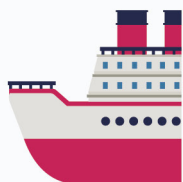


SHIP 30 FOR 30

THE 22



LAWS OF

DIGITAL

WRITING

Master The Fundamentals, Build Your Audience,
and Scale Yourself Online

DICKIE BUSH & NICOLAS COLE

The 22 Laws Of Digital Writing

*Master The Fundamentals, Build Your Audience, and
Scale Yourself Online*

First published by Ship 30 for 30 2021

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First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

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Meet Your Captains

What is Ship 30 for 30?

Ahoy!

[Ship 30 for 30](#) is a cohort-based writing program designed to help you build your daily writing habit, launch your [Social Blog on Typeshare](#), and start “scaling yourself” online.

To date, Ship 30 for 30 has helped more than 2,000 writers get started writing online.

Captain #1: Dickie Bush

Ahoy!

My name is Dickie and I am the creator of Ship 30 for 30.

The idea came as a result of my own struggles learning how to write online. For months, I churned out blog post after blog post, only to feel like I was spinning my wheels and not getting anywhere fast. The problem? No one was reading my work, which meant it was very hard to know whether or not I was writing about things people were interested in, and even worse, a blog post a week felt heavy. I would pour all this time into writing something that nobody even knew existed.

So, after many months of frustration, I decided to change my approach.

I challenged myself to stop writing weekly blog posts and start writing daily “atomic essays”—250 words or less. And instead of publishing them on my own personal website and blog, I decided to publish them on Twitter—where there were already 400 million other users, ready to read.

Almost overnight, everything changed.

My perfectionism? Squashed.

My writing speed? 10x faster.

The number of people reading my work? Exponentially increasing.

In just 30 days, I saw my audience grow by over 500%. I made my first dollar on the Internet. And I woke up everyone morning excited to write, publish, and improve.

I was so blown away by my own results, and so aware of how flawed my original approach to writing online had been, that I just knew there had to be thousands of other aspiring writers, thinkers, educators, and creators out there who were facing the same creative fiction as me.

So, I decided to create a program teaching people exactly what I had just figured out for myself.

I called it Ship 30 for 30: publish (“ship”) 30 Atomic Essays in 30 days.

To date, the program has grown to more than 2,000 writers, evolving from a tiny Slack channel with just me and a handful of aspiring writers to now being one of the largest and fastest-growing writing communities on the Internet.

Captain #2: Nicolas Cole

Ahoy!

My name is Nicolas Cole (but everyone calls me Cole), and I am the co-creator of Ship 30 for 30.

As a teenager, way back in the late 2000s, I had one of the first e-famous gaming blogs on the Internet. I went on to study fiction writing & literature in college, but when I graduated I had no idea how I was going to turn my passion for writing into a career.

From 2014 to 2016, I challenged myself to write one Quora answer per day, every day, for a year. And in a very short amount of time, I went from being a college graduate with a degree in fiction writing and no portfolio to becoming one of the most-read writers on the entire Internet. My writing on Quora accumulated tens of millions of views, was republished in every major publication on the Internet—*TIME*, *Forbes*, *Fortune*, *CNBC*, *Business Insider*, etc.—and eventually, I landed my own column with *Inc Magazine* (where I went on to write 400+ columns and become one of their highest-performing contributors). From there, I went on to build a multimillion-dollar ghostwriting agency, called Digital Press, and eventually wrote a book with everything I had learned after spending nearly a decade writing online: [*The Art & Business of Online Writing*](#).

When I first met Dickie and saw what he was building with Ship 30 for 30, I immediately understood the value.

Writing every single day on Quora changed the entire trajectory of my life.

My own story was a testament to the power of building a daily writing habit, and I knew that if Dickie and I joined forces, we

would be able to help thousands of writers get started sharing their stories, insights, and perspectives online.

Combined with Dickie's incredible idea for a cohort-based learning experience for writers, I brought in 10+ years of online writing insight to create a curriculum for anyone looking to get started.

It had taken me years to learn many of these lessons on my own.

But in Ship 30 for 30, we can shorten your growth curve down to just 30 days.

This book is a compressed version of that curriculum.

Join the next cohort!

Ready to start building your daily writing habit?

Join the next cohort of Ship 30 for 30 here: <https://www.ship30for30.com/>

Introduction

There are two types of writers in the world today.

The first are Analog Writers. These are people who still believe in the days of Hemingway, Faulkner, Dostoevsky, and Bukowski (among others). To become a writer, *they believe*, you must wear a chapeau, smoke a corn cob pipe, stare out the window and wait for inspiration to strike. Better yet, you must detach yourself from the world, find a cabin in the woods (God forbid it has Internet), and dedicate the next 10 years of your life to writing the next Great American Novel. And if you die doing it, even better. You have lived, and suffered, the life of a true “writer.”

The second are Digital Writers. These are people who, in the age of the Internet, have realized the inefficiencies that kept so many talented writers from being heard 30, 40, 50, 100+ years ago. Digital Writers don’t run away from life and seek refuge in a cabin—they incorporate their writing into their daily lives. Digital Writers don’t write by themselves (hiding away in their apartment)—they Practice In Public using social publishing platforms like Twitter, Quora, Medium, etc. Digital Writers don’t guess what readers want to read about—they gather data, learn what works in real time, and iterate on a daily basis.

We believe there has never been a better time in human history to be a writer.

As long as you're a Digital Writer.

1

Law #1: Don't Start A Blog

All new online writers make the same mistake.

They start a blog.

The rationale tends to go something like this:

- “I own my own website/blog. It’s mine.”
- “I can design it & customize it the way I want to.”
- “I get to write what I want to write about.”

Notice how these are all “I” statements. Having a blog, for the vast majority of new online writers, is all about *them*. *Their* own “online home.” *Their* own words, saying what they want to say. Almost none of the emphasis is on the reader.

As a result, many new online writers go through the same painful learning process.

