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more than words

**How to Think About Writing
in the Age of AI**

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CHAPTER 5

Writing Is Thinking

In every book I've written about writing, every talk I give about writing, I start at the same place: "Writing is thinking."

Writing involves both the *expression* of an idea and the *exploration* of an idea—that is, when writing, you set out with an intention to say something, but as part of the attempt to capture an idea, the idea itself is altered through the thinking that happens as you consider your subject. Anyone who has written has experienced one of these mini-epiphanies that is unique to the way humans write. This will have happened dozens and dozens of times during the writing of this book. As just one example, at the conclusion of the chapter on automation in writing, I engage in an extended metaphor where I say that ChatGPT has shaken the foundation of the house we once thought secure and we are now standing in the street, surveying the cracks. Some folks want to

abandon the house for a “castle in the sky” while I want to make the house “a dream home.”

That metaphor appeared spontaneously while I was first drafting the chapter. Not only did the metaphor feel fresh, but it was the moment that I realized those who come at these issues of what writing means and how we should go about doing it are coming from a fundamentally different base of values from mine. I achieved a moment of empathy with a point of view I don’t agree with. They see an incredible vision of the future. I’m more concerned with preserving what I think is important in the present.

We tend to think of writing as the act of assembling words, but it’s a deeper experience than this. Words may be symbols, but they are not abstractions; they are the method by which we express our ideas. Lots of the writing students produce in school contexts is untethered from ideas, which is one of the reasons writing in school has become so alienating. Without an underlying idea, the words have no importance and very little genuine meaning.

When ChatGPT strings together its tokens in the form of syntax, it is not wrestling with an idea. It is arranging language. There is no intention behind the expression. There is no objective in mind other than each word makes sense next to what comes before and after it relative to the original prompt. It is a technical marvel that this process produces text that seems to be the product of thought, but we shouldn’t confuse that process for the kind of thinking humans do.

The thinking we do when writing is often not linear or even explicable. In his stream-of-consciousness novel *Dr. Sax*, Jack Kerouac describes the task he has set himself as a writer:

The other night I had a dream that I was sitting on the sidewalk on Moody Street, Pawtucketville, Lowell, Mass., with a pencil and paper in my hand saying to myself “describe the wrinkly tar of this sidewalk, also the iron pickets of Textile Institute, or the doorway where Lousy and you and G.J.’s always sittin’ and don’t stop to think of words when you do stop, just stop to think of the picture better—and let your mind off yourself in this work.”

This is thinking by not thinking, by letting the mind wander. The goal is to experience the ineffable and then somehow bring it to life on the page. That we are able to achieve this through writing should be at least as marvel-worthy as the technical feats of generative AI large language models.

Some of my best “writing” happens while walking the dogs or in the twenty or so minutes before getting out of bed in the morning as my brain works on a problem while I’m half-asleep. Everyone has had the experience of walking away from a piece of writing, frustrated at their inability to capture the idea on the page, only to return to the task a day later and have a solution arrive as if by magic. This isn’t magic; it’s our subconscious working away while we’re doing other things. No, we do not and may never fully understand the mechanisms of the full range of our cognition, but this doesn’t stop us from recognizing that human thought is distinct from algorithm-produced syntax.

When some talk about the “basics” of writing, they often mean something like words, sentences, and paragraphs, the organizing units of syntax, the very elements that ChatGPT deploys in creating its simulations of writing. The synthetic text ChatGPT

produces is convincing because we confuse those surface traits for genuine meaning, often imputing (particularly in education contexts) intelligence on text that is, by and large, as featureless and indistinct, though “correct” as possible. It’s interesting that this correctness is conflated with intelligence, perhaps because it is identifiable, explicable, and easy to compare between texts, but this doesn’t mean it is something we should necessarily *value*. In fact, it *isn’t* something we value when we read. No one, save the most pedantic grammar specialists, reads a piece of writing and marvels at its correct placement of commas or lack of dangling modifiers. When we are compelled by something we’ve read, we are inevitably connecting to some deeper human thing.

