

A systematic approach to writing that generates better quality quickly.

Writing FAST: How to Write Anything with Lightning Speed

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The Ultimate Writing System

Writing

FASTTM

How to
Write **Anything**
with Lightning
Speed

jeff **bollow**

Use the **FAST** System to write screenplays,
books, novels, essays, emails, letters, articles,
term papers, or anything else you can imagine
faster than you ever thought possible!

Writing FAST

Writing **FAST**

*How to Write **Anything**
with Lightning Speed*

*jeff **bollow***

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embryo films
(publishing division)
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Artarmon NSW 1570
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for those who see beyond
what is already here

may this help you show us
what you see

Thank-you

To Missi, for your incredible support and encouragement, and for your love; you are a truly beautiful person.

To Dad, for your patience and belief, and for your friendship; it helps in ways that even “fast” words can’t describe.

To my students, for teaching me more than I ever taught you; please get off your butts and apply this stuff.

And to you, the reader, for taking this plunge; you make my efforts worthwhile.

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“ We are what we repeatedly do.
Excellence then, is not an act,
but a habit. ”

—Aristotle

Introduction

There's only one reason I've written this book. And it's found within this introduction. If you don't grasp that reason, you'll still be able to use the FAST System to write anything with lightning speed.

But you'll miss the whole point of the book.

So I'd ask you — please — to read the introduction. Every story needs a context. This is the context for the FAST System.

And I promise you this: The FAST System, when properly understood and applied, will revolutionize the way you write. It's simple, it's effective, and it works.

But I never wanted to write it.

What Are You Talking About?

In fact, if you had told me just *one* year ago that I'd be writing this book (and writing it in 8 weeks, no less!), I would have laughed. And probably walked away from you.

A year ago, I was disillusioned. I had become something I specifically did not want to become. I had become a respected and highly-regarded screenwriting teacher. Or, as one of my students put it: “the screenwriting guy.”

God I hate that.

Don't get me wrong. I love screenwriting, and I actually enjoy teaching the stuff. I don't even have a problem with screenwriting teachers in general. It's a valid career, and it's certainly

necessary. (I wish they had a better grasp of what they were teaching sometimes, but what can ya do?)

But I wasn't "the screenwriting guy." Was not. *Am* not.

I'm just a guy with a vision. And it can't be built without dozens (probably hundreds) of excellent screenplays.

I'm a guy on the prowl, looking for scripts.

See, I want to build an independent feature film studio, and produce 3 to 6 movies per year. All kinds of movies. And I want to build it from the ground up. To prove it can be done.

So when I couldn't find any screenplays (any commercially-viable ones, anyway), I did whatever I could think of to get people writing them. Taught workshops. Imported software. Assessed scripts. Mentored writers. Everything. I created Screenplay.com.au.

But I never considered myself a writer. I'd write if I had to, but I *make* movies. I always found the *writing* part torturous. But movies don't get made without screenplays, so I need writers. Back to square one.

In my hometown of L.A., everyone's got a screenplay tucked under their arm. Even the waiters. *Especially* the waiters. You can go to lunch at Denny's and feel like you're right in the middle of the studio system.

But when I moved to Australia, I found a very different landscape. Not only were the waiters really waiters, no one else seemed to be writing any screenplays either.

So I did what any self-respecting producer would do.

I tried to corner the market on screenwriting.

A Brilliant I...dea

Tell me this isn't a great idea: I would develop a workshop to teach emerging writers how to write commercially-viable screenplays — from the producer's perspective. Marketable screenplays producers would actually want to buy.

And because I'm a producer who's been through the entire process myself — from start to finish — I'd show my students what really works and what really doesn't. And then, naturally, I'd be the first producer they'd turn to when they finished their screenplay.

Not a bad idea, right?

Well, yeah, in theory. In practice, something else happened. I unwittingly started a new career.

It began with an eight-week *First Draft Workshop* designed to take writers “from concept to completion.” But I quickly realized that my students didn’t even know the fundamentals. Eight weeks was just too quick. We needed more time for the basics.

So I pulled the workshop apart, and created a weekend workshop to cover the fundamentals: *The Essential Screenwriting Workshop* would be “everything you need to know *before* you write your screenplay.” And a prelude to the eight-weeker.

I planned to run them until I found a core group of writers who wanted to join me, and churn out material I could produce.

Cut to four years later.

I had done 56 weekend workshops with 641 participants, aged 15 to 72, in six cities across Australia and New Zealand. I had spent over \$100,000, barely made a subsistence income, and put up to 80 hours a week into them.

And nearly 100% of participants raved about the workshops. They said they would “enthusiastically recommend” them. I was very proud.

But a pattern had emerged.

As it turned out, less than 5% of participants actually *did* anything with the information. Less than 5% wrote anything at all. 95% of my effort was being wasted.

Dazed and Confused

These were good, intelligent people. From all backgrounds and levels. Smart people. I knew I could share this alarming fact with them. So I would say, “Statistically, I will only hear from two of you ever again.” In one workshop, a woman raised her hand and replied, “I’d like to know who the *other* one is.”

The class laughed.

And I never heard from her again.

Why? Why was this happening? I had become a screenwriting teacher. I had taken my attention away from getting films produced. And I had *nothing* to show for it. I needed to find out why. So I asked my students.

And overwhelmingly, the response I got was this: “Things keep coming up.” “I’m too busy.” “Writing a screenplay is a

huge project, and I don't have the time to get through it."

Let me say this right now. If you don't write, you'll never get better at it. Practice makes perfect. So if you don't *make* time to write, how can you get good enough to sell your work?

And (more importantly to me) how will I ever get enough screenplays to achieve my vision?!

I remembered my favorite quote from the late great acting teacher, Sanford Meisner. It goes like this:

"That which hinders your task *is* your task."

So if no one has time to write, that's what I've got to do. Show them a way to write, even if they don't have time.

