

DAVID PERELL



The Story of Write of Passage

It's the one-year anniversary of [Write of Passage](#). One year ago, I flew from New York to Mexico City for 10 days of filming and curriculum development. Since then, I've taught more than 500 students from more than 40 countries. Here is the story of how I built the course and the lessons I've learned from the first year of running it.

A course called [Building a Second Brain](#) unlocked my passion for writing, which became the cornerstone of Write of Passage. The course, taught by Tiago Forte, transformed my relationship with information. In just five weeks, I went from fighting a tsunami of information to surfing the waves of information overload. I went from fighting the accelerating digitization of the world to working with the computer in my pocket to improve my thinking. And I went from fighting the evaporation of memory of human memory to systematically collecting the best ideas I consumed.

My mentality towards ideas shifted. Growing up, I was a terrible student. I graduated high school with a 2.8 GPA, college with a 2.9, and my SAT scores weren't any better. As my father said to me recently: "You were the kind of kid who started his homework in the back of the car on the way to school." Two years before, I earned a C in a college writing course. Armed with Tiago's note-taking system, my writer's block disappeared and my speed of creativity exploded. In a matter of six months, I launched a weekly newsletter called [Monday Musings](#) and published essays like [The Algorithmic Trap](#) and [What the Hell is Going On](#).

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As my online audience started to grow, financial advisors reached out for help building theirs. As investing is as close as you can get to academia inside the business world, the finance industry has long had a writing-heavy culture, spurred by famous memos that double as marketing vehicles from top investors like Howard Marks and Warren Buffett. Lured by the success of writers like Morgan Housel and Nick Maggiulli, investment managers hired me to outline their online growth strategy.

Even though I found clients, I despised the repetition of consulting and the demands of client service. Clients had the same problems, so I kept repeating myself when I offered the same solutions to those problems.

In November 2018, I tweeted my goal to help 1,000 people start writing in 2019. I said I would create a course to

show people the roadmap, and I asked interested readers to share their email. Within 24 hours, I received hundreds of responses from people on every continent. For the first time, I knew there was a demand for the course. But now, I had to create it.

Later that month, I pitched Tiago on co-creating an online writing course. We'd market it as a sequel to *Building a Second Brain*. I'd seen firsthand that his most successful students used his system to share ideas, so my course would give students a blueprint to become prolific creators. Moreover, I'd developed a philosophy of living on the Internet. I'd met friends on the Internet and used it to attract an outstanding roster of guests on the North Star podcast. The pitch lasted less than five minutes before Tiago said yes. Jazzed by the opportunity, we agreed to film the course in Mexico City and launch it in mid-2018.

But I had a problem. I didn't have the money to film, edit, and produce the course. I was stuck. I felt like I was standing in mud at the edge of a canyon too wide to jump across, with no bridge to walk to the shining terrain on the other side of the valley.

Then, I received an unexpected gift. Tyler Cowen, one of my all-time favorite writers, gave me an [Emergent Ventures grant](#) to fund the Write of Passage production costs. With it, he built the bridge I needed. The money removed the downside risk of starting the course and paid for me to fly two film producers from Los Angeles to Mexico City, where they worked night and day to film seven pre-recorded modules we still use in Write of Passage today. Without Tyler's grant, none of this course would have been built.



Filming the recorded modules with Tiago in Mexico City

Both Tiago and myself had been writing online for years, so all our marketing was organic. No Facebook ads. No affiliate links. Tiago told his alumni about the course and I emailed my email list of ~5,000 people about it.

We launched the course in April (two months after filming it) with an inaugural price of \$600 and ~150 students. Even though we earned more than \$200,000 in profit from the first two cohorts and saw students like [Packy McCormick](#), [Sid Jha](#), and [Shanu Mathew](#) succeed as up-and-coming online writers, I knew there was room to improve the student experience.

A student named [Will Mannon](#), who participated in the first and second cohorts, called me with a list of suggestions. I was so impressed with his drive and charisma that I hired him as a course manager for the fourth cohort. His responsibilities included restructuring the course curriculum, redesigning the student onboarding experience, creating a master feedback page with alumni suggestions, leading feedback sessions, and improving instructor-to-student emails.

Will was working for a computer security company at the time, so I hired him to work part-time. The contract said he'd work for 10 hours per week, but he blew that number out of the water. He spoke on the phone with almost every Write of Passage student, wrote outstanding follow-up emails after every session, and built camaraderie among his local community of Los Angeles-based Write of Passage students. Moreover, Will's work allowed me to focus on marketing and improving the course instead of running operations and customer support. Halfway through the cohort, Tiago and I called him to formally offer him a full-time position as the director of student experience for [Write of Passage](#) and [Building a Second Brain](#).

