



If You Absolutely Must...

a brief guide to writing and selling short-form argumentative nonfiction
from a somewhat reluctant professional writer

for those who get mad online

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Preamble

Hello, and welcome to *If You Absolutely Must*, an ebook by Freddie deBoer. In this ebook, I am collecting some of my writing on how to be a writer, specifically on how to write short-form nonfiction and, hopefully, to sell it. I have published blog posts on these broad themes for many years, and most of this ebook is made up of previously-published material, but there's a lot of new stuff too. The idea here is to provide practical, practicable advice for people who want to trade words for money. This will, naturally, focus primarily on the kind of writing I do, sometimes referred to as "takes" – that is, essays of perhaps 500-3000 words that react to current events in politics or culture and express a point of view. I will however also briefly touch on how I came to sell my book proposal. My only intent here is to share a little advice derived from almost 15 years of writing for a public audience and untold thousands of words published by professional publications. All of life is idiosyncratic and contextual, and this business in particular can vary in major ways, so some will no doubt have different experiences and thus advice than I do. But I am offering this up in the hopes that it may prove useful to someone.

You Really Should Consider How Hard This is Going to Be

This ebook is being offered under the assumption that you have already really, truly made up your mind to try and be a writer. I have at several times in my writing career counseled young people away from pursuing this profession. I have done so because being a working writer has always been hard and recent trends in the industry have made it even harder. That's true in takes media, but also in magazines and newspapers, in book publishing, and sundry other places where you can sell writing. This will not be easy, and I counsel everyone to have a day job. That said, I have endeavored to make this an optimistic text for those whose minds are made up, so I will not spend time trying to talk you out of writing as a vocation.

Why Am I Qualified to Write This Text?

I will leave questions of the quality of my writing to others at this stage. I will instead focus on my professional credentials, which are as follows: as a blogger my audience has often numbered in the tens of thousands and I currently run one of the most successful newsletters on Substack. I have written for many of the most consequential and well-read publications in the world, including *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*,

Harper's, *Politico*, *Playboy*, *n+1*, *Jacobin*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and many more. I have also done research for think tanks, done content development for textbook companies, and worked as a ghostwriter. In 2020 I published a book with St. Martin's, an imprint of Macmillan, one of the largest publishers in the world. I'm qualified because I've done it all, and for good money.

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Let's Start with the Good News: The Median Writer Has Never Written So Well

It will come as no surprise that I have a bunch of complaints about professional politics and culture writing. But one complaint I see floating around just doesn't jibe with my experience at all. I frequently read people saying (often on Facebook) that "nobody knows how to write these days," that the web writing generation doesn't have the prose chops that the old magazine-and-newspaper generations had, that there's no gatekeeping anymore.... Well, clearly this is unscientific and based on my own limited perspective, but I actually think that the average level of pure prose chops – the ability to express yourself with clarity, concision, and style – is very high today, and better than it ever has been in the 20 years that I've been reading nonfiction. There are reasons to look back on the print era with nostalgia, but prose ability isn't one of them. In my opinion, the average writer at a prominent website, magazine, or newspaper these days can write very well compared to previous eras, when you let them cook.

I think the reasons for this are pretty simple. First, today's young writers have access to a vast storehouse of the greatest nonfiction writing in history. The internet gives them the ability to read a functionally bottomless archive of the best writers from decades ago – no more digging through print stacks for old copies of *The Atlantic* or *Harper's* – and their jobs typically entail reading a lot of the best prose stylists in the business, day after day. Good reading isn't sufficient for good writing, obviously, but it is necessary. Second, and I really think this is key, they put their work out there over and over again, get feedback, and the next day try again. There are some real problems with the speed with which web writers today have to churn out content, but I also think that, as with most crafts, getting better at nonfiction writing is an iterative process. You do it and you make mistakes and you learn from them and you absorb the lesson and the next time you get a bit better and then you learn some more. In the internet era you're iterating constantly or you don't have a job. The frantic pace of the current content cycle sucks in many ways, but it means that people are iterating faster and faster, and I genuinely think it's had a positive impact on the communicative and stylistic quality of paid commentary writing. Most of the complaints seem like bogus "kids these days" whining, to me.

(This iteration thing has been on my mind a lot, lately, as someone who's taught a lot of writing in his life. Someday I'll write a writing textbook for high school and college students and name it *Iterate!*)

It's in fact exactly for that reason that the fundamental economic problems bother me so much. The messed up incentives of click-reliant writing bury this writing ability in the constant chase for numbers. Look, I hate all of the viral Facebook garbage as much as you do. And sure, there are a few pure careerists out there who just want to get clicks. But in general, nobody wants to publish trash, not writers, editors, or publishers. They want to do good work, and they have talent and desire. It's just that, as of now, doing good work hasn't been demonstrated to be an actual business strategy, no matter how badly people want to believe it. Which just gets back to my same old saw: only direct monetization, via paywalls or subscription fees or pledge drives or whatever, can save all these talented young writers from the brokenness of their industry's economic model. As someone who writes a paid newsletter, it's currently saving me.

First Rule of Making It as a Writer: You Have to Be Weird

Writing is not always or even usually a hard profession. In terms of the actual work you'll be doing, it's pretty easy. I could sleep until noon every day if my cat didn't wake me up at 5:30 AM. It's a nice lifestyle. However, getting paid enough money to live as a writer is hard. Very hard, if you do not have the sort of dynastic advantages many of the professionals out there quietly do¹. And that makes it hard to know how to navigate the intrinsic sense that you must write with integrity even as you do it for a dollar.

You have to make your own decisions about what's an ethical way to be a writer. I can't tell you how to judge how a writer makes their bread. (Unless they're, I don't know, ghostwriting Ghislaine Maxwell's cookbook.) But you can always judge on what matters most, the content and the quality. Is what's being said true? Is it kind? Is it righteous? Most importantly - above all things - is it interesting? To pick an example, consider the kinds of writers who are shaking coins out of Russiagate: they've become vastly less interesting writers since they started selling pro-Democrat conspiracy theories to the kind of people who call Andrew Cuomo's accusers sluts in the comments at DailyKos. That's the cost, not so much integrity as the lost opportunity to be something else than what everyone else is. And that is the struggle for any writer, the struggle to become the version of yourself that says in words what no one else would ever think to think.

But selling out or not, you have to understand what you're getting into. I presume you already know that the goal is not (or no longer) a Boerum Hill townhouse. If you must live in the city², it's more like aspiring to a two bedroom rent stabilized place with in-unit laundry and a 10 minute walk to a park. But that can be a lovely life too. What's not lovely are the layoffs or the pay freezes or whatever shell company owns your website strangling your union efforts. There

¹ So, so many. Writing is precisely the kind of romantic vocation one imagines for themselves while staring out the window of a boarding school with tuition higher than Princeton's, and so a lot of privileged aspiring writers arrive in New York with the wardrobe of mid-period Joan Didion and the writing skills of... not mid-period Joan Didion. Because they are insulated from financial need they will gladly get paid \$12.50 an hour to write 14,000 words a day of viral content, viral in the sense that it will make everyone who reads it feel physically ill. I truly shudder to think of how the wages of experienced and talented writers are driven down by trust funds kids and their willingness to accept poverty wages just to be able to say that they work as a writer in the big city.

² Don't. It's so expensive. There's a lot of cool cheap places to live, including urban places. Places that went down and are now on the way back up might be the sweet spot. Cincinnati?

are many people better equipped to tell you the financial picture of news and opinion writing in 2021 but whatever the case you'll have to look at your career as something you grind out until you have a stable economic picture and a job that doesn't make you hate yourself. After that, you just keep on grinding. And along the way it's years and years of roommates until you find a partner, preferably not solely because you need someone to split the Optimum bill.

Prestige ≠ money. I think you have to get over this big mental hurdle that a lot of young writers have where they associate a vague kind of prestige and visibility with money. The fact that someone has landed at a big-name newspaper or magazine does not at all mean that they have money. The fact that their title is editor does not mean that they have money. (You know how there's publications out there with like twenty editors and five staff writers? That's cause they give the honorific "editor" title in lieu of giving money they don't have.) The fact that some writer's Instagram gets written up in the Cut does not mean that they have money. The fact that everyone in the industry says "how droll!" before liking a writer's tweet about the gender pay gap does not mean that writer has money. The fact that someone gave a talk at the Strand does not mean that they have money. The fact that someone has a book out, or even several books out, does not does not does not mean that they have money. The fact that someone's book got reviewed everywhere, even reviewed well, does not mean that they have money. I say this not to discourage but to make you understand that although prestige and payment are somewhat correlated in this world it's a lot smaller of a correlation than you may think.