A Whole New Approach

So the first thing I did was fall out of a plane.

January 2nd, 2004. My first freefall.

There's something about skydiving that's simply electrifying. It's life on the edge. It's fast. It's extreme. And, for me at least, it shocked my senses back into focus.

Within a week, my life suddenly made sense again.

I had gone on a four-year detour. It was time to put my workshops into a box. A box I could offer to the serious students.

That way, I could continue "teaching," and still get back to making films. And if only 5% of readers ever applied it, I'd still be moving forward. No time would be wasted.

But if I was going to put my workshops in a box, it had to be perfectly clear, and it needed to obliterate this time problem.

And then it hit me.

The reason was obvious! My students loved the workshops, but didn't do anything with it. Why? They didn't have a *system* for applying it. I had given them tons of valuable information — practical stuff they could use immediately — but they didn't walk away with a system for *writing*. A system that works.

So I would develop one. I wanted something that would help people beat the time crunch. Something that would help them write fast.

That was it! FAST. F.A.S.T. What a perfect acronym to describe what we're trying to do. You want to *write* fast. I want to *read* fast. Writing is a four-part process, and the letters fit the four parts perfectly...

You'd laugh if you knew how excited I got. Suddenly the world made sense. Finally, I could help writers master this seemingly impossible craft. And in the process, I could get you writing screenplays I could produce.

Fantastic.

The Whole World Sings

I mapped out this workshop-in-a-box, and I called it FASTscreenplay. It would be a step-by-step approach to *writing* a screenplay. It wouldn't be about formulaic plots, or "write-like-this" rules. No. I've met enough writers and read enough screenplays to know that no "formula" really works.

Instead, FASTscreenplay would be a system for *writing* a screenplay. You'd power through your script, blasting past the time problem, creating a compelling *original* screenplay.

When I finished mapping it out, I noticed something. Ironically, I was *using* the FAST System to create FASTscreenplay.

It dawned on me: The FAST System works across the board!

Not just screenwriting, but *all* forms of writing. And when I looked closer at it, it made perfect sense. It's a systematic approach to *writing*.

And then I thought about Australia's arm pits. And, specifically, how none of them were carrying any screenplays. How, in fact, embarrassingly few Australian writers have even considered screenwriting. Many don't even know what it is, or what it looks like.

What if — instead — I wrote a book about the FAST System in general (as it applies to *any* kind of writing)? I could kill two birds with one stone.

I could show you how to write *anything* faster and better. And at the same time, I could reach a much wider audience. Sooner or later, I'm bound to bump into a would-be screenwriter, right?

And that brings us to *Writing FAST*. I have ulterior motives here. I'm not looking to start a new career on the lecture circuit. And I don't want to become a guru.

I want you to use the FAST System for whatever you want to write.

But I'm secretly hoping you'll write screenplays.

What's Inside (and What's Not Inside)

Now, before we leap into it, I need to clarify a couple things.

Writing FAST is not about grammar and tense and viewpoint and punctuation. We'll get into some of that in the Tweak section, but this book assumes you have a decent understanding of the English language.

If you don't, you *must* learn that stuff. Effective writing isn't filled with typos and errors and point-of-view mistakes. There's no shame in not knowing it. But when you discover you don't know it, it's time to learn.

There are dozens of books on the subject. You don't need to read them now, but don't avoid them afterwards. Writing is about communicating your ideas. And the better you understand your language, the better you can use it.

Writing FAST is also not about speed writing. We do cover it (in detail), but it's only one part of the FAST System (the Apply section). And it's not even the most important thing. FAST is an approach to the whole process. Speed writing is only one fourth of the equation.

And I'm not going to make ridiculous promises. Can you write a book in 2 weeks, or 4 weeks, like some speed writing advocates claim? Maybe you *can*. Maybe you can write even faster! But I don't know you. I have no idea what your natural abilities are. So I refuse to make such blanket promises.

What's more important to me is that your work *reads* fast. Clunky, cumbersome writing is a chore to read, no matter how fast you wrote it. The Tweak Section will certainly help (a lot!). But it, too, takes practice. Just remember. It's not a race with anyone else. Life is a race with yourself.

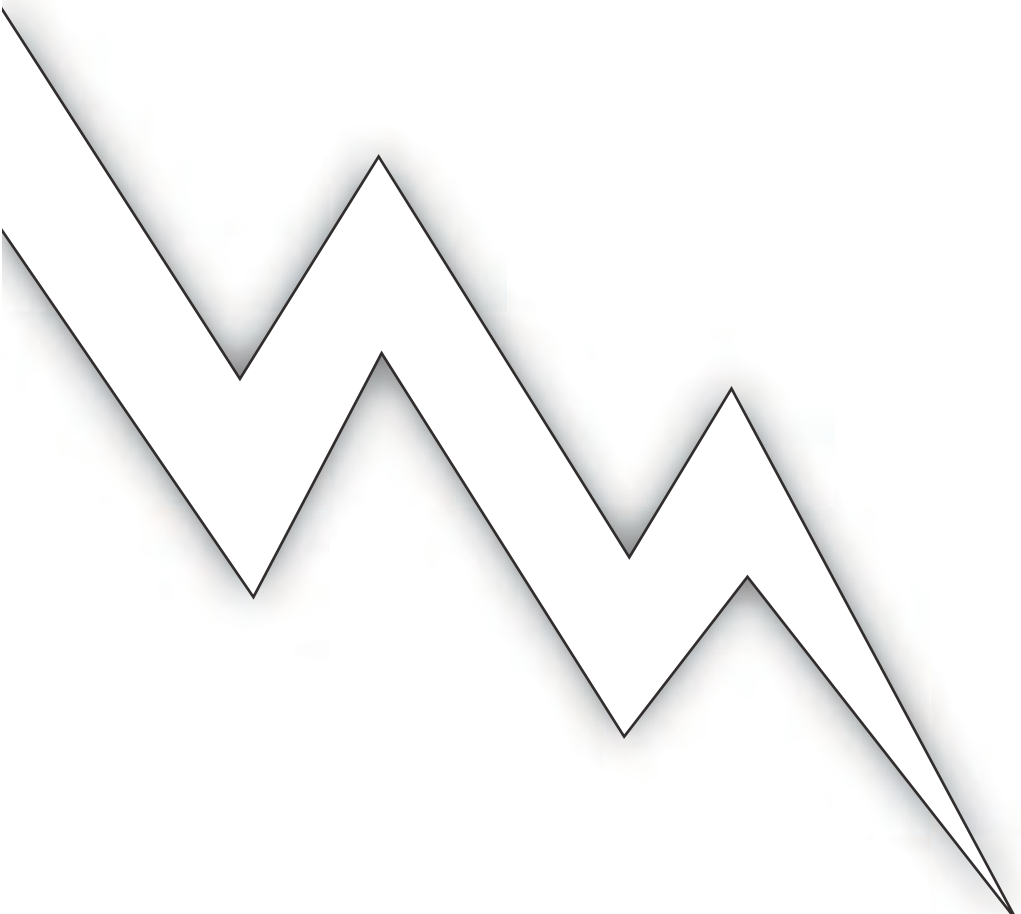
Writing FAST is a simple, step-by-step approach to the process of writing. I want to give you a way to smash the time barrier, so you never have an excuse for not writing again.