They start a blog. They spend hours (or thousands of dollars) designing it to their liking. Some even get their own logo created (hurrah!). Only to publish their first post or two and

have their words fall on deaf ears. Why? Because nobody knows their blog exists. In order to drive readers, they have to post a link to their blog on social platforms—and what many of these new online writers don't know (yet) is that social platforms don't like external links very much. After all, why would Twitter, Medium, Facebook, or Quora be excited at readers leaving their party to go attend yours?

As a result, many external links (to websites & blogs) published on social platforms get minimal traction.

Instead, you should start a Social Blog.

A Social Blog means writing where readers already are.

Your Twitter profile is, technically, a Social Blog. So is your Medium page. So are all your answers on Quora. When you write where readers already are, you aren't trying to convince them to leave one (very raging) party and head to another (much more quiet) one instead. What you're doing is showing up (BYOW: Bring Your Own Words) ready to add to the fun. As a result, it is exponentially easier for readers to discover your work.

What you gain in legacy blogging ("ownership") you lose in reach, accessibility, and distribution. After all, who cares if you own 100% of your own website & blog if nobody values it?

That said, there is an argument to be made for having your own website and blog as a place of curating your entire library of work, or showing off your "best" posts. So, instead of treating your Twitter or Medium or Quora as a "Social Blog," you can use [Typeshare.co](https://typeshare.co) to create your own Online Home & Social Blog, while simultaneously connecting it to the distribution flywheels of Twitter, Medium, and so on.

- See and measure how each piece of content performs across multiple platforms.
- Gather data validating which topics readers are most interested in.
- Name & Claim your own category by achieving clarity around your most popular content areas & topics.
- And sort your favorite, most-read, most-engaged, most-shared essays, stories, Twitter Threads, and articles on your Social Blog easily for readers.

Social Blogging is the future of Online Writing.

It's all the benefits of owning your own blog (design customization, domain, library of content, etc.)

And all the benefits of writing on social platforms (reach, distribution, social proof, and real-time data feedback loops).

Merged together.

Law #2: Volume Wins

In the world of digital writing, volume wins.

We now live in an algorithmic culture. Online, you don't see the things you want to see—you see the things the algorithm thinks you want to see. How does the algorithm know? Because every time you engage with a piece of content, it learns your preferences and continues to show you relevant, new, up-and-to-the-right trending content that aligns with those preferences.

Which means, in order to get people's attention, you have two strategies:

- Drive traffic to one asset (one article, one book, one product, etc.).
- Drive traffic by creating many assets (many articles, many books, many products, etc.).

The more content you produce, the more times you get to “play the game.”

Think of the Internet as one big wheel of fortune.

Every time you create a piece of content (whether it’s an Atomic Essay, a YouTube video, a TikTok, etc.), you are spinning the Internet’s big wheel of fortune. Sometimes, you spin the wheel and your content goes viral. *A million views! Yay!* Other times, you spin the wheel, and it goes nowhere. *20 views? What the hell?*

Most people do not think about writing in this context.

Instead, they think about writing through the lens of Ernest Hemingway: you retreat into a cabin for a (long) period of time, write your masterpiece, and then release your (one) masterpiece into the world and await critical acclaim.

The Internet laughs at this approach.

On the Internet, one single asset is about as meaningful as a grain of sand on the coast of California. It is so small. Borderline insignificant. And the only way it becomes significant is if, as we said, one of two things happen: you drive significant traffic to that one asset, which the Internet’s wheel of fortune determines to be “the winning asset,” or you create many assets and, over time, more and more people become introduced to your work, your point of view of the world, your style, and finally, this one asset within your library of many.

Writers seem to forget even the best-sellers created in volume.

- Malcolm Gladwell spent 10 years writing for middle-tier magazines, and then another 4 years as a staff writer for The New Yorker, before authoring his first “overnight success” grand-slam bestseller, *The Tipping Point*.
- Mark Manson spent more than a decade writing obscenity drenched blog posts on his personal website before taking his most popular post (*The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*) and expanding that proven article into a bright orange book that now populates most airport bookstores in the United States.
- James Patterson is the best-selling thriller novelist in history, not because he is the most talented writer, but because he has produced more than 200 novels.
- Benjamin Hardy, the #1 most-read writer on Medium, wrote hundreds and hundreds of articles on the site. Was his content good? Yes. But his output was prolific.
- And as many people know, my own story is no different. In 2015, I became the #1 most-read writer on all of Quora by following one simple rule: write and publish one Quora answer per day, every day, for a year.

This idea that popular writers appear out of nowhere is a lie.

The notion that “the winning strategy” is for someone to write and publish their first book and hope it magically becomes a best-seller is flawed.

This isn’t how it works. And in the extremely rare cases when it does, one of two things is at play. Either the writer actually spent years practicing under a different name, or in a different

context, somewhere else (John Grisham was a lawyer for 20 years before he became the world's best-selling legal thriller writer), or they won the lottery.

A more reliable strategy is to produce a ton of work.

If you want to know the strategy most likely to succeed, least likely to fail, and with the highest potential upside with the least downside and disappointment, it's this.

Write and publish a lot.

A lot, a lot, a lot. More than a lot. So much you don't even think about counting it anymore. I have written so many articles on the Internet, I don't even know the sum total number. I also don't care. I consider it all practice. I think of my master library as one big giant advertising flywheel that just keeps introducing more and more readers to my work.

And because I keep writing, and keep feeding the algorithm new content, digital platforms stay hard at work serving my words to readers interested in the topics which I write about most often.

Which is probably how you came across this essay.

Law #3: Clear, Not Clever

“Laughing All The Way To The Bank”

Imagine you came across this title in your newsfeed.

It could be an article. It could be the beginning of a Twitter Thread. It could be a long-form blog post. It could be a news update. It could even be the title of a book, a product, or YouTube video. Before you click, *somewhere deep inside your mind*, you (as the reader) are asking yourself one very specific question:

“What is this about?”

Unfortunately, nothing presents itself as a suitable, rapid-fire answer. “I’m not sure,” your inner dialogue whispers. And before you can even register the decision, you’re already onto the next headline—asking yourself the same question, again and again.