Reducing good writing to correctness drains it of its humanity.

ChatGPT sentences are like alien invasion movies where the aliens arrive clad in convincing human suits, but eventually the hero, who knows something is up, latches on to an ear and pulls the skin suit free, revealing the lizard scales underneath—only in the case of ChatGPT, we would see a matrix of machine learning braided together.

If we consider writing as the fully embodied practice that it is, words and sentences are not the basics or base units of writing. To start writing, first you need an idea.

As I consider my own thought in the previous sentence, I realize this isn’t quite true. It’s not even a full-fledged idea that’s the base unit of writing. It’s something smaller. Let’s call it a “notion.” If an idea is the atom, the true building block of writing matter, consider the notion a subatomic particle, perhaps along

with the “inkling,” “sense,” “suspicion,” and “hunch.” See how I’ve just illustrated the thing I’m talking about? My idea that the idea is the base unit of writing has been further complicated by my active thinking about my own idea.

Regardless, something occurs to the writer, and there is an impulse or energy suggesting that this notion can be explored and expressed through language. Only then do sentences come into play. Clearly, sentences are not the building blocks of writing if we are looking at writing through the lens of process.

I have yet to meet a writer who thinks in sentences. First, there is thought—be that an image, an idea, a notion, or whatever—and only then are there words. Often in writing, the final specifics of the words used to express the ideas and capture the thinking are the last part of the process. The ideas in the book you are reading will be very close to what I’ve put on the page at the end of my first draft (though several revisions will invariably continue to shape those ideas). However, the specific words used to express these ideas will change quite a bit, sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes in much larger ways when it becomes clear that the words do not capture the idea I’m wrestling with. (I just moved *however* from following *quite a bit* to the start of that string of clauses. Why? It seemed like the right thing to do.) More than once, my editor will make a marginal note along the lines of “What are you trying to say here?” and I will have to go back and find the proper language to express the idea that is already present (at least in my mind), but not sufficiently clear to the audience.

This process is not always good fun. Thomas Mann said, “A writer is a person for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people,” by which he meant that if you are going to truly

write, you are required to engage in this struggle and it will not be easy. To write is to care about what has been written. The idea you are attempting to express may evade capture no matter how diligent the pursuit.

One of the lies of ChatGPT is that it makes writing look *easy* or, by extension, if we're writing well that it should feel easy. The speed with which the text unfurls down the screen suggests that it *must* be superior to humans because we can't achieve anything like it. But this speed is merely evidence that ChatGPT's output is not the by-product of thinking, and the specifics of the idea expressed by the text is immaterial to the task at hand. If there is an idea in the ChatGPT-produced text, it is an incidental by-product of the process, not an intentional outcome. The ChatGPT process is identical if you ask for a limerick about a toaster possessed by demons . . .

*There once was a toaster possessed,
By demons, it couldn't digest.
It popped up some bread,
With flames, it turned red,
Toast from hell, it was surely the best!*

. . . or an analysis of Kissinger's philosophy of realpolitik and its role in President Nixon's outreach to Communist China. (I won't bore you with that one; the limerick is much more fun.)

Writing is inevitably a process of discovery for the writer. One of the reasons I muster the gumption to write a book every so often is to gather a couple of years' worth of thinking across many smaller pieces into a cohesive whole so I can better understand

what I have been exploring, idea-wise, over that period. There are many aspects of this book I have been thinking about for years, but the final form of the thought will not come into being until I write it in the book itself. And truthfully, even enshrining these ideas in a book will not put them to rest once and for all. This is why you will have a hard time finding writers who enjoy revisiting their previous work. The most common feeling is a compulsion to further revise those ideas, something not possible when the book's text is fixed.