Sell something unique. In broad strokes: if you want to make it as a writer you will have to differentiate yourself, in text, from the vast rising oceans of texts that surround the digital world. There has never been more text being professionally published in the history of the world, which indicates that the market has never been bigger. But that also means that there has never been more words vying for the attention of a public that also has more and more not-words to pay attention to. So you have to be different. You have to be weird. I think being unclassifiable and difficult and fractious are desirable qualities for a writer in and of themselves. I think writers thrive through the rejection of other people's writing and I think conflict is the source of all progress. But even aside from that value there's the simple fact that you are attempting to enter a market at a time when there has never, ever been more conformity and less breadth of ideas. Which means that you have the opportunity to stand out, if you have the courage to take it.

Look. This is not a political project. But it sometimes seems like writers these days are either getting funded by the ghost of Ronald Reagan or else they're constantly tweeting about decolonizing Chucky Cheese or whatever. Those are the choices consumers of political and cultural writing have right now. Many "general interest" pubs seem to have discarded the pretense that they're interested in publishing conservative voices at all³. Completely independent of the principles of broad representation, that's a market failure. You could, if you were a masochist, go one by one through the Twitter feeds of people at prominent newspapers and magazines, at sites like Vox and BuzzFeed and the Daily Beast, at NPR and the biggest podcasts, at think tanks and nonprofits, at the whole vast constellation of people involved in writing our culture, and you will find almost total unanimity in support of a self-defensive style of social justice politics.

And the mode of expression, too, is far too often the same: for a long time now media has been overtaken by a cult of expression which forbids any style or mode other than contemptuous blank irony. It is *remarkable* how uniform and homogenous the style of writing is on Twitter, which is where media culture is defined. It seemingly hasn't evolved in a decade.

Condescending, sarcastic, amused that you would think to say something so dumb, endlessly superior, contemptuous of all sincere values except the one being used as a bludgeon in the fight at hand. Absurdist in an entirely prescriptive way, novel in a tired way, funny in a humorless way. All of it is a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy of a strange and highly mannered form of humor that flourished in an obscure offshoot of an internet forum which migrated to a bigger platform and metastasized into something called Weird Twitter, and was subsequently popularized and imitated so frequently it took over the forum completely. For reasons that elude me, it's been the dominant style on the world's most influential social network for going on a decade and appears often in published commentary as well.

³ Don't come at me with the Times please. I'll give you Brett Stephens. But modern conservatism is about tax cuts and culture war. Ross Douthat doesn't seem to care about tax cuts and doesn't do culture war. David Brooks is a sentient Juicero and no conservatives think he's one of them. (Gail Collins supposedly said "I was looking for a conservative that wouldn't make our readers throw the paper out the window.") Frank Bruni's not even a conservative.

And so you look out at the landscape and you have an entire profession of people who are saying the exact same thing and saying it the exact same way. If you're a consumer of writing, you're facing a paucity of real choice, and the choices that are before you are all likely quite unappealing. People seek out writers on the margins because they're tired of pieces telling them that Valentine's heart candies are rape culture. Throw a rock in the pond of contemporary writing and you will hit someone making an incredibly dubious connection between some new fad in social justice politics and pop culture ephemera. ("Rosey From the Jetsons Really Knew How to Hold Space⁴.") Writers are forever screaming at you about matters of life-and-death oppression and yet somehow it's still all frivolous and unserious.

If you want to stand out, try being serious. If I was a young writer who wanted to make my mark, I would be serious all the time. I would take myself seriously. I would take my work seriously. I would take my audience seriously. I would not wrap every thought I had in mental air quotes. I would not spend my life in a self-defensive crouch. I would not copy and paste the tired joke formats that were getting passed around. I would not allow my professional and social ambitions to compel me to tell half-hearted obligatory jokes about, for example, a boat stuck in the Suez canal. I wouldn't pretend that the latest Marvel movie will last in cultural memory as long as *King Lear*, or that the only reason someone would put on Mahler instead of Taylor Swift is "elitism." I would not write a novel of the "millennial experience" where on every page I announce to the reader that I take none of it seriously and thus no can get to me, no sir, this is all a big joke and I am laughing too hard to crave your approval. I would understand that others and the world can take me seriously only if I take myself seriously first. I would recognize that all the irony and sarcasm and jokes will not change the fact that I am defenseless, that we are all defenseless. And if the time came when it actually was appropriate to use irony my knife would be sharp.

⁴ Immense damage has been done to the public perception of many causes beloved by the social justice set by that set's dogged insistence on associating those causes with totally frivolous ideas. When a writer says "I'm going to connect the trauma of segregation to the semiotics of breakfast cereal," it doesn't make people expand their thinking on the scope of racism. It makes the writer ridiculous and the issue seem trivial. Who is this helping? Why has no one in the profession said "maybe the prevalence of this type of piece is a mistake"?

Your politics are your affair. But fear all political fads, resist all political peer pressure, and be ruthless in asking yourself whether you actually hold a position or if you are just afraid of the consequences of appearing to not hold it. Then express yourself. Whatever you do, be weird. As a consumer of writing, please, for me, be weird. Whatever this profession needs, it does not need more hall monitors or commissars and it does not need more writers who seem to have nothing to offer beyond looking down their glasses at the world in shrill derision. That territory is covered. That corner has been taken. The whole point of writing, the only reason to have an alphabet, is to say what no one else is saying. To be singular. What is the value of replicating words that have already appeared in the same order? You can't choose to be good and you can't choose to be successful. But you can choose to be your own.

Be brave and tell the truth. Absolutely everyone and everything in the life you are choosing will try to force you to conform. They will hate you if you break ranks, but they'll hate you if you say something inoffensive but easily misrepresented too. All they want is to root out heretics; it's the only thing that makes them feel alive. So you may as well not live in fear. If you let them in there will be little of you left when they're done, so don't let them in. If you can hold on to some piece of yourself that does not care what they say, you can have the one pure thing left in an industry now made up only of snitches and nuns, that last virtue for a writer, the courage to be human.

Getting Crafty, or the Actual Work

Here's the weird thing about this project: I don't think static writing advice (that is, lists of tips and tricks that are meant to apply to everyone) is any good; in fact I think it's usually actively harmful. I believe in editing, or just the influence of a sympathetic reader who is willing to provide honest feedback. I think some people get better in writing classes or writing programs. I think it may be worthwhile to hire a writing coach, for some. But I think the lists of things you should and shouldn't do in your writing that you see out there ruin a lot of writers.

In the abstract, it's simply this: static writing advice is dangerous for the same reason that WebMD is dangerous. It fails to see that a patient is not a list of symptoms; your problems in writing are never reducible to "ah, too many commas." Worse, it treats as fixed and universal that which is ever-changing and particular. Writing has to conform to its subject, which means it has to be malleable and soft, and rules are neither. Editing is so valuable (if sometimes wrong and always painful) because the editor can see the ways in which you have been inflexible and how that has hurt the piece. (You write something and you grow attached to it and, at their best, editors are the one to gently advise you to let it go.) The writing rules that get reblogged on Tumblr or represented as scientific fact on Quora are an expression of inflexibility itself. Should you write shorter sentences? Should you write longer? I don't know. What does the situation call for? How do you want to represent yourself to the world? It depends. It all depends. Should you avoid the passive voice? If someone asks you, "where were you born?" I certainly hope that you don't. It's all just tools in a toolbox, and if you say "I'm never going to use a spanner wrench because I saw on a list that real writers don't do that," I think that's foolish and not a good sign for your future.

Besides I truly, deeply believe that most of the specific writing tips you see are worthless horseshit.

I shudder to think of how many writers have been wrecked by the cult of American minimalism. If you want to define everything wrong with 21st century American writing, think of some self-impressed brodude gazing down at you in mock concern and saying "uh, have you tried writing less?" Minimalism is a virus that infected American writing in the early 20th century and which

has flared back up for seasonal outbreaks again and again ever since. Minimalism says that there is nothing a writer can say that would not be better left unsaid. Minimalism lusts after a blank page. Five word sentence? Couldn't it have been three? There's a profoundly regressive spirit to this shit, and it teaches young writers that words are something they are confined by rather than something that empowers them. (Why write if you're scared to write lustily and out loud?) Over and over again, "couldn't you have said this more concisely" (OK), "less is more" (sometimes yes, sometimes no), "nobody wants to know what's in your heart, just give us the facts" (says who?), "what, are they paying you by the word?" (fuck you). I have never known any of these crabby ass old men to be capable of writing anything that moves anyone, so I don't know why we're supposed to bow to their monastic wisdom. Write as much as you have to.

In our tradition minimalism is something like the mutant child of Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, James Wood, and Strunk and White. Bastards, all of them. Talented! But bastards. Strunk & White ruined a generation and I for one am glad that *The Elements of Style* is steadily fading into the mists of history. (As the academic Catherine Prendergast once pointed out, the Unabomber is a big Strunk & White guy, writing "Though a terrorist, Kaczynski is also Strunk and White's target audience: an amateur writer who hates to be wrong.") Woods has been parodied so effectively that I feel nothing more about him needs to be said, though he has written many great book reviews. Orwell was a shitty novelist but a sublimely talented essayist who frequently used those skills to say things that didn't need to be said. Hemingway is like Glenn Danzig in that he was a walking talking self-parody and yet at times that parody matches the moment so perfectly you don't really care. Where was I? Oh, right - don't let an older generation lay a curse on you just because they labored underneath it themselves. Write the way that you would like, including expansively if it suits you. The world is complicated and sometimes writing has to be too.