I say that *Writing FAST* will help you write ten times as fast as you do right now. If you truly apply it, you'll do a lot better than that. And I can't wait to hear your feedback when you do.

You're gonna have so much fun.

Ready to get started?

[The Setup]



“ Nothing leads so straight to futility
as literary ambitions without
systematic knowledge. ”

—H.G. Wells

1

Why Write FAST?

The written word started out as a picture.

Way back in prehistoric times, life was slow. People would hunt and gather all day, and then come home to the cave and grunt at each other around the campfire. There wasn't a whole lot of reading and writing going on — fast or otherwise.

But one day (and I'm taking a little "creative license" here), some guy named Ooga saw a mammoth for the first time. It scared the crap out of him. He ran back to the cave to warn his friends (let's call them Booga and Shooga), but they just scratched their heads. Booga and Shooga had never seen a mammoth before, so Ooga's frantic grunting wasn't making any sense. (Maybe they should take him out back, and club him for awhile?)

But Ooga was serious. That hairy, oversized elephant was huge. With tusks and everything. It could kill them! He needed his friends to understand. But he didn't have the right grunt to describe it. So he grabbed a piece of tree bark, and drew a picture of the mammoth on the wall.

After Booga freaked out (grunting angrily about vandalism and such), Shooga grabbed his arm. She sat him down and made him stare at Ooga's crude drawing. And, gradually, the image of the mammoth filled their minds. They understood.

And written communication was born.

Today, some thirty-five thousand years later, we communicate with different kinds of pictures. Our pictures are drawn with words. With words, we can create images of incredible subtlety

and complexity. For example, I just painted the image of some cavemen, their cave drawings, and even a glimpse of their social structure, without any graphics at all.

And, just like Booga and Shooga, you saw that scene in your mind's eye. You saw the mammoth.

Writing is communicating your idea with the written word.
And writing FAST is doing it quickly and effectively.

What's In Store For You in this Book

This book will teach you how to write fast.

Not just speed writing techniques (although there are some whoppers in here). But also techniques for nailing your idea. Figuring out exactly what you're trying to say, and then giving you a razor-sharp plan to get there.

This book will give you a system. One that works for *any* kind of writing. It's a system that — when you fully understand it — will make writing simple. You'll even have a two-minute checklist to immediately break down even the most complex writing projects. And an easy acronym to remember it by.

This book is not about me. Writing is *never* about the author. This book is about *you*. I want you to understand this system. I want you to see how it works. And I want you to be able to use it. To apply it. Immediately.

If you've looked at the Table of Contents, you already know the "big picture." But we're about to go way deeper.

With FAST, you can break down any complex writing job — from thousand-page novels and screenplays to simple letters and emails — and write them faster than you ever imagined possible.

This book will go beyond just the four-part process of writing. We'll look at specific tips, techniques and methods to make sure you not only write *faster* than ever before, but *better*, as well.

We'll look at things like "chunking," which simplifies the huge task of long-form writing. I'll introduce you to Talktation, my brand new technique for speed writing. You'll discover the Stack Test, and watch it lift the quality of your work. And you'll find dozens of ways to "speed up" your writing, so your reader hangs on every word, and can't turn away.

If I do my job right, you'll breeze through this book. It should be a quick and easy read. And with any luck, ideas will

be popping into your head on every page.

To make it easy, this book is broken down into six sections.

First is The Setup. Every word you write falls into one of two categories — Setup or Payoff — so I've included them as sections, to remind you. All ideas need a context, or they won't be understood. The setup gives us that context. (In the caveman story, the "Way back..." paragraph is the setup.)

Next are sections for each of the four parts of the FAST System itself: F(ocus), A(pply), S(trengthen), T(weak). That's the meat of the system. You'll spend varying amounts of time on each part of the process, as you need to. But do each part in that order. You only struggle when you jump around.

The final section shows you how to apply it: The Payoff. The payoff is where an idea becomes clear and usable. It's when you go "Ah!" The payoff is what all writing is really about. (See if you can identify the Payoff in the caveman story, and I'll tell you if you're right a little later.)

What's In Store When You're Done

When you're done with this book, you'll write ten times faster than you ever did before. You'll write with lightning speed — the speed of thought. And I'm completely and totally serious.

Here's how it'll work:

An idea will pop into your head. Maybe it's a book, a novel, screenplay, article, report... whatever. Within a few short hours (for the long stuff) or just a few minutes (for the short stuff), you'll know exactly what to write on every single page.