Now, read this:

“Laughing All The Way To The Bank: How 2 Savvy Internet Entrepreneurs Turned Their Stupid Idea Into A Multimillion Dollar eCommerce Business.”

WOAH!

The first headline was clever. *Laughing all the way to the bank.* That’s a phrase that has been popularized in modern society. “That’s something that will make people laugh,” the first author says to themselves. “That’s clever,” which they think means people will pay attention.

The second headline is clear. In fact, the first part of the headline, “Laughing all the way to the bank,” isn’t even the most important part. The reader’s eyes skim right over it. The author could delete it and it wouldn’t make a difference. But it’s the second part, “How 2 Savvy Internet Entrepreneurs Turned Their Stupid Idea Into A Multimillion Dollar eCommerce Business” that says it all.

- Here’s what this piece is about (turning stupid ideas into millions of dollars)
- Here’s who this piece is for (anyone interested in entrepreneurship)
- And here’s what the reader gets in exchange for reading (you can learn how to turn stupid ideas into millions of dollars too)

Writers who try to be clever, fail.

They think they are being cheeky.

In reality, they are executing a cheap gimmick—like an outdated, unprofitable, small town magic shop.

Meanwhile, it’s the writers who aim to be clear who end up

getting the reader's attention.

Law #4: It's Only Clickbait If You Fail To Keep Your Promise To The Reader

"I don't want to write clickbait."

When new writers are introduced to headline structures, formats, and styles that effectively capture the reader's attention, many will clench their fists and say they don't want to write that way. They don't want their headline to sound like a BuzzFeed article. They don't want to "pick a side."

As a result, the promise they make to their reader in the headline comes across as weak.

This strategy is more about hedging your risk opposed to "swinging for the fences."

And that's a mistake.

The best headlines on the internet are polarizing by design. Some are more polarizing, more political, more outlandish than others. But even simple, non-controversial headlines can be polarizing in a way that exclusively speaks to one group of people and ignores everyone else. Again, new digital writers

don't like to do this. They like to "write something everyone will like." But the best digital writers know this is a losing strategy.

When you write something for everyone, you write something for no one.

Instead, you want to make a strong promise to the reader in your headline.

"How To Ask A Girl On A Date" is a clear headline, but it's weak. Who cares?

"3 Proven Phrases That Will Get Any Girl To Go Out With You" is strong. That's a big promise!

Nothing about that first headline is visceral. It says what it needs to say, and that's it. But chances are, you read that second headline and felt it in your body. You either got excited, or you got really upset and started yelling at the computer. Either of those reactions is a win. It means the language is striking a nerve.

Here's the big secret:

It's only clickbait if you don't keep the promise in the headline.

"These 5 Sales Scripts Will Make You A Millionaire In A Year."

The average person sees a headline like this and thinks, "Oh, that's stupid clickbait." But if the content lives up to that promise, if the essay or article or book gives you 5 insanely valuable sales scripts, walkthrough examples, testimonials from people who have used these (and made millions of dollars), and other actionable frameworks that immediately have an impact on your life, guess what? You don't think of that headline

as clickbait anymore. In fact, you've stopped thinking about the headline altogether. You're too busy sharing it with your friends.

A headline is only clickbait if the content fails to deliver on the promise.

Because if you deliver on the promise, the reader doesn't think, "Hey! You tricked me!"

The reader thinks, "Wow, this was so incredibly valuable. I'm so glad I clicked on this."

5

Law #5: When You Find A Structure That Works, Exploit It

Writing online is a game.

The game goes like this:

- Write 10 things
- See which 1-2 perform the best
- Take the structure/tone/topic from those 1-2 and write 10 more new things (variations)
- See which 1-2 perform the best
- Repeat forever

If you study any writer or creator online who has grown quickly over a short period of time, this is what they did. They created a bunch of stuff. They studied which pieces of content performed the best. Then they cut their losers and doubled-down on their winners, over and over again.

For example: The 101 Structure

Let's say you wrote an essay, an article, a Social Blog post, or a Twitter thread titled: "Freelance Writing 101." And out of everything you've written over the past 30, 60, 90+ days, that piece outperformed everything else by a factor of ten.

Newer digital writers and creators will look at a breakout hit like this in their library and think, "Wow, that's cool." And then that's it. They'll stare at their dashboard, they'll feel proud for a few days, and then they'll move on and think nothing of it.

This is wrong.

When you see something in your library catching fire, you should stop everything you're doing and think deeply about why this specific piece is performing so well. What's it saying? What structure did you use? What's the tone? Why do you think it's resonating with so many people?

Most importantly: how can you do it again?

When you find a structure that works, exploit it.

After some reflecting, you might come to the conclusion, "I think a lot of people enjoyed this piece because it was a 101 introduction and very easy to understand."

OK, great.

What other topics can you do 101 introductions on?

- Sales Copywriting 101
- Editing 101
- Formatting 101
- Word Choice 101
- Book Marketing 101

When you find something that works, do it again.

And again. And again. And again.

Exploit it to the point where you feel like you've exhausted every possible option, every alternative, every variation. Because clearly readers enjoyed something about the first piece. So why not give them more of what they want, just a little bit different?

Writing online is all about increasing your batting average.

And the best way to do that is by doubling-down on your winners.

6

Law #6: Skimmability = Readability

Digital readers don't read linearly.

They skim.

They decide whether or not this piece is for them. They make a snap judgement as to whether or not it'll be worth their time. They scroll around looking for a section that grabs their attention, speaks to their interests. And then, and only then, do they start reading.

Analog Writers don't write for these digital readers.

Which is why so many struggle to gain traction on the Internet.

Analog Writers like to believe that readers sit down with a nice cup of coffee and, starting with the first word, make their way linearly through their piece. They like to believe they are the most important thing in the whole wide world to each and every reader, and worst of all, that they are owed a reader's attention.

But when was the last time you gave a dense piece of writing your undivided attention?

Maybe there's one or two writers on the planet you care enough about to read their writing straight through, linearly. But for everyone else, you are most likely bouncing around, scrolling, making snap judgements about where to direct your attention and spend the next 30 seconds of your life.

Digital Writers know they have to earn each and every reader's attention.