For a fuller exploration of these themes by a better writer than I am, please read the essay "It's Harder Than It Looks to Write Clearly" by Francine Prose⁵, who brilliantly discusses what brevity and length do - and do not - have to do with clarity. (If this essay gives you nothing else

⁵ <https://lithub.com/francine-prose-its-harder-than-it-looks-to-write-clearly/>

but a recommendation for Francine Prose's work it will still be well worth your time. She is my true north as a nonfiction writer.)

Many people find my work overwrought or overwritten, and that's cool. Your writing will never be for everyone. But people who do vibe with my writing tend to love it fiercely. Now consider the world in which I predicted the criticism and decided to make that piece less personal, less stylized, less intense.... In that world maybe the critics would go from disliking the piece intensely to liking it mildly. But those people who loved it would also now merely like it, and what would be gained? In this world, those who don't like that piece can just not read it again; those who loved it can return to it as many times as they would like. The OK-for-everybody version of that piece gets read once and slips into the memory hole. Which is better?

There may be writers talented enough that they can write in a way that all people will love. But I'm certainly not one of them. I have to make hard choices in my writing that will please some readers and repel others. And so will you.

More specific advice, I don't know. "Adverbs are bad," or whatever the hell Stephen King says? Depends. Do you mean J.K. Rowling describing an elf making its way down a staircase, or F. Scott Fitzgerald describing a woman getting out of a car? Saying "get rid of adverbs" is as irrational to me as looking at a symphony orchestra and saying "get rid of all the oboes, they're worthless." Surely the question is not "are oboes good or bad" but "does my composing style make effective use of oboes?" If not, don't use them. And maybe oboes are a particularly hard instrument to make use of, I don't know. I do know that if you had a situation as a composer where inserting an oboe part made sense, but you felt peer pressure from other composers not to write oboe parts so you didn't, that would be truly stupid. As a reader I have sometimes been weirded out by a particularly painful expression of an action, tried to understand why the writer wrote it that way, then came to the realization that they had been confronted with a situation where they had to say "he walked quickly" or "he walked slowly," decided that Serious Writers don't use adverbs, and arrived at some laborious and disorienting way to say that while avoiding them. I feel tired just thinking about it. I promise you that an adverb can at times be better than your clumsy attempt to avoid one.

What else goes on those lists? The passive voice is sometimes appropriate, I promise. “The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time” is not a bad sentence. If I wrote a sentence that good I would grow wings and fly away to a better place. No rules. No rules.

Is all writing rewriting, like they say? I mean, sure. Why not. That’s not wrong. Yes, you should revise. And in particular you should revise reflexively and continuously. When I’m writing line 7 I promise you I’m deeply annoyed about something going on in line 4 and that it will be changed before I finish line 10. Constant endless iterative change. If I could grant you one gift as a writer it would be a sense of permanent dissatisfaction. The idea of a “first draft” or “second draft” is bizarre to me, a totally artificial construct, so of course that’s something we insist on teaching our young people. But the concept that it’s never finished, you just run out of time, I’m on board with that. So no, “all writing is rewriting” isn’t wrong. I just don’t know if there are really any writers out there whose problem is that they write down an essay completely linearly from start to finish and don’t know that they can change it and sit on their hands staring at it like “why isn’t my writing better?” That’s not an actual thing.

I have much more general, less prescriptive advice than that which you usually hear, if you would like it. Whether I’m worth listening to I leave up to you.

Please think of the money. I’ve already said at the beginning of the ebook that I don’t want to be actively discouraging. Such talk bums people out so I don’t want to belabor it. But the financial picture in this world is significantly worse than it was even 10 years ago. Many newspapers and magazines employ literally half as many people as they once did. The major publications you dream of writing for pay their median writer significantly worse than you assume. Book advances have collapsed. It’s tough. I really, truly think you should consider having a day job, and not just in the obvious sense that you need one starting out but as a permanent condition. Octavia Butler was a capital-G Genius but wrote professionally for 10 years before she was able to quit her day jobs. (Including potato chip inspector, which I would never have quit.) Wallace Stevens was the greatest American poet ever and he was happily employed in insurance his entire career, as he treasured the independence it afforded him. I know it’s not sexy but think it over as a legitimate artistic choice.

Listen to your teachers. I'm sorry to admit that I'm one of those annoying people who self-consciously "works on his prose"; I read a lot; I get a lot of feedback on my writing, some of it sincere; I try to develop a style that is distinct from the default style of my era while also absorbing what's best in that style. But the three biggest influences on my writing will always be Leigh Shearer (fifth grade), Sandy Tucci (sophomore and junior year of high school), and Mary Anne Nunn (sophomore year of undergrad). They taught me to write. Everything else is built on the foundation of what they taught me. And what each gave me was not a list of rules (although each had very particular ideas about how they wanted us to format our papers) but an appreciation that prose writing is the steady procession of small changes that create an overall impression. You can't decide "this essay will have gravitas." You successfully create it with innumerable small choices or you don't. Good writing instruction is invaluable and we should all be humbled to remember that someone once held our hand. Unfortunately college writing pedagogy has been broken by the obsession with multimodality and the recent attitude on American campuses that giving students any negative feedback at all is somehow the hand of oppression, but I'll grouse about that some other time.

Write a lot. This is easy for me to say. I write pathologically; that is, I write so much that it has become a detriment to my life, and the amount of writing I'm doing is frequently inversely correlated with my overall health. I have tracked how much I write in a given week fairly obsessively for about 9 years now. Since I lost my job last June I have been averaging a bit more than 35,000 words a week in various files and folders. I know this sounds like virtue signaling or that I'm humblebragging but I want to stress again that my compulsive-in-the-psychiatric-sense writing is not good for me or my life. Writing less has been a goal several therapists have given me in the past decade. (Yes, as you would expect, the amount that I write is frequently a reflection of my bipolar cycle, though the amount I have been writing for the past 10 months or so is high even for me and I am receiving effective treatment now.) Some of these words go into drafts here that I don't intend to publish; some into Word docs that have no purpose and which I do nothing with. There are more than a thousand of those files now, dating back to shortly after the turn of the millennium. (They serve no purpose, they clutter my drives, I have not opened 99.9% of them in years, and yet I will diligently copy them over when I buy my next computer.) Do not write a lot like me.

But do write a lot. Writing is like playing an instrument: it's all about reps. I know that this is as banal as advice gets. But I think we live in an age of distraction where there are so many other things fighting for your time; I think it's easy to tell yourself that composing social media posts improves your longform writing when it does not; and I think there remains some unfortunate impression, perhaps left over from the Beats, that great writers produce writing the way a bird produces song. The latter may be true, but we mortals create good prose by trying and trying and trying again. Which leads directly to the next point.

The internet is your advantage. Use it. One thing I hated about academia was that every professor wanted to be the cool professor and they would all constantly try to show how they were down with the kids and so essays with titles like "Down with the Yik-Yak: Why the Internet is Not Destroying Writing" wallpaper our colleges. But it's true, the internet is not destroying writing. I think the internet's impact on writing has been mixed, but I actually think that the overall level of prose style out there now is way better than it was 15 or 20 years ago. Genuinely. The average professional writer, from where I'm sitting, is so much sharper now in pure craft. I have many, many problems with the economy of short-form digital nonfiction, not the least of which is the economic exploitation of early-career writers. But one complaint I don't have is that these kids can't write. I think, frankly, that people say that because it just kind of sounds true. It isn't. I may not respect BuzzFeed but I recognize that the average 22 year old there can produce effective and graceful prose. (I stress, can.)

And I think there's a clear reason: the internet allows for constant feedback and iterative response. You write a piece, you make stylistic and formal choices, you put it out into the world, within a couple of hours you have feedback, you adjust, you put out your next piece, repeat. It's a machine for developing a voice. I don't hold myself up as some kind of exemplar but I do have a distinct writing voice, for good or for bad, and that's because I've published considerably more words on the internet in the past 13 years than Shakespeare published in his life - and at every stage people told me "this is good" or "this is shitty." You can't really help but get better, or at least more distinctly yourself, when you have that much opportunity for feedback. But everybody else has been getting better too, so the bar has been raised. So I think if you're young (or just early in your career) the essential question is how you can establish a feedback loop that

really works for you. You need to find a way to share your work with people who will be a sympathetic but appropriately critical audience. I have no advice on this score, just well wishes.

Just throw it out there. Have fun! Get serious. But have fun! On the list of topics I am overwrought about (that is to say, all of them), on the top is writing itself. But if you're going to do this too, if you want to take on a job that is romantic but financially uncertain at best, one that brings with it all manner of indignities and which has tragically adopted a self-defensive culture of triviality, you might as well take your work seriously too.

