Contents

1

Introduction (or A Different Kind of Writing Book)

These days everyone is a "content creator." This is because, as one marketing consultant explains, "every organization must produce valuable, education based content in order to compete in business today."[1]

The same is true for churches, nonprofits, ministries, and seminaries: just about every organization has to produce written material of some sort. And for that reason, writing is increasingly considered a normal part of many ministry leaders' regular responsibilities. They write blogs or newsletters for their congregations or networks, share lessons for other practitioners, and write books to extend their preaching or teaching ministry to a broader audience. Sometimes organizations encourage these projects and reduce a leader's other responsibilities to make time for writing. Sometimes a leader's writing is a personal ambition and not formally part of the job description. Either way, writing increasingly is an important milestone in many people's ministry careers.

So if everyone is expected to write, does that mean everyone is a writer?

To quote one of my favorite television characters: "Yes, I suppose, if we broaden the definition of writer to those who can spell."[2]

The real answer is, of course, no. Just because we are expected to write doesn't mean we suddenly become adept at writing or more enthusiastic about it.

That's where this book comes in. The purpose of this book is to help you become a better and more confident writer. I assume you have some responsibility, or desire, to produce curricula, Bible studies, fundraising newsletters, blog posts, supporter updates, maybe even a book. And while you may have ambitions to write or feel called to write, I suspect it's just as likely that you feel pressure to write. Someone (your congregation, denomination, professional network, conference attendees) has asked you to write, but the idea intimidates you. You say, "The thing is, I'm not really a writer." Maybe you have a project in mind but have written, to date, exactly zero words. Maybe you've gotten started and the words are all terrible and you just want to give up.

If you're feeling any of this, don't worry. If you need help figuring out what to write about, who you are writing for, how to get started, and how to see a project through to the end, this book is for you.

Put another way, the goal of this guide is to demystify the writing process by treating writing like a craft. In any craft—take woodworking, for example—there are tools, processes, and best practices that can turn a brand-new beginner into a competent craftsman. Over time, as a competent craftsman becomes more comfortable with the tools and processes, he becomes a master craftsman.

In the same way, there are tools, processes, and best practices for writing that can help you grow from wherever you are now as a writer to be both more confident *and* more competent in your work.

How This Book Is Different

Most books, guides, workshops, blog posts, and conferences about writing—at least, the ones I've read and attended—typically emphasize a couple of things: either self-expression or getting published. These are both important topics. Guides that encourage self-expression are helpful because at some point every writer has to summon at least enough courage and confidence to start writing. Overcoming the fear of a blank page or the fear of criticism is essential. But it's the very beginning of the process. There's a lot more to writing than self-expression.

At the same time, learning to build a platform, connect with an audience, and find your place in the market are important, too, especially for a writer who's trying to make a living or supplement their income by writing. But being published is the end of the process. There's a lot more to writing than simply "getting discovered."

There's another type of resource out there that addresses style and other sentence-level mechanics of good writing. Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, a classic desk reference for writers, editors, and students for decades, falls into this category. And it's an essential resource. But it assumes a good many things, including that you are writing and need to get better.

But what if you're *not* writing and need to get *started*? What if you feel comfortable preaching, teaching, or speaking but freeze up in front of a blank screen? What if people keep telling you, "You should write a book!" and you have no idea what you would write about and who would even read it?

This book will help you answer those questions.

Part 1 will help you identify your unique contribution—what you ought to write about—as well as your specific audience—who you ought to write for.

Part 2 will walk you through the writing process in three stages:

1. **Planning:** choosing your specific topic and what you have to say about it
2. **Drafting:** getting words on an empty page
3. **Revising:** turning those words on the page into a composition you are proud to share publicly

That's it. That's the whole process. And it may sound too simple. But if you internalize this process, follow it, and learn to trust it, your writing will improve. I can't promise your life will change or that you'll find fame and fortune. But you'll write better.

"The" Process and "Your" Process

Please understand I'm not trying to reduce the creative process to a series of steps that guarantee results. There are no three easy steps to writing the next great American novel or best-selling self-help book or ministry manifesto. The reason for emphasizing the process is that you will become discouraged at some stage while writing. Guaranteed. If you don't realize that stage is a predictable part of the process and that *everyone* gets discouraged here, you will give up. And that would be a shame.

Learning the process and trusting the process takes some of the anxiety out of the work. That's ultimately what I'm trying to do—to remove some non-essential anxiety from your life. You're welcome.

Emphasizing the process also is not intended to suggest that writers are, in the end, just paragraph-producing vending machines. There's a difference between *the* process and *your* process. Here's an example from a different creative process: cooking.

Imagine two people who enjoy cooking. One likes to follow a recipe the first few times she makes a new dish to get a sense

of the basics before she starts to experiment. She likes to measure everything carefully first. She washes all the dishes and starts with a clean kitchen, organizes all the ingredients at the beginning, and cleans up as she goes. The other, God bless him, takes a different approach. He may glance over a couple of recipes to get a lay of the land, and then he'll wing it. Instead of measuring carefully, he works in pinches, dashes, and smidges. He leaves open containers and empty cartons and dirty utensils on every available flat surface until whatever he's making goes into the oven to bake or onto the stove to simmer. Then he addresses the mess.