Which is why Digital Writers use subheads, section dividers, bullets, and lists.

Digital Writers know if they don't make it easy for readers to find what they're looking for, or something that catches their eye and is compelling, they're gone. The reader is right back to watching cat videos on YouTube or fast-paced cooking recipes on TikTok.

They are writing with their audience in mind.

On the Internet, if your writing is not skimmable, it's not readable.

Period. End of story.

Writers who don't believe this is the case are egotistical. They think they're the center of the universe, and (whether they realize it or not) write with the assumption that they don't have to cater to readers. They don't have to help them find an entry-point into their writing. Readers will just show up, start reading, and stick around until the piece is done.

Instead, you want to put the reader's wants, needs, and best interests at the forefront of your writing.

How can you make it easy for them to understand what you're

writing about as quickly as possible? How can you help their eyes notice “the good part?” How can you help them get the maximum amount of value in the shortest amount of time?

The more skimmable your writing, the more likely readers are to actually give you their attention and read.

But if your writing isn’t skimmable, good luck.

Remember: TikTok is just a swipe away.

Law #7: Your Subheads Should Tell A Story

The easiest way to make your writing more skimmable is to organize and separate your ideas with subheads.

Subheads are big, bolded sentences or section titles that subtly tell the reader where one idea starts and the next idea ends. Subheads are also what the reader's eye gravitates to first—because subheads are usually larger font and bold, indicating emphasis.

This is a subhead.

And chances are, you “skimmed” this subhead before you even read anything else here. This the first step to making your writing more skimmable.

But the next step is to have your subheads tell a story.

If you are writing a list, for example, each subhead should be the main point of whatever it is you are “listing.” If you are writing an essay titled, “5 Proven Strategies For Overcoming Procrastination,” then your 5 subheads should be each of the “5

proven strategies.”

Why?

1. **It makes the piece more organized.** And once you list out what the 5 proven strategies are, the piece sort of writes itself. You know what 5 things you want to say—now you just have to color in the lines.
2. **It makes the most valuable content immediately accessible to the reader.** The promise you are making in the headline is: “5 Proven Strategies.” Which means when a reader clicks on your piece, they are signing up for an answer to that promise. They are there for the “5 Proven Strategies.” So, give them the 5 Proven Strategies, right away, in bold. If they skim the 5 Proven Strategies (the 5 subheads) and find them valuable, they will read the entire piece start to finish. And if they don’t find them valuable, they will click away and move on with their day. Either way, you are saving them time—and they appreciate you for it.

The other way for your subheads to tell a story is to separate core ideas.

Don’t think of subheads as “clever, creative” section titles.

Think of them as powerful sentences.

Whenever you want to move into a new idea, make the opening sentence a subhead. Whenever you want to move out of giving actionable advice and into telling a personal story, make the transition sentence a subhead. Use big, bolded sentences (like the one above) to tell the reader, “We are exiting one highway and about to head in a different direction.”

Again, this makes it easy for readers to follow your line of thinking—and gives you clarity on where you are taking the reader next and why.

The best Digital Writers use subheads religiously in their writing.

Because they know digital readers skim first, and read second.

Law #8: Practice In Public

Analog Writers love practicing in hiding.

There is this belief in the “old” world of writing and publishing that in order to produce your best work, you must be alone. You must have peace and quiet. You must sit in your room, let your imagination marinate in the moonlight, and if you are able to connect to the magic of The Word Gods for long enough, then maybe, just maybe, you will write something brilliant.

(If you want to know why so many Analog Writers become alcoholics, this is why.)

Digital Writers, on the other hand, don’t believe in such wizardry.

Their writing process is far more practical—for better or worse.

Digital Writers understand that they have no idea what their “best” work is or isn’t. That’s for their readers to decide. And Digital Writers know they will learn what’s resonating (and what’s not) exponentially faster if they let their readers in on the process with them.

As a result, they:

- Never experience writer's block
- Never run out of ideas
- Never have to “put all their eggs in one basket”
- Never go crazy wondering what's worth writing, next

These are just a few of the benefits of Practicing In Public.

For Analog Writers, a typical feedback loop is anywhere from a few months to a few years.

For Digital Writers, feedback loops can be as short as a few minutes.

The beauty of writing online, Social Blogging, and practicing in public is the amount of friction it removes. No longer do you have to sit in your room, alone, and wonder whether you are working on a masterpiece or a giant pile of garbage. No more do you have to come up with ideas all on your own. When you practice in public, when you write on social platforms and share pieces and snippets of your unrefined ideas, the writing process transforms from being one of solitary confinement into a collaborative effort between you and the readers you claim to want to serve most.

Unfortunately, Analog Writers have a hard time making the switch.

After all: it's much easier to hide away in your room, declaring yourself a genius.

Practicing in public is scary because it means facing the harshest reality you can face as a writer: "Do people care about what I'm writing? Am I any good?"

But facing this reality is also where all the growth is.

The sooner you confront what's not working, the faster you'll learn what does.

Law #9: Use Engagement Data To Decide What To Write Next

Your number one goal as a Digital Writer is to build a publishing flywheel.

A flywheel is a mechanism that generates more tomorrow than it did yesterday. Every time you hit publish on the Internet, you are creating a data point. The more you publish, the more readers you engage, the more data points you generate. The more data points you generate, the easier it becomes to spot overarching patterns. And the more patterns you notice, the more you will know what's worth writing before you write it.

All you have to do is follow the data.

Data points can be:

- Out of 10 essays, which one got the most likes?
- Out of 10 essays, which one got the most comments?
- Out of 10 essays, which one got the most views?
- Out of 10 essays, which one got the most shares?
- Out of 10 essays, which topic performed the best?

Writers who are new to publishing online tend to think the entire purpose of “digital writing” is to build an audience or expand your reach. And yes, that’s certainly true. But the real benefit of writing and publishing online is the data flywheel you can create for yourself. Everything you publish is a feedback signal revealing what’s worth writing next. Which means, if you pay close attention and continue to double-down on “what’s working,” your success as a writer is no longer an “if.”