Figure out what you are and what your writing is. Try to understand what draws people to it or pushes people away. And what you find that you are, you should embrace. This is corny as hell, but it really is a journey of self-discovery, finding out who you are as a writer. You'll surprise yourself. And it's immensely fulfilling if you're willing to really, unapologetically take it on as your life's work. So do, and have fun.

Nuts and Bolts

- Start a website under your own name and your own URL. Not on Medium or Substack but on your own domain. It's 100% fine if the bulk of your writing is on a different platform – you can link to it on your homepage – but you must have a landing page where you own URL and pay for your own hosting. Austin Kleon, who knows as much about making it as a creator as anyone, says “own your turf.”
- You can call the blog part something fancy but the URL is your name or a play on your name if at all possible. .com is best but if you can't afford it an alternative is OK.
- If some other writer writes under your name, do yourself a favor and stylize your real name or take a pen name. Firstname MiddleInitial Lastname, if you can bear it. One way or another you have to be easily found with a Google search.
- Have a brief bio on the landing page. You can do the self-deprecating humor thing if you must, but it's better to go with a minimalist just-the-facts-ma'am “So and so is a writer. She lives in Pittsburgh with her partner and her cat, Colonel Pineapple.”
- Write stuff in the blog part of your site. Movie reviews. Political commentary. Reflections on the particulars of modern life. Nothing that will get you canceled. (That comes later.) But variety, please. I would much rather you have five B-grade pieces of different genres and modes than three A- pieces that are all the same.
- Choose one piece that you like the very best to show when asked for a representative sample. What comes out of all of this is your quiver.
- Offline backups of everything, whether published on your site, a platform like Substack or Medium, or at a publication. Everything. Every word.
- Yes, share your work on social media, and don't be afraid to ask friends to share it too.
- Pitch. Look on the websites and find the pitching instructions. If you can't find them any don't want you. Give the editor the link and invite them to look at your work. Pretend you didn't already write the piece you're pitching, you look cooler that way. Expect to hear back from one out of four editors you write and expect to get an offer with money attached from one out of ten.
- If you pitch, you will get rejected. A lot. But if you write for awhile, and you're good, you will start getting editors soliciting you. I don't really pitch until invited to these days, which is nice. But there's no getting around the period of asking and being told no.

- Mentally adjust your expectations about what they'll pay. (Down, that is. You adjust them down.) When they offer, unless they very explicitly say "we pay X for X," ask for 25% more than they offer. They will mostly say no, but they will say yes more than you think. If they get offended you asked and pull the offer then you didn't want to write for them in the first place. (If you're an editor reading this and you're grumbling about the idea, then you think it's unprofessional for writers to ask for a little more than your poverty wages and you can go fuck yourself.)
- Get edited. Watch your piece get bent in places you didn't want it to go. Feel the pain. This will also get easier. Witness yourself growing editable. Will they sometimes be wrong? Sure. Concede. Think of it as banking credibility. Develop a reputation as someone who's easy to edit. (I think it was Neil Gaiman who said you can be an asshole, you can miss deadlines, or your work can be bad, but you can only have one at one time.) Then if you really hate a change, you can push in your chips. I'm not saying you should ever deliberately put stuff in a piece to get cut so that you have a little leverage for the argument about another part you want to preserve, but, well.... Learn to love the edited pieces that emerge; they will usually be better than what you put in. Feel accomplished when the piece arrives and share again.
- Start a page on your website called "Published Work." Put the piece on the list. It will grow. You will like watching it grow.
- Yes, you can write for free at the very beginning, as a way to get edited and to gather bylines that make you more marketable for places that will pay. But you must set a strict point at which you will no longer write for free, and you must stick to it. And if you get to that point and you can't reliably publish for money, take it as an opportunity to get real with yourself.
- If you can get into print, the money can be good, but the print world is shrinking. The kind of web-only places where you have the best shot of making real money are the places where you'll be writing undisclosed advertising copy for Goldman Sachs. If you want to write for places that have higher ambitions the money is always going to be tight.
- Still, have a rate, have a goal, and have a floor. Think of it kind of like applying to college, that kind of strategic self-negotiation. At some point, pick a minimum to print your stuff, regardless of publication. It should change, over time. (I mean, hopefully, by growing.) At some point I said \$250 was the bare minimum to get my stuff. Why \$250? Because \$100 was too little

and \$500 was too much and, crucially, because that's what people would pay me. Now the rate's higher because I can command that higher amount. But you need to be realistic starting out.

- I think I first got paid for writing in 2009, less than \$100. Since then I have gotten paid in the 4 figures, let's see, 9 times. In twelve years. Most things have been news cycle web bangers, few hundred bucks a pop. Sometimes it was \$250. Sometimes it was \$750. Sometimes I asked for more and they said no. More often than you'd think, I'd ask for more and they'd say yes.
- Worrying that other people are getting more than you is probably one of the worst wastes of your mental energy in this biz. If you think you're worth more, ask for more, and don't write if they won't pay. But don't worry what anybody else is making. They probably aren't making much either.
- If you pitch an editor and s/he commissions a piece and money just doesn't come up because you feel awkward (and what if they change their mind because you asked about money!), there's a real chance they'll just happily not pay you when they would have. I must stress this: **if they don't talk about money before publication, you have to.** No editor worth working with will suddenly decline to publish something they wanted to publish because you asked about money. It's your job to be a grownup and break the ice by asking "what can you pay me?"; it's their job to tell you and not be a jerk about it. Do not wait until the last round of edits to say "oh by the way, money would be nice."
- The pitch is the prequel; writing the piece is the original; *The Quest to Get Paid the Money You Are Already Owed* is the sequel, and that one's the 3 hour epic.
- You will likely have one contact person. That person is almost certainly not the money person. However, if that's the one person you know, that's the one person you know, so it's part of their job (no matter how awkward this makes you feel) to field your questions related to *The Quest to Get Paid the Money You Are Already Owed*. Again, you've got to be a grownup: "Hey, So and So, respectfully, where's my money?"
- If you aren't ready to undertake *The Quest to Get Paid the Money You Are Already Owed*, don't pitch.
- Think tanks pay very well, give you lots of time, usually involves sympathetic and light editing, and provide real marketing for your work towards receptive audiences. However, you have to actually, like, know stuff to get those gigs.

- Knowing stuff, in general, is good. Going to school helps, no matter how much the autodidact fantasy is part of writing culture. You have to know things.
- Read books. You can't be smart if you don't read books, real books, regularly. You can't be a good writer if you don't read books, real books, regularly. There are many things that cannot be learned from short form pieces. Sorry. It's probably the only rule I really think of as a rule: to write well you must read books, a lot of books.
- A subject is good – it's good to have a subject or several that you really consider your jam(s). You can cultivate a reputation in those subjects if you want. This is one of the things that it's hard to do when you're in an entry-level daily blogging gig and you have to find a fresh angle on the latest child-animal encounter.
- That said, a method is even better than a subject. A subject is an area of interest, a thing you look at and write about. A method is a way you write about the things you write about. Ta-Nehisi Coates didn't become one of the most successful writers of his generation by having history as a subject but by using history as a methodology, as a way of knowing and looking at the world. It's a lens he can apply to a variety of situations and he can lay his stuff down with it over and over again. I think that's a real key.
- Should you get an MFA? Probably not. If you're going because you want to get a book deal, no. If you're going because you want to teach, certainly no. If you're going unfunded, absolutely no. If you're funded and you're going because you need time to write, to devote yourself to that – yeah. That's worked for a lot of people. There are worse things in life.
- To develop style, write obsessively. Publish obsessively. Solicit feedback obsessively. Over and over again. Like playing a musical instrument, it's an iterative process: performance, self- and external evaluation, adjustment, repetition.
- No rules, no rules, no rules. (Except reading books.)
- Write a lot.
- Repetition, small adjustments, over and over.
- I say without snark or pleasure that there's a chance you aren't very good at this. I'm not saying this with an assumption that I'm any good myself. I'm just saying this as someone who has read, a lot, to the point of obsession and pathology, for his entire adult life. And talent in writing (as in so many other things) is real, it is unevenly distributed, and that distribution is not

fair. People will tell you that talent isn't real, that there's just hard work. Those people are selling books.

- Write your age. Are you 13? Then don't write about how a politician is like a character from a TV show for 13-year-olds. Are you 13? Then don't awkwardly use slang that is common to a high school cafeteria. Write your age.
- What's the end goal? If you want to be a novelist, daily news blogging isn't going to help much, but you do have to pay the rent. I do think you should have some sort of idea of the arc of how you get from one thing to another. And if your ambitions are less grand than best-selling novelist, that's great too, but you also have to have an idea of an arc in your life. The thing about this kind of writing, professionally, is that few people have a clear idea about what career progress really looks like, through no fault of their own. I think this is part of why people switch jobs so much; where is up, so to speak, at a certain point? So I do think you should have a plan even if it's vague and unsettled. Where are you trying to go?
- Have fun. Tell the truth. Have integrity. Have guts. Be cranky. Remain independent. Be right rather than nice. Be committed to ideas rather than to people. Cultivate a studied indifference to the petty indignities that will attend every step of your way. Stay human. Tell the truth. Tell the truth. Tell the truth.
- When you're freelancing, have a beer with lunch. Just one.