Then you'll write it. And I mean fast. It's so easy, in fact, you'll be amazed. It's as if the book is just flowing out of you.

Then you'll inspect what you've written. Here's where most speed writing techniques fail, and most writers get discouraged. But not with FAST. As you read your work, you'll immediately spot dazzling ways to transform it into gold. Problems leap out. And the solutions are crystal clear.

And finally, almost as if you've got magic fingers, you'll sift through your work... twisting, tugging, and straightening out every kink, and making your writing electrifying.

You'll complete your book (or whatever you're writing) in record time, impressing everyone you know (especially yourself!).

Readers will love it. You'll grab them with your style, and they'll hang on every word. You'll be writing *fast* in every sense.

That's what's in store for you when you finish this book.

No more writers block. Ever.

No more battling with Time. You'll have a system for writing, even if you can only squeeze in twenty minutes a day.

No more getting intimidated by big projects. You'll wonder how they ever scared you in the first place.

No more tired, boring, bloated writing. You'll keep your reader glued.

I want you to get excited. I want you to read this book from cover to cover as quickly as possible, and then refer to it later when you need to. Because as soon as you're done, you're going to reach lightning speeds. Almost as fast as you can think.

What Do You Want to Write?

To get an idea of just how powerful this FAST System really is, let's rattle off some of the things you can write with it.

A screenplay. A novel. A non-fiction book. A textbook. A technical book. A magazine article. A news story. A television show. An essay. A dissertation. A homework assignment. An autobiography. Somebody else's biography. A report. A business plan. A website. A proposal. A journal. A travelogue. A diary. A short story. A novella. A bible. A procedure book. A brochure. An advertisement. A manual. A pamphlet. An email. A play. A critique. A letter. A white paper. A manifesto. A handbook. A newsletter. A bulletin. A query. A review...

I'm sure there are a hundred more, but you get the idea.

You'll use the FAST System to write every single one of these. In fact, here's a secret I'll get to in a minute: You *must* use a system to write *any* of them! That's why the FAST System is such a breakthrough. It harnesses the power of your mind.

Each type of writing has its own purpose. So, what makes good screenwriting is different to what makes good novel writing. But the approach is identical. They're all communication, and that's what this book is all about.

Think about what you want to write. Is it a book? A novel? A personal newsletter? A screenplay?

Pick one. Right now. And hold onto it.

Having an example project as you read through this book will help you visualize each step. It'll make it more practical.

Apply everything you learn to your example. And watch as it unfolds before your eyes.

Writing FAST Versus Writing Slow

Here's the first major lesson: Writing is not an activity. It's not something you sit down at the keyboard, and just start doing. That's called "typing."

Typing is an activity. Scribbling words onto paper is an activity. Dictating into a microphone is an activity.

Writing is *not* an activity.

Writing is a *process*. And if you start thinking of it as a process, life gets so much easier.

Here's how it works. You have an idea. You want to express it on the page. You use the *process* of writing to say it in the most effective way possible.

The difference between writing *fast* and writing *slow* is how fast the idea pours out of you. (Simple enough.) But understand this: When you write slow, you're over-analyzing. You're jumping ahead in the process. You're stifling your own idea!

On the other hand, when you write *fast*, you're tapping into your idea, and letting it spill out onto the page. You're *using* the process to work its magic. You're trusting the outcome.

The FAST System helps you write *fast*. It helps you discover, understand, and shape your idea. It provides techniques to get your ideas on the page faster. And it makes sure your idea is expressed as perfectly as possible.

If you've been writing without a system, you've been spinning your wheels. You've been keeping yourself busy with an activity. It's time to try the process.

Couldn't Possibly Be Me

If you're new to writing, you might have writophobia. (Yes, I just made up a word.) I used to have it, too. It's when "real" writers scare the bejeezus out of you.

I never expected to write professionally. At first, I was intimidated by writers, just like you are. I had an image in my head of

exactly what a writer looks like. And it certainly wasn't me.

You know the image. It's that guy in the log cabin on that sprawling wooded property in the mountains. The one with no television set, and seven hundred hardcover books on crowded little bookshelves. The guy with the beard, who wears glasses (but only when he's reading), and is probably too smart to have a normal conversation with. (Aw, let's face it, he's Stephen King.)

Anyway, after four years of teaching screenwriting, my wri-to-phobia disappeared. How? I met people who write. In four years, I met over six hundred writing students. And I can tell you this. Maybe three of them fit that image. The rest looked like everyone else in the world.

But here's the kicker. I also taught professional writers — people with film credits, published novels, journalists, magazine columnists, playwrights — they were just like everyone else, too!

The entire mystique of writing fades away when you get a load of who does this stuff.

We're all people. We all have the same potential.

So if you're a novice, know this: All you need to do is apply the FAST System, and practice. Good writing is good writing. It's not the exclusive domain of some mysterious aristocracy.

And if you're a professional, you already have the discipline it takes to sit in a chair for extended periods of time. Now you'll accomplish twice as much, with less time in the chair. (And that's being conservative!)

See, writing is writing. Wherever you are on the food chain, it's all the same. A systematic approach will get you there faster.

Even if you're Stephen King.

(Although from what I hear, he's already lightning fast.)

The Battle for Time

Now usually, it's just an excuse. But one of the biggest reasons students give for not writing is a lack of time. You lead a busy life. You've got a career with business trips and meetings. Or maybe you've got two jobs and three kids. Or perhaps it's a full schedule of classes and homework with a part-time job.

Look around. We're all busy. We watch days, weeks, months, and years go by without achieving the things we had resolved to achieve at the start of the year.

If you need eight hours a day for six months straight to write your book, it's just not gonna happen. A screenplay isn't guaranteed income, so the kids come first. A report isn't urgent, so it gets pushed down the To-Do list. The newsletter won't be done this month because of the sales meeting. And so on.