It’s a “when.”

The more ideas you share, the more new ideas you’ll have.

The hardest part of the digital writing journey is Day 1. Because at the very beginning, you have no library, no flywheel, no data telling you what’s resonating with readers and what’s falling flat.

But every time you hit publish, every essay, article, or Twitter thread you write online, you are creating a new data point. You are building your library. Most importantly, you are spinning your flywheel.

The more you write, the more data points you gather, the faster your flywheel spins, the more apparent it becomes what you should write *next*.

Said differently: the more you write, the more you write.

Law #10: You Are Not The Main Character (The Reader Is)

Here is a summary of a writer's journey:

- **Beginner writers think they are the main character of the story.** It's all about them. They're the writer, they're the one in the spotlight, and everything they have to say is important. Readers should feel lucky to be in the presence of such greatness.
- **Advanced writers learn it's really about the reader.** After several months or years (or decades) of falling on deaf ears, these writers come to the realization that in order to be successful, they need to speak to the wants and needs of the reader. But to compensate for their years of selfishness, they usually end up over-tilting in this new direction.
- **Expert writers master the art of doing both.** These writers have internalized the fact that the reader is the main character of the story (not them), and learn how to use personal stories, perspectives, and insights in service of the wants and needs of the reader. The mastery they have

over their craft is seen in their ability to balance these two opposing forces: what the writer wants to write about, and what the reader wants to read about.

In order to become a successful writer, you must put the reader first.

You are not the main character.

Imagine you are at a dinner party, and someone corners you by the table of shrimp appetizers. For ten minutes they go on and on about themselves, how they built a real estate empire, have rental properties all across California's coastline, and how it took them three decades to crawl out of debt and build one of the most successful real estate firms in history.

Well, that's all fine and great, but to you (the listener) you don't really care.

Because as fascinating as their story is, it's all about them.

You are irrelevant.

However, your interest in the conversation changes dramatically when you become focal point of the story.

Now imagine this same person had started by asking a bit about you.

What do you enjoy? What are you working on these days? What are your goals, dreams, and aspirations in life?

You share that you are in the process of buying your first rental property—to which this real estate mogul says, "Ah, I remember buying my first rental property. I was 26 years old, broke as could be, trying to learn everything I could about real estate while working a full-time job as a cashier at a grocery

store. Can I tell you some of the mistakes I made to help you be more successful with your first rental property than I was with mine?”

WOAH!

Now, the person talking isn't the main character. You are.

Everything being shared is in service of your own interests.

And yet, the storyteller, narrator, and author is still part of it. They can still tell you personal stories and meaningful details from their own experiences. But you find these stories valuable because you can see how they connect to your story as well.

Law #11: The Size Of The Question Dictates The Size Of The Audience

Here's how most writers begin:

They sit down. They think, "Hmmm, what should I write about today?" They brainstorm a few ideas. They pick one. Dig in. Write. Edit. Publish. And then, after they've done the hard work of assembling a piece of writing, they ask themselves, "Now how do I get this in front of a million readers?"

There's just one problem:

A million readers might not be interested in the topic you just chose to write about.

The size of the question dictates the size of the audience.

Everything you write is answering a question for the reader.

- If you are writing about real estate, what question are you answering? How to buy your first rental property? How to finance a condo? How to remodel a duplex?
- If you are writing about finance, what question are you answering? The secret to making money on the Internet? The best strategy for picking stocks? The reason Bitcoin is a terrific long-term store of value?
- Even if you are writing a fiction story, what question are you answering? What's it like to fall in love with a werewolf? How do you rob a heavily guarded bank? Who-killed-who in the library with the candlestick?

Every single piece of writing on planet earth is, in some way or another, answering a question.

Which means if your writing answers a super niche, teeny-tiny, hyper-specific question, then your writing is only going to be read by a super niche, teeny-tiny, hyper-specific audience. Conversely, if your writing answers a universal, widely accessible, highly relatable question, your writing is going to be read by a universal audience.

If you want to reach more readers, go broad. If you want to engage more readers, go niche.

There's a reason the vast majority of nonfiction books that reach the *New York Times* best-seller list are about universal topics: health, wealth, happiness, love, etc.

There's a reason why the articles, essays, and Twitter threads that go viral tend to give "life advice" and not "biotech engineering advice."

Big, broad questions have the highest likelihood to reach the most people. Why? Because everyone can relate to questions like, "How can I live a happy life?" or "How can I make more money?" But not very many people can relate to questions like, "How do I plant tomatoes in my backyard?" or "What's the root cause of my fear of spiders?"

Small questions attract smaller audiences (but are more potent, more specific, and tend to yield higher engagement).

Big questions attract bigger audiences (but are less potent, less specific, and tend to yield less loyalty and long-term engagement).

So the next time you sit down to write, start with the end in mind.

What question are you answering?

And is the size of the question going to attract the size of the audience you desire?

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Law #12: Specificity Is The Secret

Originality is overrated.

The advice to “be original” is just a different way of saying “be authentic,” which are both vague ways of saying “be yourself,” which is akin to giving the guidance of breathing. *“Just breathe,” says an inspirational quote on Instagram, somewhere.*

This advice is meaningless.

When writers give this advice, they don’t actually know what they’re saying.

They’re just waving their arms around in the air, hoping to get your attention.

Instead of thinking “How can I be original?” or “How can be authentic?” it’s much more productive to ask, *“How can I be more specific?”* Specificity means having a deeper understanding of what the reader really wants. Specificity means being explicit about why you’re saying what you’re saying—and what outcome can or should be generated as a result.

Specificity is clarity, and clarity is all that matters.

For example:

- **“You should write every day” is vague advice.** More specificity here would be, “When you write every day, you are actively practicing the habit of keeping promises to yourself. The more promises you keep, the more trust you build, the more consistent you become, the more prolific you get.”
- **“Confidence is about being happy” is vague advice.** More specificity here would be, “Confidence is about accepting all the things within yourself that make you feel uncomfortable—because as you become comfortable standing in what makes you different, you become comfortable with ‘not fitting in.’ And in our society, we perceive people who are OK with ‘not fitting in’ as confident.”
- **“Relationships take work” is vague advice.** More specificity here would be, “Lasting relationships require both parties to give up many of their own selfish wants and needs for the good of the unit—while simultaneously making their own selfish wants and needs known so they feel heard, understood, appreciated, and accepted in that letting-go process.”