On Selling (or Not Selling) a Book

My first book, *The Cult of Smart*, was published by St. Martin's Press in 2020. It sold more than 98% of the books published that year! But still has only sold about 6,000 copies to date (late January 2022). That's both not very good from the standpoint of my trying to sell another book. According to *The New York Times*, 98% of books published in 2020 sold less than 5,000 copies⁶. In 2019 the Author's Guild estimated that the median advance now stands at barely more than \$6,000⁷. My book's sales, and my \$75k advance, look better in that context. But of course there are authors who sell vastly more and get vastly more. (Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* sold a million and a half copies and she is rumored to have received an advance for her next book in the seven figures⁸.)

All of that said, I've been through the process, landed an advance in the high five figures, and publish a book through one of the Big Five publishing houses. (That's Penguin/Random House, Hachette Book Group, Harper Collins, Simon and Schuster, and Macmillan.) The book didn't sell great but was reviewed reasonably positively and was named one of *New York Magazine's* Ten Best Books of 2020⁹. So perhaps I can give a little good advice.

I Can't Tell You How to Get a Literary Agent, But Get One

I hesitate to say this, since it will likely sound like a brag, but I can't help you figure out how to get an agent because my agent found me. He emailed me and said, "Do you have any book ideas?" So I sent him my novel manuscript, and he very politely let me know he didn't like it. So I scratched together a nonfiction proposal, he said that it was the right book for me at the right time, and we signed a contract for him to represent me. I wish I had experience in finding an agent to share but I just don't.

Here's the thing: I tried to sell a book on my own for a year prior to first hearing from my agent. I queried dozens and dozens of imprints and editors. I heard nothing. I mean literally, I didn't

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/18/books/book-sales-publishing-pandemic-coronavirus.html>

⁷ <https://www.authorsguild.org/industry-advocacy/authors-guild-survey-shows-drastic-42-percent-decline-in-authors-earnings-in-last-decade/>

⁸ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/01/17/hanya-yanagiharas-audience-of-one>

⁹ <https://www.vulture.com/2020/12/best-books-2020.html>

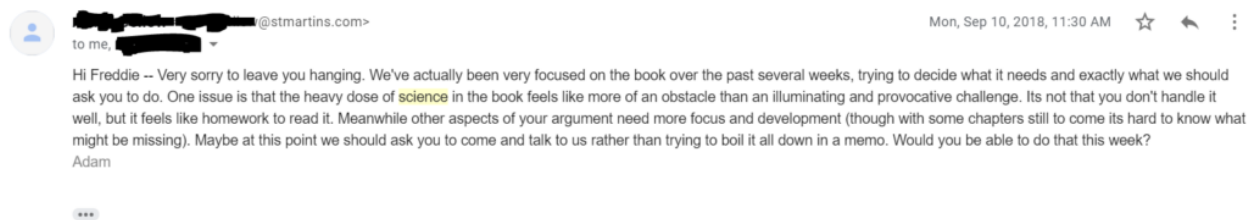
even get a single rejection letter. It was a big brick wall. This perhaps had more to do with me than with the market as a whole, but one way or another it was clear that I couldn't break into publishing a book based on my name alone. With my agent we had several interested imprints and two offers within maybe six weeks. It was remarkable how much easier it was. And you get a sense of why that's the case when you observe the process. With one publisher we talked to (and didn't ultimately go with) we walked in and my agent recognized one of the guys from the publishing house. And they slapped each other on the back and participated in some in-jokes and clearly knew each other. He also gave me a lot of real-keeping tips about who was really interested and who wasn't, and what the various overtures would look like. That aspect of having an agent appears to me to be invaluable. Yes, people can and do sell books directly to publishers. But my sincere advice is to not go through the process alone, as it's hard. There are multiple guides to querying agents that you can check out online.

You'll Probably Have No Idea If a Proposed Advance is Good or Not

I certainly didn't. I just knew that \$75,000 is more than \$45,000, which if I remember correctly was what the other offer was for. My agent seemed to think the offer we took was good, and ultimately it was enough for me. (I'll certainly never see a dime in royalties lol.) But because the market for books is contracting, and because the top-tier advances are only getting handed out to celebrities and the big-money names getting grandfathered in from the olden times, it can be genuinely hard to figure out if you're getting a fair deal. Here the existence of an additional offer may be helpful, so if you get an offer you might ask for a bit of time to consider it so that you can see what other offers come in. (But don't wait too long.)

Understand That You Will Have to Answer for Whatever's in Your Book

St. Martin's treated me very well and I'm forever grateful for them taking a chance on me when many people certainly would not. That said, it's also the case that I lost every argument with them, and this was the biggest.



As you can see from the above image, the first major note, and one that would prove to be the biggest sticking point, was that the section on gene science was far too long in the eyes of the publisher. They felt the general audience reader would not tolerate reading as much as I put in. I pushed back at first, but ultimately some four pages were cut from that section. And so of course the first impression of many people is "he didn't engage enough with the science." I wish I had fought harder but when you're the first time author and they're the publisher, it's hard to be brave in that way. I deeply regret it. Of course I am, in the end, responsible for the contents of the book. But as a first-time author it was really difficult to know what I could push on, when, and how hard. Were I to do it all over again, I would be more assertive and protective throughout the process. Because at the end of the day you're the one who will be seen as responsible for every aspect of your book, even the ones you didn't fully control.

Don't Try to Follow Your Book's Sales Day by Day

Just don't. It's hard without an expensive license to access Bookscan, and more importantly it's bad for your mental health. And if your book is a hit, trust me, they'll let you know.

My Writing, the Way I Like It the Best

I leave you with this piece, which I wrote in 2017, and which was almost lost along with much of the rest of my archives due to a malware injection

When I was 13, my father took me on a trip for work, first to Sydney Australia for a conference on Indonesian art and culture and then to Bali to do a little research for a book. We had gone before as a family, but this was my turn, after my sister and older brother had gone themselves. The pictures are hard to look at now, my father jaundiced and old, me fat, greasy-haired, and hating myself with the type of passion that is reserved for the very young. But it was my trip, my turn, and not everybody gets to take their turn. Only the lucky few.

At the conference he introduced me to some dissidents. I knew of a Western academic or two who had found themselves unable to get a visa into the country, having been too public in their criticism of the Suharto regime. Their risks were mostly professional. But, you know, there were Indonesian people we knew for whom the risks were far greater, and you would be surprised today, in this new regime, despite everything, how much people are still at risk. Many people would prefer the past stay buried.

One of the guys there, a long haired young Javanese hippie of a kind I knew well, was a friend and would banter with my dad in the usual way. He kept asking my dad to buy him a guitar. He would come up to where we sat in the morning as we ate shitty dry scrambled eggs and deliciously bad sausage and say “Les Paul! Les Paul!” and they’d speak in that mixed style, shifting seamlessly between Bahasa and English in the way I always found inscrutable. And the final joke, every time, was that my father would respond “Stratocaster?” and he would put his hands in the air and say “OK, OK, good enough.”

Anyway, Sydney was fine. My dad had told me for months that summer in the United States was winter in Australia and to pack warmly, so I brought one pair of pants and a long sleeved t-shirt as a concession to his quaint notion that the tropical paradise of Australia could get cold, and when we got there it was freezing and when he discovered my lack of clothing options he sighed and grumbled and took me to an army navy store to buy the jacket you see above. Secretly he

was pleased, mind you, to have this opportunity to grumble affectionately. During the day he would go to panels and I would wander over to this arcade and play games, then grab some fried chicken for lunch. I remember being struck by the fact that I could have been in any big city in America, were it not for the birds, the bizarre Australian birds.

One thing that sticks out was his worry, when practicing his talk, about his plan to open the panel with a recitation in Kawi. It was surprising; my father did not betray professional or intellectual insecurity, ever. He was an emotional man but I am sure I will never meet a more self-possessed person in my life. Even when he was sick (and by then he was always sick) he was the only person in the room. But he was worried about the recitation; he was afraid nobody would get it. He ended up reading it and he said it went alright. And then the conference was over and we journeyed inland a bit and saw beautiful places and I held a koala awkwardly for a souvenir photograph, and then it was time to fly back to Bali.

He chuckled as we got there and told me that I was permitted, as all returning visitors to Bali did, to say “it’s not like it used to be!” But it was more or less as I remembered it, and when we emerged from the plane I still felt the humidity descend onto my shoulders like a blanket, and we still went to the Borneo Bar and the Hey Cafe in Sanur, and he still would drink Bir Bintang even though he was strictly forbidden from doing so. Back then, before rabies came and they swept them from the island in a mass euthanasia campaign, there were these packs of wild dogs, and they were not quite dangerous but were worrisome. He told me to not be afraid and they would leave me alone. I was struck by how true it was, how much power there was in the insistence within myself that I was not afraid – it was visible, in the dogs, the minute I’d steel myself and project strength, they would lower their tails and skulk away. In time I would learn about body language and pheromones, and in time I would learn that you can do the exact same thing to most humans, and in time I learned why you shouldn’t.