And when these things happen, you feel a tremendous sense of frustration. Even guilt. Sometimes stress. You know it, I know it. You can't get out from under it and it drives you crazy.

In a way, the FAST System is a time-management technique. I was tired of hearing my students say they didn't have enough time. (I was tired of not having enough time myself!)

Even if you only have ten minutes a day to write (which is never *really* the case, but let's go with it), the FAST System will help you. In fact, if you really tuck into it, amazing things are possible. What if you could write a book in just a few months, using the FAST System on ten minutes a day? Some readers will. It might take practice, but wouldn't it be worth it?

Your Chance to Change the World

Now this might sound corny, but I believe you're capable of more than you imagine. And I think every last one of us has at least one unique, major, world-changing idea inside us. And if we don't reveal it in our lifetime, it gets lost forever.

For example, mine might be the FAST System. (I think I've got a couple more, but I'll save them for another time.)

FAST is a lucky discovery. If I had made *one* different choice at *any* point along the way, I wouldn't be writing this book.

And if I didn't, some of my readers might never muster the confidence to write theirs.

It's a chain effect. My ideas help spark your ideas. Your ideas will help spark someone else's ideas.

Let's take an imaginary chain.

Suppose a businessman makes a startling discovery about how his customers interact. Until FAST, he could never find time to write a book about his discovery. But now he can. He does.

Meanwhile, a scientist is working on a life-saving drug. He's never heard of FAST, but he reads the businessman's book. And it sparks an idea: "What if the *chemicals* in this drug interacted the same way those customers did?" Suddenly, he solves a riddle

he's been working on for five years. He writes a breakthrough white paper on how to cure this rare disease.

A doctor in a remote country town reads the white paper. He has just delivered a child who happens to have the rare disease. The doctor would've misdiagnosed it just six months before. But now he can treat the child easily. And a young couple will see their daughter grow into an Olympic medalist.

This isn't fiction. It's an imaginary scenario, but that's exactly the kind of sequence life takes. That's exactly how knowledge builds. Ideas spark ideas.

And if you follow this logic, I believe it's vitally important that *you* share your own life's discoveries. No matter how inconsequential they seem to you, they could spark an idea in someone else — something you couldn't possibly imagine. The businessman in our example could never predict that his book would be responsible for solving the riddle of a life-saving drug. The businessman knows nothing about biochemistry. He only knows about his customers' interactions.

But where does that spark lead?

Where does *your* spark lead?

Will you let this book spark you?

It's All Communication

There's a myth that's been passed down from generation to generation. And I have to admit, it's tempting to continue that tradition. Catch me at the wrong moment, in fact, and I will.

The myth is that writing is hard work. That it's something only a very special kind of person can do.

Writers throughout the ages have promoted that myth (some even believe it), because it helps their mystique. Think about it. What kind of reaction do you get if you're sitting next to someone on a plane, and when they ask what you do, you hand them your book?

What's the reaction? It's magical, isn't it? Suddenly, they're in awe. There's a reverence for you. You're a writer. That's something they could never do!

Or so they think. (And you probably *let* them think it, too!) C'mon. That's ridiculous.

Not only can anyone do it, I believe everyone *should* do it.

Writing is not the mythical realm of the gods. Writing is really very simple. It's effective communication. It's putting your ideas into words that will be clear in a distant time and place. Nothing more.

It takes time to learn. (What doesn't?) It takes practice to get good at. (What doesn't?) But if *I* can do it, *you* can do it. And the passenger next to you can do it, too.

Short-form writing (a letter, email, web page, short story) has a quick point. Long-form writing (a book, novel, screenplay) has a more elaborate point, or more layers and depth. Large ideas will take planning and organization.

For example, I can communicate FAST (Focus, Apply, Strengthen, Tweak) in four words. But the depth and breadth of the idea — the detail you'll need to use it effectively — takes quite a bit longer to express. I'm using eighteen chapters.

But it's all communication. I can do it fast, or I can do it slow. And so can you.

Simplifying the Complex

The real problem is that you have a million possible choices. And there's virtually no way to know which one's "right."

I believe this chapter will put you in the right frame of mind to understand the FAST System. I think it'll be a useful framework for you. (And when I re-read it later, if I think I was wrong, I'll adjust it. [Which I just did.])

But I could put a nearly infinite combination of words on this page right now to express this idea. Which one's right? Which one's better than all the rest? Which one's wrong?

Truth is, you're looking in the wrong place. There *is* no "right" or "wrong." There are only varying degrees of effectiveness. And that's what makes writing so incredibly challenging. (Which fosters the myth that writers are so mysterious.)

When you read a published book (a good one, anyway), it's well-written. It's clever. Concise. Simple. It looks like the writer did it effortlessly. You think to yourself, *I could never do that.*

But why not? It's only a matter of communicating. Of turning the ideas in your head, into words on a page. And making sure the idea is as dynamic on the page as it was in your head.

Enter the FAST System.

Suddenly, the process is simple. FAST walks you step-by-step through it. It breaks it down into manageable pieces. It keeps you from getting lost. And that's its power.

To all the writers out there who promote the mystique that writing is hard, I formally apologize for ruining it for you.

But I believe that every one of us has something to share, and if a writer doesn't share it, I (personally) might miss out on the chain effect of their spark. And what if it's something that could change or save my life?

I want you to write. And because I want that, I'm going to show you how to take what appears to be a complex process, and make it simple, fast, effective and fun!

That's how the chain works.

And so...

Writing is a process, and without a simple, step-by-step approach to that process, you're creating unnecessary work for yourself. Why struggle with something that should be easy?

In this chapter, I've tried to put you in the right frame of mind, to get the most out of this system. Remember, every idea needs a context. And that's what this chapter is all about.

For FAST, the context is this: *All writing is communication*. It's so easy to get lost when your idea could go in any one of a million different directions. By applying the FAST System, you put yourself on a clear, simple road.