He jumped on the opportunity. Once Will signed the contract, we both flew to Tiago's hometown of Mexico City where we planned for 2020. We mapped out our yearly plan and set our strategy for launches, operations, and course improvements. We agreed to redesign the student directory, improve the curriculum with Saturday live writing sessions, and launch an ambassador program for some of our top alumni.

We decided to begin our first Write of Passage cohort of 2020 on February 19. The launch was a success. We raised the price by 50% and still increased the number of new student sign-ups: 130 new students and 68 returning alumni signed up for a total of 198 students. Best of all, the business profits allow us give case-by-case scholarships to people like young students and citizens of countries with weak currencies (Write of Passage costs more than one year of study at one of India's top business schools).

For the fourth cohort, we added an initiation week where students can meet their course-mates at the beginning of the course (while the energy is still high). We also recruited 10 alumni mentors who will support and mentor new students throughout the course.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Build the product you wish existed: I've never done any market research for this course. Instead, I followed my intuition and built the course I wish existed when I began writing. Write of Passage is the classic example of an [Audience-First Product](#). I attracted an audience before I built the product instead of building the product before attracting an audience. The more your audience overlaps with the product you create, the better. If you want to invent something transformative, ignore the data and build a product you wish you could use.

If you want to build a business, build an audience first: I wrote online for 3.5 years before launching *Write of Passage*. In that time, my email list of almost 20,000 people has become my most important professional asset. More than 1 million people visited my website in 2019, many of whom read the entirety of long-form articles like [*Peter Thiel's Religion*](#) and [*What the Hell is Going On*](#). Because of that organic traffic, I can grow the business steadily without paying for acquisition or diluting the quality of the student body.

If you want to start an online business in the future, start writing now and don't pander. Write about what you're interested in. By doing so, you'll attract a group of like-minded people who share your values and interests. As you keep writing, you'll identify opportunities to launch a product for your audience and [guarantee instant demand](#) for it.

The student experience is the most important variable: For high-end products like *Write of Passage*, word-of-mouth is the best advertising channel there is. Morgan Housel once wrote: "Marketing is increasingly cheap. Trust is increasingly expensive." You can buy attention, but you can't buy trust. Building a great product is the most sustainable way to build trust. From cohort-to-cohort, I expect an increasing number of students to sign up for the course from a friend's recommendation, and if those students enjoy the course, they'll recommend it to their friends and spin the marketing flywheel.

Online courses don't benefit from credentials or hold the prestige value of an accredited university. Instead, they must attract students by delivering an exceptional product. That's why improving the student experience and the back-end operations is my number one priority for the foreseeable future.

Fortunately, with testimonials like these, we're off to a good start.

Today 9:49 PM

That was just amazing. Two people in my feedback group were already subscribed to my newsletter, knew of me, and one of them told me her husband was also subscribed and they loved my work and now are considering homeschooling. I'm shocked. Honestly, WoP and the internet changed everything for me. THANK YOU! ❤️



Jen Vermet
@JenVermet



My breakthroughs that took place in Write of Passage have been priceless.

Thank you [@david_perell](#) & [@will_mannon](#) for making this writing class so enlightening. My perspective on the process of writing needed a change. Such a great experience and an amazing community!!

WHAT'S NEXT?

I'm in this for the long-haul. The business is already profitable, and I have no plans to sell it. Moreover, I'm going to keep bootstrapping the business. I don't want to take any investor money because I don't want to justify my decisions to any stakeholders except for my students. That way, I can follow exciting but unproven paths with payoffs that are hard to quantify, such as launching the [Write of Passage Fellowship](#) or Write of Passage For Kids, which will launch this summer. For example, I've ignored the conventional wisdom to invest in affiliate marketing and Facebook advertisements.

The Internet isn't just a technology. It's a way of life. Software impacts every aspect of human life, and people who can best leverage the Internet are well-positioned for the coming decades. I want Write of Passage to evolve beyond a writing course and become a social club too. If the 2010s were about meeting dates online, the 2020s will be about meeting friends online. Write of Passage attracts a tremendous roster of ambitious students who radiate intellectual curiosity.

Long-term, I want to enable life-long friendships, personal growth, and use the Write of Passage ecosystem to help my students build profitable businesses. As they do, they'll become citizens of the Internet and acquire the necessary skills and relationships to thrive in the 21st century.



Annual Review: 2019

The New Year is a time to stop and slow down. It's a time to reflect on the previous year and plan for the upcoming one. Every holiday season, I reserve time to conduct an Annual Review.



Audience-First Products

We've reached a tipping point for the creation of online businesses.



Annual Review 2021

I'll start this Annual Review by reflecting on 2021. I'll share highlights and reflect on the goals I set at the beginning of the year. Later, I'll outline how I plan to improve my life and set a new vision for 2022.

[All essays](#)

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