Each cook works differently. Both ways, food ends up on the table. Both meals taste great. And, when it's all said and done, both cooks follow the same basic process:

They plan—make decisions about what they're going to make and how.

They make—chop, mix, proof, julienne, etc.

They refine—season, finish, present, eat.

Even though the individual approaches are different (and probably cause the other person stress), both are working the same fundamental process.

The same is true for writing. Every writer works uniquely. Some draft detailed outlines, color-code notecards, carefully organize a digital filing system, and then systematically draft page after page of prose before making their final revisions. Others work from hastily sketched outlines—or none at all—or thoughts and ideas recorded in fourteen different notebooks, journals, napkins, or grocery receipts all over the apartment, never to be found again. They dash out sentences or paragraphs here and there, until, eventually, it all comes together as an actual document. Some read and

talk and read and talk and bore friends and family with the intricate details of their "writing project" long before—*eons* before, if you ask the friends and family—they type a word of it. Some work best in the morning, some at night; some in short daily increments, some in long reclusive weekend retreats. No matter what, when it's all said and done, everyone plans, drafts, and revises, if each in their own way.

The purpose of this guide is to *familiarize* you with the process—plan, draft, revise. It includes exercises to help you *internalize* the process—trust it and own it—so that *the* process becomes *your* process.

Instead of focusing on self-expression or getting published, we're going to spend our time getting better at the craft of writing. We'll talk about developing habits and improving self-awareness. The good news is, the process we unpack in the pages that follow will give you greater confidence and competence, not only in writing, but in any creative work you may do—from preaching to project management. If we can demystify the process, we can master it. And then you can confidently start and finish projects that intimidated you before.

Fine. But who are you and why should I listen?

I've been writing professionally for about a dozen years. In that time, I've written books and articles and blog posts, email newsletters, sermons and book reviews, a doctoral dissertation—just about anything you might need to write. Which is to say that I have more than a decade of experience figuring out who I am as a writer, who I write for, and practicing and personalizing the process.

More relevant for you at the moment, I have coached first-time writers, many of whom are ministry practitioners. I did this first as an editor for *Leadership Journal* (a former publication from Christianity Today International) and later as a service for publishers who

were publishing first-time authors. Now it's a key part of my job at Redeemer City to City. Our organization's vision is to see the great cities of the world transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. One ingredient in city transformation is locally produced and contextualized materials that help leaders communicate the gospel to the hearts of their neighbors. That is, one ingredient is competent writing. Competent writing produced by people who don't necessarily feel like competent writers. On every habitable continent of the planet, I meet with groups of pastors to help them determine their unique contribution, understand their target reader, and internalize the creative process. The material in this book has empowered ministry leaders in Europe and Asia, Africa and Latin America, to find their writer's "voice" and serve their communities confidently. It has been my experience that the material applies across cultures and in numerous languages.

For this reason, I'm confident this resource can help you too. There are exercises throughout the book because the only way to improve in writing is to *write*. You'll read a little and write a lot. The exercises are designed to be most helpful if you apply them to an actual, specific project. So if there's a writing project you've been putting off indefinitely, consider pulling it out of the drawer, blowing the dust off, and using it as the focus of your activities in this guide. Each chapter and activity will move you one step closer to completion.

Whether you're writing because you want to or because you have to, I'm glad you're here. Let's make something great together.

2

I Can Preach (or Teach or Coach . . .). Why Can't I Write?

You should see me swing a golf club. Knees bent, feet shoulder-width apart. I step into the swing, rotate my hips, roll my wrists. If I manage to make contact with the ball, it rolls a few feet and stops in the tee box. Usually I miss the ball completely. The problem is, I grew up playing baseball, and I can't shake the instinct to swing a golf club like a baseball bat. Some people can do both. Good for them. I can't.

People are often surprised to discover a similar dynamic at work in communication. They have years of experience with public speaking and are quite good at it. They can preach down the rafters, keep a classroom full of uninterested teenagers hanging on every word, and walk a cohort of adults through the most tedious of professional training exercises with joy. But when they sit down in a quiet room alone, stared down by a blank white page and blinking cursor, they feel helpless.

They think, *I can teach* (or preach or coach or whatever). *Why can't I write?*

Others feel the opposite. They can churn out coherent, compelling pages of print or blog posts all day long, but they panic in front of real live humans.

Very few people move confidently between oral and written communication. There are notable exceptions, to be sure. But odds are that the celebrity preacher you love to listen to and whose books sell gobs of copies didn't actually write the books. Odds are a team of people who are experts in written communication helped a great deal or did it for him, so that the gifted *oral* communicator could appear to be an expert writer. This process is called "ghostwriting." It's a common practice and not a nefarious one, but it is invisible. It gives the impression that the speaker/author is gifted at all forms of communication, which may not be the case.

