

# SUMMARY EVERYBODY WRITES

ANN HANDLEY



# **Summary of “Everybody Writes” by Ann Handley**

Written by Lea Schullery

Your Go-To Guide to Creating Ridiculously Good  
Content

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# Introduction

For many, creating content can be a daunting experience, especially if you aren't a strong writer. But imagine if you could be more confident in your writing and content creation skills, how much better would you be at your job? Well, luckily, writing is a skill that can be learned. For example, can you do push-ups? Perhaps you can barely do one, or maybe burn out after 10, 20, even 50! No matter your strength, you can always improve and become stronger. And like push-ups, writing requires the development of the necessary muscles. In fact, the ability to write well is "part habit, part knowledge of some fundamental rules, and part giving a damn. We are all capable of producing good writing. Or, at least, better writing." You might be thinking that you aren't a writer and that you don't need to learn how to write at all. Well, look at it this way. "If you have a website, you are a publisher. If you're on social media, you're in marketing. And that means we are all writers." It may seem as if social media has eliminated the need for good writing as our feeds are filled with memes, gifs, pictures, and hashtags. But just the opposite is true. Writing matters more now than ever before. "Our writing can make us look smart or it can make us look stupid. It can make us seem fun, or warm, or competent, or trustworthy. But it can also make us seem humdrum or discombobulated or flat-out boring."

In other words, writing well isn't just a bonus for content creation, it's a necessity. So if you're ready to embark on a journey towards becoming a better content writer, then let's get started.

# Show Up Every Day and Write

How often do you write? While you might not be in the middle of writing the next great novel or writing in a daily journal, you are certainly writing something each day. Whether it's typing out an email, commenting on a Facebook post, or sending a text to a friend about lunch, you are writing. All that posting, texting, and emailing is a form of writing that you practice just about every day. And just like any fitness regimen, the more you practice, the stronger you become.

And just like you must show up at the gym each day to work your muscles, you must show up every day to write. "Both writing and strength training can feel awkward and a little painful at first." For author Ann Hadley, it felt awkward showing up at the gym donning spandex and sneakers and it felt awkward grunting under barbells that seemed sizeable for children. "But the point is to keep at it, even when it's uncomfortable and you'd rather quit. Simply put, the key to being a better writer is to write." So how should you begin?

First, set aside time each day when you're freshest. For Hadley, she writes in the morning before distractions begin to hijack her day. For you, it might be different. Perhaps you can't get any peace until after the children are put to bed at the end of the day. You know your life best, so choose a time where you can simply show up and write. Next, don't write a lot. Just write often. Author Jeff Goins once stated, "Spending five hours on a Saturday writing isn't nearly as valuable as spending 30 minutes a day every day of the week. Especially when you're just getting started." Think about it, if you're only doing something once a week, it's only a matter of time before you stop doing it altogether. After all, "there are no shortcuts to becoming a better writer. So show up at your desk and get to it. Daily."

Of course, showing up every day is only part of the formula for becoming a better writer. Additionally, you must abandon everything you learned in school about writing. Okay, not everything, some of it may be useful. But

one rule, in particular, should be erased from your mind completely: the five-paragraph essay. The five-paragraph essay is an essay that includes an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. While this might be perfectly fine to guide young writers in middle school, the problem is that the structure is so formulaic that it's boring to write and boring to read. Even worse, it implies that there is only one way to write. We know, however, that there are many paths to the same location.

In the end, showing up every day to write and abandoning formal structure will set you on the right path toward becoming a better writer.

# Writing is a Process

Once you've decided to show up and write, it's time to begin. This is where many writers struggle. After all, writing is hard! Where do you even start? Well, before you even put pen to paper (or hands to keyboard), you need to establish a goal. What message do you want to convey? What do you want your reader to take away? This is where you begin to go through the writing process.

When learning how to write in middle school, you likely remember your teachers requiring you to write rough drafts before completing the final essay, right? Well, as it turns out, drafts are simply part of the writing process. And while we may find the process incredibly boring and mindnumbing, having a process in writing is necessary. You need a road map to get you where you need to be. Think of it as a "writing GPS that gets you from discombobulated thoughts to a coherent, cogent piece of writing that others can understand and appreciate."