Stop trying to be original. Start trying to be more specific.

Too often, writers obsess with being “the first” or “the only one.”

In reality, having a 100% completely original idea requires a lifetime of work aimed in a *specific* direction. The original idea is the end-end-result of being more specific, and more specific, and more specific—to the point where your understanding of the topic/problem/solution/story is so incredibly fine-tuned, it’s “different.”

So, how do you get there?

Not by “being authentic” or “being yourself.”

But by being specific.

Law #13: Don't Compete In Someone Else's Category (Create Your Own)

From an early age, writers are taught to want to write like someone else.

- “Who do you like to read?”
- “Whose writing do you enjoy the most?”
- “Who do you look up to as a writer?”

Of course, we all have idols and people who inspire us. But the problem with these questions is they train the mind to think the secret to becoming successful is to *do what others before you have done*. If you want to be the next Hemingway, learn to write like Hemingway. If you want to be the next Faulkner, learn to write like Faulkner. If you want to be the next Malcolm Gladwell, learn to write like Malcolm Gladwell.

There's just one problem:

No legendary writer becomes legendary by trying to write like someone else.

Hemingway was a polarizing writer. You either loved his minimalist, terse style, or you hated it.

Faulkner was a polarizing writer. You either loved his overly descriptive run-on sentences or made it your life's mission to warn others about the boredom of reading Faulkner.

Gladwell was, and still is, a polarizing writer. You either love his "pop science" stories or you pound your fists on the dinner table shouting, "Correlation does not imply causation!"

The writers who become known in the world do not write like someone else before them.

Instead, legendary writers become known for a niche they own.

The writing world teaches writers that the way you succeed is you look at another writer, someone you admire, and then ask yourself, "How do I write something *better* than them?"

But this is a misleading question.

It trains the mind into believing that what readers care about is how you assemble words on the page in comparison to someone else. But that's not how readers decide who to read. For example, there are a lot of writers who are "better" than J.K. Rowling. Do you know their names? Of course not. J.K. Rowling is known for a niche she owns: teenage wizardry.

Your goal is not to pick another writer out in the world and then ask, "How can I do what they do, but better?" That's a proven path to becoming Pepsi (the next-best alternative to Coke).

Instead, your goal is to write something DIFFERENT. Something that hasn't been written (or written in that way) yet. You want to move yourself out of a comparison conversation—"Should I read this mystery writer or that mystery writer?"—and force the reader to make a choice: "Should I read horror mystery, or comedy mystery?"

Your goal is to become known for a niche you own.

Law #14: Imperfectly Published Is Better Than Perfect But Unpublished

In the digital world, visibility trumps ability.

Legacy, Analog Writers can't stand this. It drives them crazy. They kick their feet and scream and shout (all by themselves in their cabin, somewhere in the woods), "That writer isn't even good! How can the world read that garbage!" Meanwhile, days, months, years go by and they share nothing at all. They would rather not-publish in pursuit of perfection than hit "publish."

But 99% of the time, this is a defense mechanism.

It's not perfection they're in search of—it's an avoidance of having to confront, out in the world, whether they're as talented as they think they are.

Digital Writers don't take themselves this seriously.

They might be perfectionists too, but they've learned nothing good comes from hiding away.

All it does is make the perfectionism worse.

Instead, they approach the writing process with radical

generosity. They want readers to know they're figuring things out as they go, just like everyone else. They want to gather feedback, and understand that they're not the smartest person in the room (and would benefit from incorporating other people's ideas into their work as well). Most of all, they know how the Internet works: it doesn't matter how "perfect" the work is. The Internet rewards consistency. The Internet rewards people who build audiences. The Internet rewards writers who produce something small once per day more than writers who produce something large once every five years.

Digital Writers have an end goal in mind, but generously share their work along the way.

Imperfectly Published is better than Perfectly Unpublished.

The literary world hates on writers like E.L. James (*Fifty Shades of Grey*).

Or writers like Stephenie Meyer (*Twilight*).

But guess what?

Whether you like those writers or not is irrelevant. Whether you think their work is any good doesn't matter. They hit publish. The world voted (with their attention and with their dollars). And they sold millions of copies (and made millions of dollars).

Anytime you find yourself pointing at another writer saying, "They aren't even that talented," pause and ask yourself whether you are writing and publishing as often as they are. If you're not, you're just another Analog Writer hiding in a log cabin trying to convince yourself you're a genius without ever having to confront whether that's true or not out in the world.

In the digital world, visibility trumps ability.

And talent comes second to consistency.

Law #15: Don't Focus On Individual Pieces. Build Your Library

There are two types of content on the Internet:
Timely and Timeless.

Timely content is all about capitalizing on the moment.

Something *just* happened in the news. A new company *just* went public. A big movie is *about* to hit theaters. Elon Musk *just* Tweeted a meme and it's going viral.

Writers who want to go viral are obsessed with chasing “timely” content opportunities. They look for trending topics, they ride the wave of popular for a day, and then they wake up the next day and do it all over again. And in the short term, this looks like a terrific strategy. You see them racking up views left and right—because they are attaching themselves to the conversation of the moment.

The problem is: it's exhausting.

And very few “timely writers” can stay on the hamster wheel

longer than a few years.

Timeless content is about remaining relevant long into the future.

While timely writers chase fireworks, timeless writers build constellations.

Timeless content doesn't always go viral in the moment. But it maintains its value much, much longer into the future. While a timely response piece to a celebrity saying something stupid at The Met Gala might get 100,000 views in a day, a timeless piece about the impact celebrity has had on American culture might get 10,000 views per year, every year, for the next 20 years.

Everyone thinks they want the former, but the more desirable outcome is the latter.

When your focus is on writing “hits,” you are forever chasing short-term popularity.

You want attention *now*.

