargon was crucial. Your perspective as a national security generalist was incredibly helpful, too. You made sure that my writing was clear to a broader audience.

KATIE: Do you think there are either structural or professional barriers to encouraging people in the military to write? Not necessarily even officially, because there are established rules and regulations, but what stops people? I know this is part of a larger conversation that I've seen going on about the military and writing, and encouraging people to write for an external audience. What are your thoughts on that?

TOBIAS: There's a natural tendency in the military to avoid the limelight and deflect attention. Standing out is the quickest way to get beat down, like the tall poppy or the nail. So, there's a hesitancy to speak up, to put yourself out there. It's funny because everybody respects a person who writes and publishes. If it is well-written, then people applaud that.

KATIE: What was your previous relationship to writing like? What did you think about writing in school?

TOBIAS: I just wrote passively in high school and in college, happy with "good enough." I appreciated the liberal arts, but I didn't put much time into my writing. I would just write a paper for class, give it a quick glance for any major spelling errors—enough to get a B—and I was happy with that.

I never thought, "how could I make this better? What would make the writing better?"

KATIE: Because of the way we are taught to write in school, we rarely do drafts of anything unless we take a specific writing course. Usually, you write your paper, you send it to the teacher, they give you a grade, you move on to the next lesson, the next paper. We rarely

get to see the struggle of the editing process until we try to publish something and by then it can be jarring.

TOBIAS: That's actually a good thread to pull on. We don't learn about editing as part of the process to become a better writer. It's a lot of the reason why I sit down but can't write. The biggest writing detriment for me is trying to write and edit at the same time. I'll write a couple of sentences, look at it, and think it's crap. It's as if the first draft has to be my final draft. If you don't allow yourself to write poorly, write crap, then you never get to the edit stage where it becomes something.

KATIE: I definitely recall when you had this realization that all that smart stuff you see printed in magazines or on blogs or in newspapers, that what you were seeing was not the first draft, or even close to it. No matter how good the writer is, or how smart the thinker is, the published piece you saw is unlikely the first draft. Nobody writes perfectly the first time, at least nobody that I have ever encountered has written a first draft and it's absolute gold. It's totally perfect.

We're approaching a year working together. What tools do you think that you have acquired to overcome future roadblocks in writing? What have you learned from this process that you think you'll be able to revisit?

TOBIAS: One of the things we talked about at the beginning was to separate the process from the outcome. There's a tenuous link between how hard I worked on a piece of writing and how the world receives it. I wouldn't say they're completely disconnected, but you can't control how people read your writing.

KATIE: If we depend too much on "success" being the factor validating whether our writing was good or whether our ideas are worthwhile, then we would stop writing at the first high hurdle and may never come back to it.

I tell people this all the time: You're never going to get published if you don't pitch. It's difficult because you put your heart and soul into a piece and then you put yourself out there, and then some editor says, "Yeah, no thanks."

From the perspective of an editor, I can tell you there are many reasons for rejection. But rejection on the writer's side always feels the same: "I am bad. My piece was bad. Nobody loves me. This was trash." That's not always the answer. In an ideal world, an editor would be able to write back with the reasons they're rejecting the piece. We don't live in an ideal world.

TOBIAS: One thing I've learned in this whole process is that you see one name, maybe two names on the byline, right? But you don't see the editors who touched it, the copy editor who touched it, and the subject matter experts who touched it. You don't get to see the six drafts of garbage before it was turned in. It takes a team to get that out there. I almost wish more outlets would publish pieces with notes about who did the copy editing, who were the editors, etc.

If you don't understand how this process works, you could end up thinking that the writer did it alone—it's not true. They had lots of help along the way. And so, if you understand that, then you might not be so intimidated and it would make sense to get a writing coach. There's already a lot of people touching the piece anyways. Why not add one more but earlier in the process?

KATIE: If you haven't seen how the proverbial sausage is made, then you don't know how many hands are necessary to actually bring something to life. Every publication has its own process. And as we've discussed before, you don't always know why something was rejected and that's daunting.

TOBIAS: This happened to me. Years ago, I had a burst of writing and intellectual

production, and then fell off the path for a long time. One of the things that tripped me up was a bunch of rejections on a piece I thought was pretty good. I was dumbfounded and didn't know what to do.

Through our work together, though, I realized that every outlet has a different writing style. You have to produce to their submission standards. It's not enough to just have deep thoughts. The idea might be great but if you're not putting it in a format that they want then it's easy for an editor to reject the piece. You definitely opened my eyes. I'm trying to internalize that before I submit a piece, I need to package it up in the way the editor is expecting to see it.

KATIE: You want to make it easy for an editor to say, "yes." The best way to do that is to serve up the meal in the way that it was ordered. Most publications have submission guidelines. They tell you exactly what they want and their website shows you what they require. If I'm getting 50 submissions and can only take three, then it's easy to reject things that clearly ignore the guidelines for submission, regardless of how good the idea might be. The best way to make it easy for an editor to say "yes" to your piece is to demonstrate that you have read the things that they publish and you read their submissions guidelines.

One thing we've talked about before which I think is worth reflecting on is that writing is a form of thinking. For me, and I think for others too, writing is a thought process. There are shower thoughts or thoughts that occur during a walk in the woods, but this is different. Writing is an active process of thinking out loud. It's a conversation we're having, first, with ourselves, and ideally later with an audience. Because it's a conversation, you have to start somewhere and you may not know exactly where it is going to end.

TOBIAS: I agree. You don't have to have the whole thing fully worked out before you start writing. In fact, you probably shouldn't if you want to write more frequently. For each piece we worked on, a lot of my thinking changed throughout the course of writing it.


KATIE: That's why I say just write and come back to edit later. Even the most intelligent and brilliant thoughts don't always come out in a perfect stream or in perfect form. A good way to encourage people to write is to remind them that it all starts with just a bunch of words on a page, an accumulation of thoughts — and there ought to be no barrier to who can have thoughts about a given subject. Chances are, if you're even tempted to write about something, it's something you know and care about.

TOBIAS: Everyone has had a unique career. There's lots of people with twenty years in the military, ten years, five years, or maybe one year, who have done interesting things and have something to say. If I could go back to the beginning, I would have found a writing coach earlier to unlock my writing instead of waiting toward the last part of my career to really get started.

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