Eventually we made our way inland to his dear friend Sumandhi’s village, and I got to look at his giant catfish, which was always a thrill. Pak Rajeg, Sumandhi’s father and my father’s great teacher, was still with us at that time. And that first night I laid down on a mat as they talked, laughing and chatting for hours into the night. It was all perfectly foreign to me – the seamless switching there was between Bahasa and Balinese, even – but I still could not have enjoyed it

more, hearing distant sounds of gamelan, the smell of the fried plantains they'd snack on mingling with the spicy scent of the kreteks they smoked, my father's laugh. I laid on the mat and took in that perfect sensory overload and thought about the pretty tits on the topless women at the beach that morning. I was 13, remember.

Back here in 21st century New York we have been adjusting my medication lately. I have now been in treatment long enough to have accepted this part of the deal: feeling like you've got the drugs and dosages right, then gradually realizing that something is not quite right, then you adjust, and you wait to see if you can feel any difference, and the doc says, you know, how's it going, and then you have to figure that out – how is it going, after all? Eventually you say, aha, this is it, we nailed it this time. And over time things drift, like your rear view mirror slowly falling out of your line of sight as you slouch deeper into a long car ride, until you have to admit to yourself that you need to adjust again.

For me the process of getting my medication adjusted is like trimming the hair on the back of my own neck, like trying to back a trailer down a narrow tunnel.

Not that treatment's going poorly. It's about as good as I can imagine it being, all things considered. Like a lot of people, I suspect, I spent much of my adult life resisting medication out of the fear that I would no longer be my true self, that it would change me. Then, when I was too exhausted to fight anymore, I wanted just about the opposite, to be given a pill to cure things just like that, like fixing a vitamin deficiency. And what you learn, of course, is that both of these are pleasing fantasies – medication as a way to stop being yourself, or medication as a way to be your true self. You don't get either of those. Which is fine. I get a little chemical smoothing of my own reaction to the confusion and disappointment that are the basis of human life, and a safety net against another manic episode. It's fine; it's fine. Quotidian. You go in fear of mind control and in hope of profundity and find instead something like getting your oil changed, or at least I do, now that I'm better than a year in. That's what I've come to understand, about these psych meds: how ordinary they are. Their terrible, terrible adequacy.

Near the end of our trip we saw a car accident, a fatal accident. I didn't really see but it seemed that a bemo took a wide corner and a man on one of those rickety motorbikes lost his control and

skidded into that terrifying traffic. My father and others rushed over. All I could see from where I stood was his body crunched under his bike, his hand waving strangely at the frame of it with vague fingers, feebly pushing. A man standing nearby, looking stricken, kept saying in an Australian accent “these things happen, these things happen” to his kids. The rider was dead before they took him away. I have not forgotten him since. Even at the time I think I knew that I would remember, that it would stand in my mind as a marker between what I had already seen, and what was soon to come.

The past has a way of getting in touch with you. The other day I realized that I’m older than my mother ever was.

Today I am engaged in the business of being an adult, and I am impatient, but I am fine. The city has welcomed me with its busy indifference, which was exactly what I needed, to get folded into Brooklyn like a remote getting lost in the nooks of your couch. Some people have teased me for ending up here, after grumbling about Brooklyn for so long, and that’s OK. Now I’m just here – it’s just a place I live. The past four months have been remarkable in the speed with which they have become ordinary. And now I go to the Y and lift my weights and I eat beef patties at Golden Krust and I worry after my dog and I occasionally get laid and I get shocked at how little is left in checking and I rescue my knockoff robot vacuum from where it’s once again gotten itself trapped on a power cord and I go out with friends and I feel gawky at yoga classes and I drink too much beer and I walk endless miles to trains and, god help me, I check the balance on my pension. That 13-year-old kid might have been shocked to find me here.

And yet despite everything he’s still me. Perhaps the biggest surprise, for him, would be that he could bend life to his will a little bit, and make himself something a little less worth hating. Still I find a part of myself feeling like an American with coke bottle glasses waiting to be let into an Australian arcade. But the world conspires to reveal to me how many people I find beautiful and strange see something beautiful within me too, and despite everything, the nastiness the internet would like to deposit in all of our emotional bank accounts, I am ready and I am unafraid. I am left only to live and to desire, to know those things that I want and cannot have, and to pause someplace waiting until life knows that I am ready for them. Somewhere inside of me the same self-protective wisdom that guided that younger me through all that was left to come still exists,

the steady invulnerability to cancer and rejection and guilt and neglect, and I know that it is the same part of me that is profligate in what it desires, the part that once left me curled up on the floor alone, the part that now propels me through welcoming and indifferent city streets, this part of me that is stranger to myself, this fire in my heart.

Book Proposal

This is the proposal for my first book, more or less as it appeared to publishing houses. We had two formal offers and indications of interest from another imprint. I received an advance of \$75,000 for the book, which is not an eye-opening amount but which is vastly more than the industry average.

The Seed and the Soil

Fredrik deBoer

Overview

Years ago, I served as a long-term substitute teacher at the public middle school in my hometown. It wasn't a bad gig; the money was alright, the day wasn't too long, and most of the students were pleasant and well-behaved, if not exactly enthusiastic learners.

I was struck while working, though, by the relentless repetition of a single message: that every student was constrained in their lives only by their will, that if they worked hard and never gave up on their dreams, they could do and have anything. If they would only believe, in other words, they would achieve. That effort and commitment were the sole requirements for success in life – not just to be healthy and happy, but to achieve one's most outsized dreams – was the mantra, and it papered the walls.

I can't tell you how many posters hung in this middle school that made this claim, each one expressing one cliché or another about the power of self-belief. I stopped counting after I hit two dozen posters in the months I worked there. They were in just about every classroom, almost without exception. I heard a similar message from a speaker at a school assembly, who asserted the preeminence of work ethic; from the coach of the cross country team, who told his charges that whether they thought they would win or thought they wouldn't, they were right; and a science teacher, who counseled his charges that genius was a fiction and that to be a great scientist only took work and fortitude. Everyone involved was sure that those students who would succeed would be the ones who wanted it the most. I felt, at times, like I was living in a one-party state, where the official propaganda was repeated ad nauseum.

I thought of this insistent message later, when I was working in a different school. That school was in the same district, but the context was very different. It was a special program for children with severe emotional disturbance. The students had mostly been forced to leave other schools in the district, after a parade of detentions and suspensions and parent-principal conferences. The program, for many, was the last chance; the only other place left to go was into the state mental health system or into the juvenile detention system. I was there for about 16 months, after which I quit and went to grad school. The emotional toll was just too great. I have never forgotten the dedicated women who had worked there for decades, and I never will.

One day I sat next to a favorite student, attempting to guide him through long division. I had been told that he had been a hard case, at one point, a real hell raiser, but it was hard to believe. He was a clear success story of the program, and was being gradually phased back into regular classes. He was funny and sweet and had become my buddy. But his behavioral and social improvements had not been matched in his academic work, where he still struggled. Indeed, his now-infrequent behavioral problems emerged only when he was confronted with scholastic work he couldn't complete.

Sitting there, I guided him individually through the steps, again and again. I explained things to him orally and charted it out on paper. I tried to come up with a mnemonic for the steps. We made division into a game, and I tried using incentives like pieces of candy. We kept at it

relentlessly, for hours over the course of a week. He genuinely tried. He really, really did. Nothing worked.

At one point he broke out into tears, as he had many times while we tried long division. I exhaled slowly and felt myself give up, though of course I would never tell him so. I tried to console him, once again, and he said, "I just can't do it." And it struck me, with unusual force, that he was right.

It was then that I thought back to the middle school, to the posters, to the motivational speaker – to all the motivational speakers out there, in our society, to the self-help books and productivity apps and inspirational wall calendars, the entire American culture of success. And it struck me that all the sunny positivity of those pleasant clichés hid a dark and toxic reality. The cruelty of that idea – that we are all so equal in ability that only effort and character can keep us from success – was apparent. The evidence was sitting at a desk in front of me, weeping real tears. What did those posters have to say to him? He had stuck with it for weeks and was no closer to his goal. He had tried and he had failed. Did he just not believe enough?

He had lived a hard life. All of the students there had. And I wanted what anyone would want, for him and his peers to enjoy the same opportunities and the same safe and enriching environment as the students with richer, kinder, more stable parents. I would never doubt that we should strive to give underprivileged kids like him as much support as we can, to use policy to make their environment safer, healthier, and more nourishing. But I also don't doubt that no amount of enriching the environment would be sufficient to erase the academic distance that opens up between individual students in all educational settings without fail. Nor do I accept the implicit idea that efforts to improve the environments of our students are given moral force because they are assumed to lead to improvements in test scores or graduation rates. We should improve the environment of our students because it is our moral responsibility to do so. Giving underserved children better living conditions is an end, not a means.

