

The Art of Writing is Born by Considering Elephants

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Have you ever sat down to write and waited or even prayed for a flash of brilliance that never came? Writing an assignment, a thesis, or a book might well seem impossible. You might have got started but floundered? After experiencing this many times myself, I discovered a secret. Well, more I attended to a cliché — on how to eat an elephant...one bite at a time.

One bite at a time, that's how you eat an elephant, not that many people are inclined to devour such magnificent creatures! This advice is perfect for writing a book; 50,000 words, 10 chapters, 5,000 words a chapter. Add the five concepts you want to convey in each chapter and a premise for each chapter. Structure each chapter to include the premise, a story, some examples, research, add personal observations and insights.

This means writing 250 words a day for 200 days, that takes six months, or 500 words a day for three months, which is the approach I took as I wrote my first book, *Leadership Material*. Eminently doable.

For an AANZPA thesis of 7,000 words, this is 250 words a day for 28 days. You get the picture.

Other suggestions for writers:

- Create and follow a structure.
- Stick to timelines – (not my natural tendency).
- Keep writing and editing as two distinct and disparate functions.
- Write 250 – 900 words each day.
- Keep meticulous bibliographic notes
- Accept that creating diagrams, gaining permissions for case stories and researching are your everyday conversations.

Why I wrote the book

My first book, *Leadership Material*, (Jones, 2017), focused on how encompassing personal experience underpins professional development. I knew that coming to terms with our life experience is the life blood of our

professional competence rather than skills and knowledge. Given that business schools had consistently avoided this knowledge, I wanted to write so that many more people would find this knowledge accessible.

I wrote my second book, *Leadership Levers* (Jones, 2022), because I had noticed leaders invariably floundered with group dynamics. I wanted to help them find joy in leading groups.

Three dominant coping mechanisms were apparent with the leaders I worked with. They would:

- prepare for meetings by being familiar with oceans of content, or
- talk without giving attention to the response they were getting, or
- withdraw and remain silent.

These three responses were guided by their fear that they would be rejected and that no-one would want to listen, believe, or accept what they were saying.

I wanted to change this. I wanted to help leaders succeed, whether with something as small as a meeting, or as large as implementing enterprise-wide change. I wanted to present a new model of leadership where relationships, not content or expertise were central to leaders' success.

A seed was sown

After being with Max Clayton in hundreds of workshops, each one riveting, I analysed Max's approach. How did Max warm us up to being present despite our fears, become vulnerable and work to explore and repair our relationships?

In essence, I observed Max ignored the 'agenda' and focused on building the relationships among those there. That insight steered much of my application of sociometry in my work roles as leadership coach and advisor. I realised the agenda was actually developing our relationships so we could have the conversations we wanted to have with the people we wanted to have them with.

I wanted to help leaders understand how groups work, to release their untapped talents to help them make better decisions and to create a sense of belonging for the people in their organisations.

I wanted leaders to understand that to lead a meeting their content and the agenda were secondary. Primarily, the leaders' role is to create group environments where people want to participate, they want to contribute and find the satisfaction and joy in that.

In essence, I wanted to write about my work as a practicing sociometrist in organisations and of the leaders' role in releasing the power of relationships.

Was the second book harder than the first?

I was asked if the second book was harder than the first or just different. Yes,

the second book was harder to write than the first and it was also different. With the first book I knew what I wanted to write about and had a format for each chapter of; main dilemma, story, facts and insights. I had the delightful experience of conveying my knowledge and experience and the flashes of brilliance you might dream of – words and concepts flowed.

With the second book, I had to fight to keep my ideas from merging. I had an overwhelming feeling that I was repeating concepts I had written about earlier. I discovered that a chapter heading and a subtitle had been repeated but that wasn't the problem. As I began differentiating the processes behind ideas, I was repeating myself. It dawned on me that processes of becoming influential as presenters, conversation inviters and group leaders do have similarities. That was the repetition. I was able to relax.

Writers create new concepts as they write

The biggest mistake writers make is thinking that they know everything they are going to write about before they begin. Writing is like producing a drama, directors don't know precisely what is going to happen when they begin. They trust the method, their protagonist, their experience and their intuition. Writing is similar. I discovered I was creating new concepts as I was writing. This was exciting and challenging.

As I was writing on intimacy, I realised that in my work in organisations, intimacy and authenticity in groups was both valued and rare. I would frequently say: 'You decide the level that you want to share. I provide a framework but it is you who decides what and how you will share.' I have been privileged to be present in profound moments in many work groups. Group participants long for their leaders to be personable and human.

I wanted to show leaders that intimacy is accessible. I wanted to show that intimacy is a leadership quality that many leaders find challenging to reveal relevantly. Many leaders' resort to being self-absorbed and lack empathy. This is the wrong warm up.