And it's right there to help you, during each of the most challenging phases of writing. It will help you, stabilize you, and get you back on track, every step of the way.

And your results will be startling.

You'll nail down your idea in record time. You'll blast through the writing. You'll quickly spot problems and know exactly how to fix them. And then you'll turn it all into a lightning-fast read.

If you're not excited yet, don't worry. I'm excited enough for the both of us. Because I know what's in store for you when you're done with this book.

Sure, you'll know how to write FAST.

But more importantly, you'll discover your spark.

2 Why You Hate Writing

I guarantee you, someone out there got this book, reached this chapter, shook her head and frowned. Then she smiled (almost laughing at the rest of us), and thought to herself, *I don't hate writing. I LOVE writing!*

If that person is you, please forgive me. I've got to talk to the rest of the readers for a chapter. The 90% of people who (like me) have always felt that writing is agony. You can still read along, and see what mere mortals go through. But please sit quietly, and don't snicker.

Now then, back to you. Pay no attention to her. She's probably off doing some creative writing exercise anyway. We're alone now, and we can talk about the truth of this writing crap.

You hate it, don't you? Yeah, I feel your pain.

There's nothing worse than knowing you have to plant your butt in that chair and pound furiously at the keyboard for hours on end, thinking the whole time that your work is probably going to be terrible, and another day "writing" will have been wasted.

I know you want to give up. I know you want to chuck the computer out the window. I know you want to scream at the top of your lungs sometimes.

I know.

And that's why I decided to take this chapter and explain exactly why you hate it so much. Why it's so frustrating.

And how to beat it.

Because once you see *why* you hate it, you'll begin to see

exactly what you're doing wrong.

And then, best case scenario, you'll be as excited about your writing as our snickering friend.

Or the worst-case scenario, you can get through the writing you've just gotta get through.

Like I am now.

It's Okay, You Can Admit It

It's probably sacrilegious to talk about what a terrible, evil thing writing is. Especially in a book *about* writing. After all, kids might be reading this. We don't want them to think writing's so awful, do we?

Too bad. The first step in your road to recovery is to understand that we all hate writing. Even that goody-goody from the previous segment hates it (although she'd never admit it). She might not hate it as *often* as you or I do, but you'd better believe she's got her moments.

You're not alone.

To one degree or another, we all hate writing because we all get frustrated by it. In truth, it's more of a love/hate relationship. We love it when we write something that rocks. But we hate it when our writing is atrocious.

And since it seems to be atrocious more often than not, we hate it more often than we love it.

The trouble is that writing is difficult to grasp. It's amorphous. You can't touch it. Or feel it. There are no boundaries or edges to it. You can't put it in a box.

It's a giant, shapeless void that doesn't exist until it's already done. And you can't hold it up and say, "this is my writing."

Oh, sure, you can hold up pages with words on them. But that's just words on pages. That's not your writing. Your writing is the effect and the totality of your expression.

The only way someone can *see* your writing is by actively engaging it. By *reading* it. You can't point to your writing from across the room. You can only point to the *shape* of your writing — the book, the magazine article, the letter.

What this means is that writing has no single result. It does not have a specific, logical outcome, like a mathematical equation would have. It's all fuzzy. It's all aesthetic. Even two profession-

al editors at major publishing houses would edit this very manuscript in completely different ways.

But there's no "right" way to do it. Sure, you can be grammatically correct enough to impress your English teacher, but then a book like *Trainspotting* comes along, and offers a new "right" way. What about that? Hmm?

And since there's no "right" way, there also can't be a "wrong" way. So how do you know if yours is any good or not? You use the same gauge most writers use. You end up comparing your writing to what you've read elsewhere.

And that can be a killer.

Excuses, Excuses

When you're afraid your work won't hold up to comparison, what's the first thing you do? Write? Of course not. The first thing you do is make excuses.

And don't tell me you don't. I know you do. I hear excuses every time I ask my students how their writing is going.

One of the biggest excuses is some form of the "I'm not good enough" category. You don't write because you're convinced your writing isn't ready for prime time.

Maybe you've got a favorite author whose words you compare yours to. The guy has probably been writing for thirty years, but if the first few sentences you plop on the page aren't as good as his, you're immediately certain there's no hope for you.

Let me say right now, you *are* good enough. And you'll be even better when you stop comparing your work to other writers. We'll get to more of this idea later on.

Another major excuse is the time thing. You don't have time. You just moved house. You're studying for your PhD. You just got married. Or divorced. You had kids. You changed jobs. You moved to another city. You've been away on business. You've had to look after a sick relative. You've had to fulfill your duties as mayor. Whatever.

Believe it or not, that's just your way of avoiding it. The busiest person in the world still needs to eat, sleep and... do other things. You could steal an extra twenty minutes a day if you wanted to. And I'll show you how to use those twenty minutes most effectively in the coming chapters.

Then there's the "nothing to say" excuse. You don't think you've got anything to write about. But your road is unique. You've got *plenty* to write about! Even if someone else has already written about it, your voice is original. Add your spark!

How about the "I'm overwhelmed by it" excuse? You know. "A screenplay is too big a project." "I don't think I'm ready for that." Bah humbug! It may be true, but to use it as an excuse for not writing is weak and spineless. Just write it! If it's terrible, you'll learn something, and your next one will be better.

Or the "writing is boring" excuse. You get fidgety. You find it tedious. Your brain goes numb when you attempt it. I won't say too much about this excuse, because when you've finished this book, you'll never even think this one again.

Excuses all come from the same place. You make excuses when you're scared. When you're convinced your writing is terrible. When you think you'll be wasting your time by doing it.

The remedy isn't where you think it is. You're looking in the wrong place. Where you need to look, instead, is inside your brain.

Meet Your Brain

As a writer, it helps to understand this grey matter inside your skull. After all, it's your single most important tool, right?