To begin, don't be afraid to create The Ugly First Draft (TUFD). To get to the ugly first draft, you must first establish a goal. What are you trying to achieve? The key to establishing a goal is ensuring that it is authentic and that you care about it. "You can try to fake it, but your readers will be allergic to your insincerity." After all, if you don't care about what you're writing about, then why should your readers? Next, you need to reframe or put your readers into your writing. Why should they care? What value are you offering them? Tim Washer of Cisco refers to this reframing as "giving your audience a gift: how can you best serve them, with a mindset of generosity and giving?" Once you've expressed your reframed idea as a clear message, write that message at the top of your page to remind you of where you are headed.

Next, you need to seek out data and examples. What credible sources support your main idea? While your personal experience may be a great place to start, don't rely exclusively on it. Including both personal



experience and credible sources is the perfect combination for establishing trust and credibility with your reader. In fact, advice columnist writer Chip Scanlan states, “the smart writers I know start out by tapping into their own private stock first.” Now it’s time to produce The Ugly First Draft!

This is where you “show up and throw up. Write badly. Write as if no one will ever read it. Don’t worry about grammar, complete sentences, or readability. Don’t fret about spelling or usage. You’ll tackle all that later. For now, just get that TUFD down.” Oftentimes, bloggers and other writers stop the writing process after this “show-up-and-throw-up phase,” but not you. You have respect for your writing and respect for your reader. Don’t worry, we’ll learn in the next chapter where to go from here.

# How to Self-Edit Your TUF D

Once you have written The Ugly First Draft, it's time to begin editing. You may feel that revisiting a first draft to rework and rewrite it doesn't sound like much fun but this is where the fun begins! Think about it, you've already done the hard part of writing the words down, now it's time for the easier part: crossing out the wrong words. This is where you get to be at your most creative and is the fun part of writing.

When we talk about editing, we aren't talking about handing your first draft to an editor. At least not yet. Instead, you need to learn how to self-edit, and there are two approaches you can use. The first is developmental editing, which is what author Ann Handley calls "editing by a chainsaw." This is where you look at the big picture. First, ignore the grammar and specific words you've used, and simply focus on the bigger stuff. To begin, make sure that you've stated your key idea as clearly as you can near the start. Oftentimes, we try to set up our ideas with too many introductory explanations. This is called a running start and should be avoided. Instead, readers want to know why they are reading, so you should get to the point as quickly as possible. Next, slash anything that feels extraneous - anything that doesn't support your main point or further your argument or distracts from the key point.

Next, look at each paragraph. Does every paragraph contain an idea that the one before or after it doesn't? It should. Are the paragraphs more like Frankenparagraphs? That is, paragraphs made up of disconnected sentences bolted awkwardly together and create an ugly mess. Instead, you should ensure that the sentences build on one another, and work to further a single idea and create a whole. After looking at the paragraphs, take a look at each sentence. Does it bring something unique to the paragraph? Or does it simply restate the previous sentence? "Think of sentences in a paragraph as a conversation between an elderly, companionable couple. They don't talk over each other; they expand or elucidate what the other said before them."

The second approach to self-editing is line editing, which is what Handley calls “editing by surgical tools.” Here’s where you look at paragraph and sentence flow, word choice, usage, and so on. This is when it’s time to trim the fat. Are you using too many words? Shed what you don’t need, including phrases like, “In this article,” “In regard to,” and “I’ve always felt that...” Next, take a look at your verbs. Are they weak? Replace weak verbs with stronger ones. Finally, create transitions between paragraphs. “The best writing flows from paragraph to paragraph, creating progression and cadence. Good transitions are like fine stitching, turning disconnected writing into a seamless whole.” Don’t rely on high school transitions like however, thus, and therefore; instead, identify the main idea of the previous paragraph and connect it to an idea in the next paragraph.

# How to Use Facebook to Sell

For many companies, Facebook used to be a place where they reached a large number of their fans and customers. In recent years, however, Facebook has changed its algorithm and in the spring of 2014, companies were only reaching 2.5 percent of their fans. This doesn't mean that Facebook is no longer important; in fact, the opposite is true. It means that the content you post is getting more important. To grab new customers, you must learn how to tailor your posts and ads to a particular audience or a certain demographic.