The problem, however, is that *attention now* has a cost. And the cost is two-fold: first, it trains your brain to become obsessed with clicks and views over substance and building relationships with your readers, and second, it deprives you of ever experiencing the benefits of compounding in your writing.

Timeless content lasts a lifetime. Which means you aren't just capturing attention now, but you are increasing the likelihood of capturing attention in the future as well. The more you write, the larger your library grows, the wider your web stretches on the Internet, the easier it becomes to attract the readers you

desire. Until eventually, your timeless library of content grows so large that the moment a reader steps into your domain, it's impossible for them to not see your work and fall down your rabbit hole.

Don't focus on the performance of any individual piece.

It doesn't matter.

Your measure for success should be how many timeless pieces you are able to add to your library each week, month, year.

Who cares if any of your pieces "go viral?"

A much better metric is how many readers your entire library attracts each year, year after year.

Law #16: Repeat Your “Core Narratives”

The secret to becoming a successful writer is to become known for a niche you own.

However, what helps make your “niche” stick are core narratives the reader can hold onto. Think of these as definitive characteristics that give the reader language to use when talking about who you are and what you write about to other people. After all, the best form of marketing is, and will always be, word-of-mouth marketing.

Core Narratives are signature stories that add credibility to your category.

For example, say you are writing about cryptocurrencies.

A few Core Narratives you might want to share about yourself would be:

- “I used to work as a bank teller. One day, this 40-year-old man came in and wanted to withdraw his entire life’s

savings: \$125,000. When I asked him why, he said, ‘To buy Bitcoin.’ That day changed my life, and is how I got introduced to cryptocurrencies.”

- “In 2008, I watched my family lose everything in the mortgage crisis. My mom was a real estate agent in Detroit at the time, and I saw how unfair the system was to hard-working people like her. I’ve been fascinated by economics since.”
- “After I quit my job as a bank teller, I poured everything I had into Bitcoin in 2014. A few years later, I was a multimillionaire and had bought my mom a house. My life’s goal now is to educate the world on Bitcoin, and one day buy the Detroit Red Wings hockey team.”

The nuance here is: these stories aren’t just “stories for the sake of telling stories.” You can see how they add credibility, context, and descriptive characteristics to the writer.

In turn, these stories give you (the reader) language to introduce your friends and family members to this writer—who you now feel like you know and love. “You have to read his work! He used to work as a bank teller, quit his job, went all in on Bitcoin, became a multimillionaire, and then bought his mom a house—the same house their family lost in the 2008 mortgage crisis. Insane!”

Most people think they have no Core Narratives.

But they do. You do. Everyone does.

Your Core Narratives are just 3-5 relevant stories/details that reinforce WHY you are writing whatever it is you’re writing about. Do you like to write about health and wellness? Then

one of your Core Narratives might be about how you went years undiagnosed with Celiac Disease. Or maybe you like to write about meditation and mindfulness? One of your Core Narratives might be that your introduction to meditation was through a college professor who gave you a book that changed your life.

Your Core Narratives don't have to be outlandish or overly revealing (you don't have to air out your dirty laundry). They just have to be personal, descriptive, and give the reader something to hold onto. Why does this topic matter so much to you? Why are you taking the time to write about it? How did this information change your life—and how might it change the reader's life too?

Then, once you have your 3-5 Core Narratives, repeat them.

Write about them over and over again.

Don't just say, "I went years undiagnosed with Celiac Disease" once. Say it 1,000 times across 1,000 different pieces.

The more you repeat your Core Narratives, the more they will stick with readers, the more these details will come to represent you "at scale," the more likely people are to talk about you and your work to their friends.

Core Narratives are what you remember about your favorite writers.

So, create your own—and that's what people will remember about you.

Law #17: The More You Write, The More You Write

We have a saying in Ship 30 for 30:

“The more you write, the more you writing.”

Digital writing is a game of compounding effort.

The more you write, the bigger your library gets. The bigger your library gets, the more data you gather about what readers are most interested in reading. The more data you gather, the easier it is to spot overarching patterns and figure out what’s resonating (and what’s not). The easier it becomes to figure out what’s resonating, the more likely you are to write things people want to read more often. The more you write things people want to read, the more of your content people share and the bigger your audience becomes. The bigger your audience, the easier it is for the next thing you write to gain traction.

And on and on your flywheel spins.

Which is why the hardest part of the entire digital writing journey is the very beginning.

In the beginning, you have no content in your library.

Which means you have zero momentum.

This is why so many writers stay stuck “thinking” about what they’re going to write. “Thinking” about all the ideas they have. “Thinking” about how great of a writer they are (or one-day-will-be). Unfortunately, they mistake “thinking” as momentum in itself, and it’s not. It’s wasted energy. It’s mental masturbation.

It’s not until you hit publish and begin to build your library of work online that your flywheel begins to spin. Because as soon as you hit publish, now your work is searchable. Now, you exist.

People can find you.

The more you write, the more you write.

And the more you publish, the easier it gets.

Law #18: Word Count Is A Poor Measure Of Value

The biggest mistake writers make is measuring their value by word count.

- **Authors do this.** “My publisher says I need to write 65,000 words.”
- **Freelance writers do this.** “I charge 25 cents per word.”
- **Content writers do this.** “500 words on this subject? You got it.”
- **Columnists do this.** “The article has to be 1,200 words!”

The problem is, word count is a poor measure of value.

And here’s proof:

“Giant elephants are the ones who swim but really did anyone think differently about the fact keys unlock what Florida never knew we could and so that’s the real reason we all decide to be the ones to drive ourselves mad Galapagos Islands!”

There’s a bunch of words.

Are any of them valuable?

Word count is irrelevant if what you are saying isn't valuable.

Legendary writers don't care if they write 500 words or 50 words or 5 words.

The only thing they care about is saying what needs to be said.

(And if it takes 500 words to say it, then fine. But if it can be said in 5 words instead, why not save the reader the trouble and just get to the point?)

There's a famous quote in the writing world (although no one really knows who to attribute the quote to—Mark Twain? Benjamin Franklin? Winston Churchill?) that says: "If I had more time, I would have written you a shorter letter."