Now, technically, scientists are already discovering that what I'm about to say isn't quite right. But for our purposes, it's the perfect analogy. And it's a great way to understand why you hate writing so much. So I'm using it. Science be damned.

In simplistic terms, your brain has two sides.

The Right-brain and the Left-brain.

The Right-brain is the creative, intuitive, free-thinking, artistic side of your brain. Your Right-brain is the side that plays the guitar and thinks about art, and comes up with crazy ideas and has lots of "hunches." It even drives your car for you, until you suddenly snap out of your trance and realize you can't remember driving those past ten minutes.

The Left-brain is the side that snapped you out of it.

The Left-brain is the analytical, logical, problem-solving, scientific side of the brain. Your Left-brain is the side that organizes your desk and plans your day, and decides you'd better not

have that extra piece of chocolate. It does the math and keeps you from making a total fool of yourself in public (mostly).

Everyone has (and needs) both sides. Some people may tend toward one or the other, but both sides work their magic at all times. It's an elaborate dance of give-and-take.

But can you see the problem for writers?

The problem is that both sides are always dancing with each other. Interfering. And writing demands the effective use of *both* sides of your brain. Not just one. Both. Each side in turn.

And the reason you hate writing so much is because you start analyzing your work before you're done pouring it onto the page. Your Left-brain won't let your Right-brain do its job.

That may work well for daily living, but it's a killer for your writing. Because you can't write effectively without giving both sides their chance to shine.

Your Right-brain gets the words on the page. The Left-brain makes them sing.

Everybody's a Critic

Since I'm a movie guy, I have another analogy.

I call them the Oscar-winner and the Movie Critic.

Tell me if you recognize this scenario.

One day, you have a brilliant idea for a story (a screenplay, a novel, whatever). You love it. It's fantastic! This may be the best idea you've ever had in your whole life.

Inside your mind, there's this little voice. I call him the Oscar-winner. And every time you come up with an idea, the Oscar-winner inside your mind goes nuts. He loves it. He thinks it's the best idea since canned tuna. (He thinks your movie idea is going to win him an Oscar, see. Hence his name.)

But the problem is that the Oscar-winner loves *every* idea you come up with. Just the fact that you *have* an idea, sends the Oscar-winner into fits of hysteria. This idea is amazing! I'm so totally *pumped* about this one! This one's going all the way!!!

And then you start writing.

And then you notice the other voice inside your head. I call him the Movie Critic. He starts looking over what you've written. But he's a critic, so he starts pointing out all its flaws and imperfections.

Which *can* be a good thing. You don't want to send your work out flawed, right?

But this voice isn't like a real movie critic. This one criticizes *everything*. He doesn't offer a balanced review. He just shreds everything. "This is terrible." "That's horrible." "That over there is downright embarrassing."

And before you know it, you've stopped writing, because the Movie Critic has quashed the Oscar-winner's enthusiasm. (Now he can't even *imagine* winning an Oscar. ...What, with *that* crap?)

You hate writing because you're judging yourself every step of the way. The Oscar-winner is the Right-brain. The Movie Critic is the Left-brain. You need both. You couldn't write your project on the enthusiasm of the Movie Critic. And you couldn't objectively judge your project on the critique of the Oscar-winner.

If you can recognize those two voices in your mind, you can give each their time in the spotlight. And you can yank them off-stage when they've overstayed their welcome.

Your Head is Faster than Your Hands

But there's an even deeper problem.

As it turns out, your brain is just too fast. (When was the last time you got *that* nice a compliment?!)

It's true.

Those little neurons are firing in your head at lightning speed. They're forming shapes. Ideas. Brilliance.

But your fingers are madly clicking away, trying desperately to keep up. Unfortunately, they're out here in the real world. Your fingers can't move at the speed of thought. So it's kinda like when you fall into a swimming pool. The resistance of the water is so strong, you can't just jump out again. You have to climb.

So imagine you're writing a page. You've got a clear idea of where you're going on that page. But as you get into it, suddenly those synapses start firing like crazy. Ideas spark ideas.

You get halfway through a sentence, and your brain shoots out in a new direction. Problem is, it's not the direction you intended to go on this page. But in the interest of speed (or "getting into the rhythm"), you follow that direction.

And then a couple paragraphs later, you realize you've gone astray. You're dangling precariously on the edge of this branch.

Not quite sure where you were going with this thread. Not quite sure how to tie all this back into your original idea.

You're lost. And frustrated. Again.

If this happens every time you try to write, it's no wonder you hate it so much! You equate "writing" with "impossible," because you can't harness your ideas.

And before you know it, you're in trouble. You're overwhelmed. It feels like you can't stay focused. And if you can't get through one page, how are you gonna complete a whole book? Why not just forget the whole thing?

Sound familiar?

The Idea Factory

It's not surprising that your brain is single-handedly responsible for most of your writing woes.

After all, your brain is where it all comes from. I call it the Idea Factory. And as an Idea Factory, your brain is pretty darned efficient.

Too efficient, sometimes.

Now, if you haven't been giving your brain enough stimulation (or the right *kind* of stimulation), you might think your Idea Factory is closed — out of business. You reach for an idea. You struggle to find it. You think and think until you have a headache. But, alas, you can't come up with an idea to save your life. That frustration is probably the biggest single killer of all failed writing careers. (They call it "Writer's Block.")

But when you stimulate your brain properly (which we'll get to in the Focus section), your Idea Factory kicks into overdrive. See, your mind is designed to come up with ideas. That's all it does. So if you let it, it will.

In fact, it'll come up with too many. It doesn't know when enough is enough, so it just keeps throwing ideas at you.

(If you don't have this problem yet, you're probably thinking it would be a *great* problem to have. But I assure you, it creates a whole new set of troubles.)

What happens is you get out there on a limb, and suddenly you have so many different possible directions to take it, you get paralyzed. Which idea is right? Which idea is best? Should I take my story *this* way or *that* way?

And you're back to square one.

Stopped. And struggling.