My student would go on, eventually, to learn long division, though it always took great difficulty. But while he toiled in our classroom, some of his age group peers in the other wing of the school were learning fractions. A few even were tackling the rudiments of algebra, all before middle school. It was those students who would, at a later age, be his competition in the great academic arms race of American college admissions. And, in time, they would be his competition in the labor market in our new knowledge economy. I lost track of him after I left that job. I hope the world served him better in the second decade of his life than it did in the first.

I have taught students from kindergarten through graduate school. I have taught black and Hispanic and Asian and white, men and women, boys and girls. I have taught students from China and Iran and Bolivia and Kenya. I have taught classes as small as eight students in intimate conversation groups and dozens in large lecture halls. I have taught in a high-minority and largely poor public school district and I have tutored the sons and daughters of the immensely wealthy. There are three things that I have learned that come before everything else, three lessons that were taught to me while I was teaching others: that all students have something to learn and something to contribute; that teaching is hard and grueling work; and that students

differ profoundly in their underlying academic ability. This last perception is not just my anecdotal experience. It is buttressed by a large and growing body of scholarly work which demonstrates that cognitive traits like intelligence are significantly influenced by genetic inheritance. That reality – that academic talent is real, that it asserts itself early and often, and that the difference in talents between individual students is largely a function of their genes – has been the single most insistent fact of an adult life spent teaching and researching about teaching.

We have, in the world of education, borrowed a term from agriculture to describe our students and their talents: we cultivate them. It's the kind of metaphor that's been used so much it's no longer really a metaphor. But the comparison is a good one. Each student is a seed, and each seed grows in the soil of the student's environment. In the world today, some seeds are sheltered and nourished, while some are neglected and underfed. We should strive for a world where all seeds grow in healthy, well-tended soil, out of a fundamental commitment to the equal moral value of all. But just as no plant can grow to its full potential height from poor soil, no amount of tending to the soil can make some seeds taller than some others. Some seeds are meant to spawn taller plants than some others. All plants have their own beauty, and all human beings have something of value to contribute to society. But to act as though every human being has the same potential in academic life is no more sensible than expecting every sapling to grow to the same height. It's a fiction, a pleasant fiction, and one we can't keep believing in. The modern science of genetics tells us so.

*

Nobody wants to have this conversation. Not liberals and not conservatives, not libertarians or leftists. But we need to have it all the same.

The notion that each of can achieve whatever we imagine if only we have the will fits in perfectly with the American myth. After all, this is the land of the self-made man, a place where anyone can become anything. This is the country of Horatio Alger and his stories of the poor rising up from their station through courage, perseverance, and pluck. Of course, this is also the country of John Steinbeck, of Upton Sinclair, of Bruce Springsteen, those who have pointed out in art and journalism that the deck is stacked, that not everyone gets to play the same cards. We have those who insist that outcomes are the product of hard work or laziness, and we have those who insist that outcomes are the product of chance. But all sides seem convinced that our natural talents are more or less the same.

Conservatives support the idea of equality of talent because they believe it leads to a laissez faire approach to the economy. If everyone has had the same chances, then there is no error in market outcomes for the government to correct with redistribution. ("Why, if my grandfather could come here as a penniless immigrant and rise to wealth...") Liberals support the idea of equality of talent out of a righteous commitment to the equal rights and equal moral value of all people, a

commitment I share. But in mistaking that moral equality for equality in all facets of human life, they leave themselves open to criticism on scientific grounds – and, in a weird way, accept the basic conservative premise that economic security and social value must be earned. If you see life as a race, and insist that the outcome is unfair because some people were given a head start, you are still accepting the basic idea that life is a competition. Starting everyone from the same place is one thing. Telling them they can stop running is another.

What we need is an alternative. We need a perspective that rejects bigotry in all of its forms, recognizes the inherent dignity and value of all people, and accepts that an overwhelming body of scientific evidence shows that all people do not have the same academic potential. We need a left that points out that genetic differences in cognitive ability undermines the very notion of just deserts and the basic assumptions of the market economy. What we need is a “hereditarian left,” a term coined by the behavioral geneticist Dr. Paige Harden to designate the small but growing number of us who accept contemporary science on human genetics and who see that science as an argument for, not against, left-wing politics.

*

For understandable reasons, the left-of-center in American intellectual life has avoided arguments based on the science of human genetic variation. After all, from the eugenics movement to the *Bell Curve* to the Google diversity memo, discussions of inherent talent and genetic predispositions have been used against people from marginalized groups. It’s natural that progressive, educated people would avoid endorsing any argument that seemed similar to those that have been used against black people, women, and other groups.

But this denial of human genetics and their influence on talents and abilities risks throwing out the baby with the bathwater. In particular, these arguments mistake the necessary and correct denial of genetic *group* differences for a rejection of genetic *individual* differences. This dismissal of the existence of hereditary differences between individuals amounts to a rejection of the overwhelming body of relevant scientific evidence. Too many on the left speak as though evolution only functions from the neck down, contradicting the evidence in just the way conservatives contradict the evidence about climate change. What’s more, this stance perversely supports a conservative vision of a fair society. If everyone is endowed with the same basic talents, then the argument for laissez faire economics is strengthened, as different outcomes are then more likely to be the result of hard work and individual choices.

Nowhere does this dynamic play out more destructively than in the domain of education. The notion that all students can excel in school is a largely-unspoken but ubiquitous assumption in education policy discussions. Arguments that natural talent restricts the boundaries of the possible are often met with fierce pushback, based on the mistaken notion that anyone speaking frankly about academic talent believes those without it should be left behind. Or, as the director and writer of *Waiting for “Superman”* Davis Guggenheim put it, “Don’t tell me these kids can’t learn!” But the question is not whether all students can learn. The question is whether all students can meet arbitrary performance benchmarks. And this debate has profound policy implications, as the premise of students as blank slates has led to failed initiatives like No Child

Left Behind. By refusing to acknowledge that different students have profoundly different ability, we spend scarce public dollars in a quixotic effort to achieve universal academic excellence. Worse still, in doing so we hold both teachers and students alike to standards they cannot meet.

Instead of denying the truth of individual genetic differences, the left should embrace it. It is the left, after all, that has argued that chance plays an outsized role in determining life outcomes. What could be more susceptible to the vagaries of chance than one's own genetic endowment, which no one can possibly control? The concept of the "veil of ignorance" developed by the great liberal philosopher John Rawls seems perfectly suited to discussion of genetics and talent. If we imagine ourselves behind that veil, we might well ask whether we will be lucky enough to be born with a genetic endowment that predisposes us to better academic outcomes – and in so doing strengthen the case for redistributive policies and a strong social safety net. The proposed book would make the empirical, political, and moral case for the hereditarian left. It would describe the science of individual human differences, contrast that with the false science of group human differences, enumerate the reasons why so many people resist such a large body of science, detail how education has been so deeply distorted by the blank slate assumption, pull apart our implicit assumptions about human value, and chart a better, fairer future.

Author Biography

I am a writer and academic who works in assessment of student learning at Brooklyn College in the City University of New York system. I hold a PhD in English from Purdue University, where I took extensive coursework in pedagogy, testing theory and application, educational measurement, statistics, and other relevant topics. My job requires me to remain conversant in the latest educational research, and I have a passion for translating complex academic research into plain language for a popular audience. As a writer, I have been published in some of the biggest magazines and newspapers in the world. In print, my work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*. Online, my work has appeared at places like *Politico*, *Playboy*, *The New Republic*, *Foreign Policy*, *n+1*, *Jacobin*, and many others. I have also worked with the New America Foundation, a leading think tank, on educational issues.

I have the privilege of large networks in both academia and in media, and would be able to spread the word to many leading figures in both worlds.

Audience and Promotion

The book is conceived in the lineage of influential texts like *The Nurture Assumption* and Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate*. Those books, however, are fundamentally academic in their orientation, as well as decades old. *The Seed and the Soil* will be a political argument as well as an academic one, calling for a society based on universal programs and true societal equality as an alternative to our marketplace of talent. This book would be part of the genre of books that discuss academic research, make it understandable for a popular audience, and use that research to advance political arguments. In other words, this book would fit nicely with the "wonk" tradition in contemporary political discussion. The proposed text would engage and argue with books and articles about human potential and social policy from both the left, such as Chris Hayes's *Twilight of the Elites* and Richard V. Reeves's *Dream Hoarders*, and the right, such as Charles Murray's *Coming Apart* and University of Pennsylvania Professor of Law Amy Wax's recent controversial op-ed about the superiority of "bourgeois values."

I am in a strong position to promote this book. My academic field, the assessment of student learning, is directly relevant to the topics and research discussed in the proposed book. I have a large network in both media and in academia. My work has been discussed in major publications like *The Atlantic*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *New York Magazine*, *Slate*, *The Huffington Post*, and many others. I have many friends within the world of professional political and cultural writing, and I could easily find willing readers to discuss and potentially blurb the book.