Friends Corey O' Loughlin and Nina Vitalino, who launched the Facebook store Prep Obsessed, found success by changing their marketing strategy and connecting with existing communities of potential buyers. Nina and Corey first connected with communities of preppy women on Facebook before launching their business. Next, they targeted a niche, not numbers. It doesn't quite matter how many likes you get on a post; instead, it's more important to be very clear about who your potential customer is. For instance, "Prep Obsessed targets a relatively narrow profile of a user: women in the United States who are between 20 and 50 in age and who have expressed an interest in specific retail brands and specific categories."

It's also important to realize that Facebook isn't free. After all, it is a business. Prep Obsessed spends \$40 a day on Facebook ads or \$15,000 annually. While that may seem like a lot, it pays off in the end. Over nine months, their strategy allowed Prep Obsessed to accumulate more than 55,000 actively engaged fans, with the cost of acquisition less than 10 cents each! So how do they reach so many fans? Well, Prep Obsessed doesn't generate 600-700 fans a day just because of their great advertising. Instead, they post many Words to Live By quotes which act as "rallying cries that unite the audience." Their online voice and tone are important. They address their audience as ladies, which suggests gentility and refinement, and Corey and Nina sign each email or Facebook post with XO, suggesting friendship and intimacy.

Additionally, Nina and Corey don't just post on Facebook during business hours, they post when their audience is online. For instance, Facebook users engage with brands more on Fridays than on other days of the week, according to a recent report from Adobe. Thursday has the second-highest engagement, and Sundays have the lowest. To get even more engagement, make sure you post an image, and not just any image, but one that is 800 x 600 pixels. Posting a video doesn't hurt either. Lastly, keep it brief. Limit posts to 100-140 characters.

# Writing an Effective Landing and About Us Page

While Facebook is important for many businesses, the website is perhaps one of the most important aspects of any business. It's where first impressions are made and where visitors determine if they want to stay or leave. Landing pages, for instance, are places for inviting visitors and grabbing their attention, and the wrong landing page will have visitors running to the exit as quickly as possible. A landing page is where visitors often end up after clicking on a targeted campaign, like a desirable offer delivered via email, social media, or an ad. Therefore, "the landing page should offer visitors a hyperfocused experience that delivers them to a specific page and gives them a clear path to follow."

Creating a targeted land page is a mixture of art and science. A highly effective one should convey three simple things: "where your visitors are (where they've landed), what you're making available to them (and how awesome it is), and what the next step is to procure (or find out more about) that incredibly awesome thing." While it may be tempting to include everything you can on the landing page, the key is to go for simple and clean, with "stupid-obvious" navigation. When it comes to landing pages, less is more.

In addition to writing an effective landing page, you'll need a successful About Us page. Ironically, the best About Us pages aren't really about the company; instead, they focus on relaying who they are in relation to the visitor. You see, all good content puts the reader first, and that shouldn't change when writing the About Us page. On this page, you have the chance to talk about yourself, but always in the context of what you can do for your customers. What problems can you solve for them? What burdens of theirs can you relieve?

For example, the About Us page for Toys "R" Us is seriously lacking. Not only does it look boring, but it is also uninspiring and overwhelms the page with lots of text. Coca-Cola, on the other hand, has a nicely designed page

that is bold and graphical. It tells of the company's rich history and is presented in a way that is interesting to the reader. Even better, it is fundamentally useful. It follows a successful content formula: Useful x Inspired X Empathic.

When it comes to your About Us page, it's important to write with a clear voice and a conversational tone that matches the rest of your site. Avoid tempting superlatives like best in class, world-renowned, or cutting-edge. You should also show your people as real people. Use photos, links to social profiles, favorite quotes, what your staff members do in their spare time, what music they listen to, their favorite place to travel, and so on. You should also include an Easter Egg. This means that you should surprise visitors with something unexpected. For instance, the video hosting company Wistia shows its staff members in typical "yearbook-style" photos. But when you mouse over each photo, you see that each employee appears to dance in the frame!

Finally, bring your customers into your story. Why do your customers care about what you do? How can you help them? This is a great place for customer testimonials. Include quotes from previous customers, or even better, include a video.

## Final Summary

Everyone is a writer. Even you! And similar to how you train in the gym to get stronger, you should train your brain to get stronger in writing. It's time to think about how your words affect your readers and your customers, and how those words can make an impression or leave them running for the door! Luckily, anyone can be a great writer if you practice enough. So start practicing your writing skills today. Think about your posts on Facebook and Twitter, pay attention to the emails and texts you send. When you think of writing in everything you do, you'll gradually strengthen your skills and turn into a writing expert!





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