Furthermore, it creates a set of expectations to live up to. Increasingly, those of us in ministry are expected to be good at both. If you are a popular speaker with a big or growing platform, it won't be long before a publisher asks you to write a book. Maybe your own congregation will ask. If you lead retreats or conferences or teach or consult and people are helped and encouraged by your work, someone will say to you, "You should really write a book about this." If you are in ministry, chances are you will someday feel pressure to write, whether you aspire to or not.

I don't think everyone should write a book. But you will have to write *something* that you don't want to write or don't feel qualified to write—a newsletter, a blog post, a Bible study. If you serve in ministry, you likely have some ability and some level of comfort communicating orally. And it may be that one of the reasons you don't write more or don't like to write is because it's *hard*, or unnatural, or exhausting. I get it. That's normal. You're not wrong or defective. Over the years I've worked with lots of pastors and

ministry leaders who start to write and feel discouraged. "I preach every week. That's like writing a new chapter of a book every week. I thought I would be good at this. I thought this would be easier. I don't know where to start."

Writing can be difficult for every new writer. But people who communicate orally for a living—pastors and teachers, for example—will feel the differences keenly when they start writing because shifting from preparing and delivering presentations to writing articles or blog posts is a bit like switching from baseball to golf. Both involve smacking a white ball with a long stick. But the tools are different, and using them correctly requires different techniques.

Some Differences between Speaking and Writing

There are significant differences between speaking and writing, and switching between the two presents challenges.

1. A different set of tools available—and not available

Acclaimed American writer Kurt Vonnegut once said, "When I write, I feel like an armless legless man with a crayon in his mouth."[1] If you are a speaker who is beginning in writing, you might feel similarly.

When you speak, you have gestures, tone of voice, volume, presentation slides, video clips, a PA system, screens, live music, handouts—snacks—and other means of capturing and keeping people's attention, expressing shades of meaning, and signaling humor or sarcasm. Those tools are *not* at your disposal in print. And you can't just make up for those things with bold type, all caps, and exclamation marks. (Seriously. You can't. Please don't.)

2. A different relationship with the audience

When you speak, at least in your own familiar context, you know the people well. You know what they find funny or helpful. You can change course in the middle of your presentation when you read expressions or body language and realize that something is unclear or didn't land right. In a real sense, the audience is helping you create the oral presentation in real time. With writing, you have to deliver a finished product to an invisible and possibly unknown audience. They don't know you. They may not be inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt. They can't read your mind and you can't read their faces.

The only constant in the shift from live to print delivery is you.

3. A different priority

Writing well requires time—time for brainstorming, time for preparing, time for drafting, time for revision. Lack of time is a challenge for most people who write. If writing is not your full-time job, there will always be something more urgent and perhaps more important for you to do instead of writing. A friend or church member will need counseling. A student crisis will need attending. An email will require a response. Crises crop up at the most inopportune times. If writing is something you do *in addition to* your job, you will have to make a conscious effort to prioritize your writing time.

In short, being a competent and confident preacher or teacher doesn't necessarily translate into being a competent and confident writer. You can become one, for sure. But you'll have to acquire some new tools and unlearn some habits.

Some Similarities between Speaking and Writing

When you consider the similarities between speaking and writing, you'll see how your experience as an oral communicator has its advantages. There are several ways speaking experience can make you a better writer.

1. As a communicator already, you know your audience well.

Understanding your audience is one of the writer's most important jobs. If you're a pastor, for instance, you definitely know your audience. You perform their weddings and funerals. You baptize or dedicate their children. You pray beside their hospital beds and celebrate their milestones. You have counseled them in their traumas. You have helped them overcome their addictions. Likely, these people also make up your readership, or at least part of it. If, as you write, you keep in mind the known needs and pain points of the people you serve, you'll be much more likely to connect with readers.

2. Your experience developing sermons and lessons and workshops has given you an education in the creative process.

By now you've probably discovered the answers to a few questions about your work habits that every writer needs to answer eventually: What time of day are you most productive? Where do you work best? How do you generate ideas, identify the strongest ones, and develop them into a presentation?

It took me years of writing to learn the answers to questions like these. You may know your answers already.

3. You have a voice.

Many new writers feel a great deal of pressure to write in a clear and distinct voice. They want the kind of writing style a reader can

recognize immediately as belonging to them. This distinct voice is made up of the writer's tone, choice of words, and turns of phrase. It takes many writers years to develop their voice.

An advantage of speaking and teaching is that you have likely found your voice. All that's left to do now, as journalist and best-selling author William Zinsser puts it, is to "Relax and say what you want to say."[2] This is easier said than done, of course. It will take some time to figure out how to translate your voice into print. But if you are accustomed to speaking, you already have something to say, you say it regularly, and you say it in your own unique way.

So take heart. Some of what we do together may be new to you. Some of it may be familiar. But believe me when I say: You can do this.

The most important step is simply to start doing it.

Do It: Reflect on Your Experience

What kind of experience, if any, do you have with preparing presentations, "talks," lessons, workshops, etc.?

What is easiest for you in this process? What's hardest?

What do you find the most fulfilling? Why?

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