The book's major argument is provocative. As I've indicated, both the education policy world and the broad American left-of-center has largely failed to really grapple with these topics, and frequently dismiss arguments about human genetics as inherently conservative, bigoted, or both. Though the book would stand expressly against racist and sexist arguments that are sometimes advanced in the name of genetics, it would still discuss fundamental differences between individual human beings in their basic predispositions and talents. This would likely spark a lively conversation in reviews, essays, and social media. This controversy would generate publicity and attract attention for the book.

Manuscript

Anticipated Length: 200 - 225 pages

Anticipated Completion Date: Six months from proposal acceptance

Chapter Outline

Chapter titles are descriptive and will change in the final manuscript.

Introduction: What This Book Is and What It Isn't

In the introduction, I will succinctly lay out the argument that I intend to make, and reassure readers about the one that I don't intend to make. Using a narrative style, I will talk about my journey through our education system as both a practitioner in tutoring and substitute teaching and as a researcher in academia and the policy world. I will lay out the same basic story I made in this proposal, talking about how the insistence on the equal potential of all children ultimately becomes a form of abuse, leaving students, parents, and teachers with impossible expectations they can't meet. I'll frame the dimensions of my argument and make clear my intention to keep the book data-driven and evidence-based throughout. And I'll place special emphasis on what I'm not arguing, by explicitly and forcefully denying the arguments of pseudoscientific racism and sexism. I will stress that I am writing a book about individual differences, not group differences. This will lead naturally to the first chapter.

Chapter One: On "Scientific" Racism and Sexism

Why are so many people so afraid to acknowledge the existence of individual genetic differences, given the vast body of research demonstrating those differences? To answer that question, we need to understand how ideas about genetics and human potential have been misused in the past. I will therefore begin the book with a history, tracing the early eugenics movement and its association with the (capital-P) Progressives of the early 20th century, through the Nazi party and its actions, to *the Bell Curve* and Jason Richwine's controversial work for *The New York Times*, and finally to the infamous "Google memo" and its arguments about sex differences in areas of academic difference. I argue forcefully that these arguments are inherently bigoted and call for the left to resist them.

Chapter Two: The Case for the Heritability of Academic Ability

Politicians and policymakers doggedly cling to the notion that all students have the potential to be academic stars. But the reality of differing academic potential stands as the single most robustly replicated finding in the history of psychology. The second chapter makes the empirical case for the heritability of human cognitive traits, such as academic talent, personality traits, disorders such as mental illness and addiction, and similar. The chapter summarizes the state of

contemporary understanding of behavioral genetics, with discussion of twin studies, adoption studies, and genome-wide association studies (GWAS).. I will also lay out the history of public engagement with genetics, including what the media and popular understanding of these topics get wrong. I will conclude with a consideration of new breakthroughs in genetics, including the plummeting costs and popularization of personal genome diagnostics, and what lies ahead as more and more people have their own genetic information provided for them.

Chapter Three: Reconciling the Two

A society that understands the reality of genetic potential could be a society susceptible to even greater racial and gender inequality. It's therefore necessary to make a careful, evidence-based argument against traditional, bigoted ideas about genetic differences between groups. In this chapter, I demonstrate why acknowledging the reality of individual genetic difference does not lead to "scientific" racism or sexism. I discuss the differences between individual variation and group variation, both scientifically and morally, and look at the within-group variation in any identifiable population – that is, I will show the diversity of outcomes between demographic groupings like sex, race, and the like. Finally, I will argue that the fight to end racism and sexism are in fact strengthened, not weakened, by acknowledging that not all individual humans have the same inherent talents, and make a call to action to continue that fight.

Chapter Four: Our Deluded Educational Policy

Education, the conventional wisdom goes, is the great equalizer. In a fiercely partisan age, the notion that education is the most important tool for fighting poverty and inequality unites the parties. From George W. Bush to Barack Obama, from Silicon Valley moguls to conservative think tank analysts, our political and policy elites are sure that the best way to improve the lot of the poor is with education. The only problem with this idea is that it isn't true. Since not every student has equal potential to be educated, not all of our social problems can be ameliorated through education. In this chapter, I present a large amount of high-quality empirical data to dispute the assumption of universal academic potential., showing that differences in academic ability appear to be largely hereditary and far less mutable than commonly believe. I discuss the policy distortions that arise from this misconception, such as the disastrous No Child Left Behind. I present striking facts about the stability of relative academic rankings over time, such as the fact that third grade reading group is a strong predictor of college completion.

Chapter Five: The God That Failed – Technology, STEM, and Education

Nothing better demonstrates the flawed logic of blank slate thinking quite like our obsession with STEM, both as a means to educate and as a set of subjects for everyone to study. In the 21st century, we're asking technology to save our students, to their detriment and to our economy's. In this chapter, I discuss our mania for technology as a cure for educational woes, and our insistence on training every young person to be a budding computer science. I present a large number of empirical studies that demonstrate no real impact from the use of technology in the classroom, and call into question basic assumptions about what works in teaching and why. I

conclusively debunk the notion of the STEM shortage, showing that it's a media invention with no basis in data. Finally, I discuss the basic economics of skilled labor, pointing out that flooding any one sector of the labor market with skilled workers simply erodes whatever advantage that sector might enjoy. Finally, I look forward to better ways to direct students towards skillsets and academic journeys that are useful and fulfilling.

Chapter Six: A New Educational Philosophy

Recognizing that many students will never have what it takes to excel in the classroom does not mean we should abandon our financial and moral commitments to education. On the contrary, if we recognize the existence of unequal academic potential, we can revitalize our schools, freeing educators and students from the unnecessary drudgery of attempting to bring every student to arbitrary performance benchmarks. In this chapter, I lay out a different philosophy of education, one that rescues teaching and learning from our obsession with metrics and standardized tests. I argue that education is still relevant and worth fighting for despite the persistence of relative academic outcomes, calling for a return to a holistic, humanistic vision of education as a tool to create engaged and moral citizens. I sketch out some policy ideas for how education can be used more humanely and more efficiently. And I articulate a new vision of what role education plays in a society where we are aware that not everyone has the same inherent academic talent.

Chapter Seven: The Rise of Meritocracy and the “Just Deserts” Vision of Economy

In this chapter, I consider the basic liberal and conservative orientations towards merit and the problems with each. To do so, I present a brief history of the basic philosophical conception of “liberalism,” in the classical sense, and how it led to both contemporary American progressivism and conservatism. Touching on thinkers like John Locke, Voltaire, and Thomas Jefferson, I will argue that basic ideas about human value have been with us for so long, we have ceased to think of them as ideas at all. I argue that we need a new paradigm to account for new data and to envision a better society.

Chapter Eight: A New Kind of Equality

The consequences of unequal inherent ability are vast – and potentially destructive, if we do not strive to meet them humanely. To ensure a better future, we must clearly articulate a new moral vision for society. In this chapter, I make the case that a world where genetics play a major role in human outcomes such as education and employment is a world where only a socialist system can be truly just. I discuss the incoherence of the ideal of equality of opportunity, and I sketch out a better, more humane vision of summative equality. I argue that the ideals of equal opportunity and equal outcomes must be replaced with the ideals of procedural equality and summative equality. I articulate the moral case for summative equality as a natural and necessary pursuit of a free, moral society. I then consider how best to achieve that vision in the next chapter.

Chapter Nine: Building a Better Society and a Policy to Get There

A moral vision is useless without a policy agenda, and so I will lay out, in detail and buttressed by a large body of research, a specific and practical plan for making a more just society. This

chapter tells us what we should do once we recognize that different human beings have different talents, from a policy perspective. Drawing on the work of John Marsh, the author of *Class Dismissed*, and the leftist policy analyst Matt Bruenig, I argue that redistributive policies have far better humanitarian and social outcomes than alternatives like universal college or vocational training programs. I lay out what the correct policy response might look like, considering possibilities like a federal jobs guarantee or universal basic income (UBI). Finally, I argue that the market is an inherently unfair force in human life, and lead into the next chapter, where I lay out an alternative vision of morality and just deserts.

Epilogue: The Sad Reality and a Happier Future

I begin this chapter by writing frankly about my struggles with bipolar disorder, tying it to the topic by discussing my father and his father, who like me were academics, like me were socialists, like me suffered from a mood disorder, and like me had problems with alcohol. I also discuss our shared facility in school, our height, our advantages as white men. I acknowledge the inherent unfairness of genetic lineage, to lament that the facts I have laid out are indeed facts. I will explore what it might mean to be someone who has lost the genetic lottery, and what the winners might do – and might give up – to help them. I finish with a consideration of human value, why we value what and who we do, and whether we can change, for the good of all of us.

With the best of intentions, the contemporary American left has largely rejected the modern science of human genetics, which not only pits us against the scientific consensus, but also deprives us of one of the most powerful arguments for mass redistribution of wealth.

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