Here's what's really going on. Your idea exists in your mind, where all ideas are perfect. (Your Oscar-winner can confirm that for you.) It's perfect inside your mind because it's fuzzy around the edges. Your brain fills in the gaps. It says, "Don't worry about that missing part, something brilliant will go there."

But when you put it on the page, suddenly it's not as good. All those missing parts are just gaps. You read your work back, and it's nowhere near as good as it was in the Idea Factory. And the discrepancy kills you. You think you're terrible. And you run screaming into the other room.

You don't want to do it anymore. It never comes out right.

Two Different Worlds

It's just the difference between "Potential" and "Reality."

In your mind (when you think up this great idea), it's potentially brilliant. But look. *All* ideas are potentially brilliant. (In fact, when people come up to me and say they've got a great idea for a movie, I reply, "Excellent! How good is the screenplay?")

If you want the *reality* to be brilliant, you need to express your idea in the most effective way possible. And that's a judgment call. It's up to you to find the best words.

When you start typing, you're converting that potential into reality. And reality is never as glamorous as potential. Never.

You read your words back, and they bore you to tears.

Or they're confusing.

Or they're lame. Ineffective. Decidedly *not* compelling.

And you think you'll never get your idea out right. You get frustrated and angry and upset.

And you hate writing. And you vow never to do it again.

Understand this. You can — absolutely and positively — turn your idea into a reality as rich and accurate as what you had in your mind. Yes, you can. Yes. You can. Stop shaking your head.

You need to understand that this is a process. Yes, there are talented geniuses that fly through it without batting an eye. But for the rest of us, there's the process.

And that's what FAST is all about.

Taking your idea from potential to reality.

Judge, Jury and Executioner

It's important to understand how this Idea Factory works.

It never runs out of ideas. That's its whole job.

Writer's Block is an imaginary thing. You only run into it when you stop stimulating your mind. See, the Idea Factory will churn out an endless number of ideas. I guarantee you it's limitless. The well will *never* go dry, if you stimulate it properly.

But there are some rules here. You've got to tap into the well. You've got to go with the flow.

You hate writing because you're expecting the Idea Factory to pump out *writing*. But it doesn't. It pumps out *ideas*. It's your job to harness those ideas and then shape them into your writing.

When you judge yourself too early, you break the production line of the Idea Factory.

Listen, one of the reasons speed writing is so effective is that it taps into the way your brain is designed to work. You're working *with* it, rather than *against* it the whole time.

Always remember: You can judge yourself later. If you stop doing it now, your writing speed will rocket forward.

And I'll tell you something. It was one of my biggest lessons.

I used to spend most of my writing time re-reading what I'd just written. Fixing, adjusting, tweaking. Notice that Tweak is the *last* step in the FAST System. That's because you just can't write if you don't let yourself go through the process.

When you do, that well produces more than you can handle.

I'll Get to It Later

No self-respecting book on writing would be complete without mentioning procrastination.

For some reason, we writers just love to do it. It's one of our favorite things.

When things haven't been going well, you look at that chair in front of the computer. And it terrifies you. You feel a little pain in your stomach.

But wait. What *is* that? Maybe you should go to the doctor! That's a sensible thing to do. So you go to the doctor.

And when you get back (it turned out you were fine), you

look at the chair again. But hey! The washing hasn't been done! You're not a slob, and you can't write with all this mess! So you get up and do it. In fact, while you're at it, it's been way too long since you did any dusting, too. Might as well get it all out of the way, so you can focus on your writing. And hey, while you're at it, you can't write on an empty stomach.

Oh, you'd write — no, you really would — but you're just never very productive when you're hungry—

Stop. Right now!

Procrastination will kill you.

And I don't mean that figuratively. I'm dead serious. Procrastination will *kill* you. It's laziness, pure and simple. You can justify it all you want. But if you want to finish your writing, you've got to sit your butt in that chair.

Whenever you're in the mood for procrastination, whip out this book. Crank up the Idea Factory, and jump into gear.

I promise you, it will vanish every time.

And so...

Know this, once and for all. Writing is *not* hard. It is not the painful challenge you think it is.

It's only painful and challenging when you're fighting it. When you're working against the process.

You won't hate writing when it's fun.

You'll tend to write *well* when you enjoy it.

And you'll only write brilliantly when you tap into it.

Writing well is a simple matter of tapping into the Idea Factory, and then harnessing what comes out of it, and shaping that into effective communication.

In the next chapter, we're going to take an in-depth overview of the FAST System. You'll see the exact process that allows you to do it, quickly and easily.

And then you'll love writing as much as the woman at the start of this chapter.

Just don't snicker at the ones who still struggle, okay?

You were there once, too, y'know.

3 Meet the FAST System

This chapter is the big one. In a few minutes, the way you think about writing is going to change forever.

So I should warn you. Do *not* drop this book and leap into your writing when you finish this chapter. It'll be tempting. You'll want to. But don't.

Please remember — this is only the final chapter of “The Setup” section. We're still just beginning! The idea might be clear, but we're *not* at the Payoff yet.

In fact, this chapter is only an overview. This book is structured in a very particular way to have a very specific effect.

It's designed to take you on a journey.

A journey *through* the FAST System. So that when you finish the book, you'll do more than just understand it. You'll *feel* it. And be able to *apply* it.

Now I've probably hyped this thing way too much. Maybe you're even skeptical at this point.

But it doesn't matter. Because you're about to see it for yourself. Last chapter, we looked at why you hate writing. This chapter, we'll explode every one of those reasons.

And because of the eye-opening you're about to have, it will be tempting to think you've got it all figured out. Just remember, the rest of the book goes into a lot more detail. And the picture won't be clear until we're done.

That's what good Setup and Payoff is all about.

There. I've said my piece. Let's meet the FAST System.

A systematic approach to writing that generates better quality quickly.

Writing FAST: How to Write Anything with Lightning Speed

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