Over several supervision sessions, my supervisor and I teased out three levels to differentiate intimacy. Finding examples was easy, yet the table sat awkwardly as did the terminology. She proposed I outline a purpose for each. This united what I had been grappling to express eloquently. The terminology identifying the three levels of intimacy in work groups became 'simple, deeper, unguarded'.

Yes, there were setbacks

A month into the second book, David had a heart attack. We raced to the hospital and I faced the reality of losing the man dearest to my heart. I was unable to function other than to take care of him as he recovered. My life priorities changed radically. Rather than three months to write this book, I wanted to take six. My editor agreed.

The second set back was more insidious. Working with the line editor was a delightful experience on one hand, *Dear Ms Jones*, but damaging on the other in that typos were inserted and homophones overlooked, for example *elicit* meaning 'to get something' was changed to *illicit*, describing something illegal. The line editor had English as a second language and while endearing in our communications, this was not helpful in their linguistic accuracy as line editor.

Just before publication I had sent the edited manuscript to a colleague, within hours I received an email with the subject 'Typo'. My heart sank. Eight further emails in the same day and I accepted the book was not ready for publication. I contacted another colleague and together with my partner David, they scanned the book. By the end of the next day my eagle-eyed companions had identified 72 errors. Knowing they were close alongside me practically helping, lifted my spirits enormously.

One of the more difficult emails I have ever written was to my publisher asking for the corrections to be actioned. He was not happy. The corrections were completed within a week delaying publication by two weeks.

What makes good writing?

Several elements comprise good writing:

1. One is powerful openings. Here, short sentences reign supreme. Let subjects lead. Avoid explanations. This takes practice.
2. Metaphors matter. Metaphors enable you to place your reader into two worlds at the same time, the content of your writing and the allied metaphor. The readers' imagination is engaged. Learning processes are stimulated.
3. Brevity and focus are essential. Angela Merkel's recent biography (Marton, 2021) the author noted, '*Angela spoke to the press with scientific precision and in easy-to-understand sentences. She hardly used adjectives and said things as they were, without flourishes. She presented twice as much information as her colleagues.*' Avoiding unnecessary adjectives means a great deal of information can be given simply.
4. Psychodramatists have exceptional opportunities to bring life to their writing. Role language enables us to describe behaviour vividly. A performance manager becomes a wise insightful talent spotter. A meeting manager becomes the inclusive guardian of group development. Adjectives enable writers to be compelling and captivating. Shifting our language from social descriptions to psychodramatic observations is at the heart of communicating our clinical capacities.
5. Compelling headings give your reader signposts to where they are being taken.

More hints and tips for writers

Asking myself a question whenever I hit a roadblock became second nature. At the end of a chapter, I'd write 'how do you want to make a compelling link to the next chapter?' The next day, I would know.

Other favourite questions were: 'How might you say this simply?' and 'What metaphor enhances this concept?'

Writing and editing are two separate and disparate functions. I learned if I got up early in the morning to write, I would have a few hours before my editor woke up and was active, usually relentlessly critical. Writing and editing at the same time doesn't work. What works is to write for several days and then edit. Write and then have supervision. I find if my editor is active and alongside my writer, my creative genius shrivels and disappears.

Colleagues matter

Writing itself is a solitary process. Maintaining your warm up to writing is a companionable process.

Writers have their formal connections with their publisher and line editor. After publication, the publisher's operations and distribution managers become your allies. My aim is to gain a trusted relationship with each of these people. To a person, they want you as a writer to succeed as that impacts on their success. I found the production and distribution managers personable and helpful.

Given that my publisher was in the USA during covid, simple email communication was most effective. I had contracted a graphic designer who lives in South Africa. She had created graphics for an Australian colleague's book, had speedy turn-around times and was easy to work with.

Being in a network of international colleagues with over 100 business writers helped. Several of these people had five or six books published. They inspired me. These authors give writing and publishing tips freely. I had developed my book proposal within a group of nine other writers from Sweden, Canada, England, US, Israel and Australia. We had an email group and communicated with one another as we achieved specific milestones. This process was motivating and companionable.

My original publisher rejected the *Leadership Levers* manuscript. Disappointed, I let one of my close US colleagues know. She immediately recommended my book to her publisher. He accepted.

The biggest mistake writers make

Going backwards and remembering your writing at school or university is a mistake. Warming up to writing for psychodrama is a chance to reflect on and share what you are learning, your observations and insights as you work with individuals and groups.

Are you like the leaders in my book who refuse to believe or accept they

are competent? I recall working with one leader who was over the 92nd percentile in each leadership category being rated, yet he wanted to work on his development. I thought there were only two areas of development for him —one was that he was blind to his abilities and two, he overthought everything. This is a recipe for immobilisation.

As writers we have a chance to mirror the exquisite experience of human development and to add to the body of knowledge of human healing in the world by expressing ourselves. Writing is another opportunity to concretise our learning and wisdom.

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