Rebecca Solnit, author of more than twenty books, including *Men Explain Things to Me* and *A Paradise Built in Hell*, was asked for her feelings about ChatGPT and other LLMs after the revelation that her books had been part of a database of pirated texts that were used to train generative AI applications.¹

I'm a writer because I want to write. I don't want a machine to do it for me. I'm a writer because the process of writing is creative in what I do with language, but also in how I understand the subject. I often feel that I don't think hard enough about things until I have to write about them. Often my understanding changes in the process of writing. That's exciting for me. That's my own development, which, ideally, is somehow also something I can share with the readers.

I'm engaging in thinking, and what is the point of handing the job of thinking itself over, of understanding something more deeply, seeing the pattern that underlies? Why would I want to give up that profound experience?

Where I would quibble with Solnit is on this notion of “handing the job of thinking itself over” because outsourcing text production to ChatGPT is not handing thinking over so much as abandoning thinking altogether. This, however, is exactly right: “I often feel that I don’t think hard enough about things until I have to write about them. Often my understanding changes in the process of writing. That’s exciting for me.” It *is* exciting. It is why, despite Thomas Mann’s lamentations about the difficulty of writing and the challenge of making a living through writing, there are still millions and millions of people who engage in this struggle on an ongoing basis. It is the difficulty of writing that makes it enormously satisfying.

Some of you may believe that this is all fine for professional writers who *want* to write and don’t mind the struggle. What’s wrong with others who do not enjoy this tedium finding relief in a tool that will do this thing that is unpleasant and difficult and not rewarding in the way writers seem to find it?

As we’ll see in a later chapter, this is a healthy impulse that may indicate some writing really doesn’t need to be done, but to abandon all writing to generative AI is to abandon thinking itself.

Of course, writing is not the *only* way we think, but it is a truly excellent way to think. The realm in which we think while we’re writing is called the *rhetorical situation*, a concept that is illustrated by thousands of writing instructors across America every semester by drawing an equilateral triangle on the board and placing the words *message*, *audience*, and *purpose*, each at one point in the triangle. The illustration is meant to convey the equal importance of these elements and that altering one element will inevitably require changes in the others.

For example, because this is a book targeted toward general audiences, I am taking the time to illustrate and explain the concept of a rhetorical situation, a concept that may be unfamiliar to some of the people I am communicating with. If this book were solely intended for writing instructors, I would assume my audience knows what I’m talking about and move on.

When we write, we are conveying a message to a specific audience (with specific needs, attitudes, and knowledge) in order to achieve a specific purpose. In some cases, the purpose can be quite simple in theory—say, a set of instructions for a sequential task like changing the oil on a car—but then prove to be much more complicated in practice as the purpose intersects with the audience.

How mechanically inclined is this audience in general? What is their experience with car maintenance overall? What is their existing knowledge of appropriate terminology? A set of instructions for someone who can barely tell the difference between a flat-head and a Phillips-head screwdriver must be different from those for someone who has previous experience in this domain.

When the purpose becomes multifaceted and audience needs, attitudes, and knowledge may vary at the individual level, but the writing must work across these variations, the complexities and choices become infinite. Every moment I am working on this book, I am both shaping my ideas and considering my audience(s). My big-picture purpose is to be persuasive, but underneath this, I must also be informative, trustworthy, and entertaining; otherwise, people are not going to read my book.

These calculations when working inside a rhetorical situation are both constant and without definitive answers. They

require human judgment and are beyond the capability of any large language model, no matter how powerful they may become. That's not quite right. It's not just beyond the capability of a large language model; it is something an LLM is entirely unconcerned with.

Here I am going on about how complex it is to think inside a rhetorical situation, but at the same time, I must acknowledge that it is not a particularly advanced skill for we humans, that in fact, it is innately human and can be done even by wee humans. The first writing I was ever asked to complete in first and second grade was situated in a fully realized rhetorical situation. Every Monday, Mrs. Craig would hand us large sheets of newsprint paper with blank space on the top and four lines for entering cursive text below. She asked us a question: "What did you do this weekend?"

Our audience was Mrs. Craig herself, who was either a wonderful performer or genuinely interested in what the first- and second-grade kids in her classroom had done that weekend. (I'm pretty sure it was the latter.) We were to write a sentence or two in the provided lines and then illustrate the events in the blank space above.

Because of those pesky and persistent fine motor coordination issues, I struggled with these assignments. But oh, I was happy to tell Mrs. Craig about what I'd done that weekend. My mother kept these for years, turning them over to me when she and my father moved out of the home I grew up in. The newsprint paper practically crumbled in my hands. It was fascinating to see who I was, what I was concerned with the first times I was asked to write.

Judging from the evidence, I tried to make my weekend news interesting, informative, and entertaining.

Saturday we went sledding and I hit my head. Ouch! I feel better now.

We got a dog whois [sic; it took me years to learn to correct this default language to "whose"] name is Melvin. He is cute but he bites me too. Ouch!

Apparently, I was working on a theme.

Telling Mrs. Craig about my weekend prepared me for third grade with Mrs. Goldman, when, for the first time, I learned that thinking clearly inside a rhetorical situation matters and that when we write, there are real stakes attached.

Writers of middling accomplishment are not superheroes, but if we were, this is my origin story, the moment I was bitten by a radioactive spider or blasted with gamma rays. To my knowledge, there was no radiation involved, but there was peanut butter and also jelly.

The ask from Mrs. Goldman was simple: *Write a list of instructions for making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.*

I don't remember the doing of this part, but as I wrote out my list in my terrible handwriting, I assume I worked as diligently as I did on any other school assignment, which is to say not very. I still liked school at this point in my life, finding it a nice place to do a few things that seemed interesting, hang out with my friends, play with the class pet (a guinea pig), and once a year in the fall make peanut-and-caramel-covered apples on a stick, everything a kid could want from life.

After we finished with our writing, Mrs. Goldman produced the necessary fixings for making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and then asked us to use those fixings while following our own directions to the letter. This is how I found myself knuckles-deep in a jar of Centrella-brand creamy peanut butter, because in my instructions I failed to indicate that you should use a knife to spread the peanut butter on the bread. I know these things happened not because I have some kind of eidetic memory but because there is a picture of me captured by Mrs. Goldman in the moment in my stylish red-and-black-checked flannel, hand shoved inside the jar, grinning. I use it as my avatar on my newsletter as a reminder.

In that moment, I am a young person having fun while learning about writing, experiencing a lesson I've never forgotten, that there is an intention and audience on the other side of things you write, so spending some time considering them before you start writing is only sensible.

We tend to view thinking as a solo activity, emblemized by Rodin's famous statue of *The Thinker* hunched over, fist on chin, absorbed in thought. But with writing, at some point, the thinking ends, and we uncurl ourselves and present the product of our thoughts to an audience.

This, then, is the act of thinking through writing, taking a turn into *communication*, a word that also conjures connections to other words like *community* and *communion*. Writing starts with a kind of communion between ourselves and our minds and ends when this communion is joined with others as an act of community. The intersection between authorial intention and what is received by the audience involves a constant exchange where

the author attempts to transmit the idea to the audience with the greatest fidelity possible, but while doing so, the idea may shift, throwing both author and audience in a different direction. The writing is experienced, used, and thought about by others, who may decide to do some writing of their own in turn. It is an endless, recursive process, an ongoing conversation. Even in something like a journal or diary, where the writing is personal, the writer is engaging in reflective thinking that will shape their perceptions and identity and how they interact with the world. In this way, ultimately even this private act will impact others in the community.

In Mrs. Goldman's class, I learned that a failure to think of the impact of one's writing comes with consequences, that we must be responsible for our words, not only because they are ours but because they will impact the lives of others.

Cogito, ergo sum—"I think, therefore I am"—Descartes's famous declaration of his knowledge of his own existence. If writing is thinking—and it is—then it must be viewed as an act of our own becoming. In Mrs. Goldman's class that day, through writing, I first recognized my existence in the world, the possibility that I was an agent, responsible for himself and capable of having an impact on others.

It was a gift I've never forgotten.