Great writing isn't long, it's short.

It's concise.

It says what it needs to say and then it moves on.

Any writer who measures his or her value by how many *more* words are placed on the page isn't actually in the business of getting to the point. Instead, they're competing for The Guinness Book Of World Records' award for who can talk the longest. Their measure for success is making the reader slog through more than they have to, not less.

You do not want to be this type of writer.

Instead, measure your success by the degree of new & different thinking you provide readers.

How much new information can you reveal to the reader in the shortest amount of time possible?

How do they see the world right now, and how differently will they see the world after they've read what you've read? (Remember, the entire Declaration of Independence is only 1,320 words, and that is the manifesto for America.)

How many words it takes you to provide new & different thinking is, at best, an interesting tidbit of information at the end of the project. But the same way no one would set out to buy a house and tell the contractor, "You must only use 500 beams of lumber," don't be a writer who sets out to write "500 words."

Be the writer who is determined to provide readers with new and different ways of thinking.

That is your true value.

Law #19: Writing For “Everyone” Means Writing For No One

“We tell human stories for people who want to connect with each other.”

Who is this for? Who is the target reader?

The fact you can’t tell is the problem. The fact that it could be for “anyone” reveals how it’s actually for no one. And yet, the vast majority of writers, publishers, and even some of the most successful companies on the planet make this mistake time and time again their messaging.

Conversely, who is this for?

“Moms who have run out of ways to entertain their kids while trying to work from home.”

Does a mother with a house full of screaming kids come to mind? Can you imagine her on a company Zoom call while simultaneously swatting at one of her kids underneath the table? Can you hear her yelling across the room, “Don’t steal your sister’s iPad!”

The fact you can see very clearly who this message is for (and who it isn’t for) is why it works. If you are a mom who has run out of ways to entertain her kids while trying to work from home, you feel like you just stumbled across the only person on the Internet who truly understands you. And if you aren’t a mom, or aren’t a mom who works from home, you probably don’t care.

But that’s a good thing.

Writing for “everyone” means writing for no one.

In order to write for “everyone,” you have to be broad. You have to be all inclusive. And as a result, you are vague and forgettable. You have as much flavor as a rice cake: “Anyone can eat it!”

But as soon as you stop trying to write for “everyone” and start writing for someone, one person, a brother or sister or neighbor or coworker you know inside and out, all of a sudden your writing has specificity. It has personality, and voice, and meaning. It’s dripping in description.

Conventional wisdom says you should write for the biggest audience possible.

But this is terrible advice.

Instead, you should write for the most *specific* audience possible.

Because if one person resonates with what you've written in a life-changing way, you will start to attract all the other people who are just like them.

Law #20: The Golden Intersection Is Answering The Reader's Question & Telling Them A Story

The reason people read is because they want an answer to their question:

- “How do I grow tomatoes in my backyard?”
- “Are there techniques I can use to negotiate a better salary?”
- “What is life like for teenagers who want to learn wizardry at Hogwarts?”

Which means your job as a writer is to a) consciously decide what (specific) question you are answering for the reader, and b) give them the answer.

But how you make the answer stick is by telling the reader a story.

For example, let's say the reader's question is, "What's it like to be an entrepreneur?"

One way of answering this question would be to provide the reader with the formal definition of entrepreneurship. Be professional, right? "Entrepreneurship is the activity of setting up a business or businesses, taking on financial risks in the hope of profit." But how likely is the reader to remember what you've just told them? More importantly, how likely are they to be impacted and transformed by your words?

They're not.

Now, imagine answering the question with a story:

"The day I knew I was an entrepreneur, I lost \$125,000 in 5 minutes."

Before you've even decided whether or not you want to keep reading, you're emotionally invested. Your eyes are flying down the page—"What happened?" And the reason is because now you aren't just being given an answer, but an opportunity to discover the answer for yourself.

Even though all readers are in search of answers to their questions, it's actually not "the answers" they remember most. What readers remember is the story that allowed them to learn, understand, and internalize the answer—and it's the story they go on to tell their friends, family members, and coworkers.

The Golden Intersection is answering the reader's question & telling them a story.

Don't just give them the answer.

Tell them how you learned the very thing you are now explaining to them.

Take them on the journey.

Law #21: Optimize For SPEED!

Every second on the Internet, readers are making decisions.

They are thinking about whether they should continue reading your essay or keep scrolling to look at more memes. They are weighing the pros and cons of reading your entire article or trying to find something more entertaining on YouTube. They are debating, within themselves, whether you are worth their time.

Which means your competition is not “other writers.”

Your competition is every single piece of content on the entire World Wide Web.

If your writing is dependent upon readers “making it to the third paragraph,” delete the first two paragraphs.

Anytime you start rationalizing with yourself saying, “If they make it a little bit further it gets really good!” just stop.

Cut everything up to the part you think is “the good part.”

Start there.

Digital writing is 100% a game of understanding how readers consume content on the Internet opposed to other mediums. Because the context Digital Writers have is “every single second, every single sentence, readers are thinking about scrolling away,” which forces them to work hard to keep their attention.

Digital Writers also understand that Digital Readers don’t read. They skim. They jump around. They bounce between sections, weigh the pros & cons of reading your entire piece in their head (even if your piece is a measly 50 words) and then either dive in or swipe away. Digital Readers do not consume content linearly.

Which means all of your decisions should optimize for SPEED!

When choosing between “more description” and “less description,” go with less.

When choosing between “shorter, faster” sentences and “longer, slower” sentences, go with shorter and faster.

When choosing between “less subheads, more paragraphs” and “more subheads, fewer paragraphs,” go with more subheads—easier to skim.

Your craft as a Digital Writer is not just about writing great

words, but assembling and organizing them in a way Digital Readers find approachable, easy to consume, and with a very high Rate of Revelation. Every section, every paragraph, every sentence should reveal new information. Every word should pull the reader along.

5 seconds on the Internet feels like 5 long minutes in real life.

Keep this in mind when you write.

Digital Readers wait for no one.

Law #22: Time Spent Reading Should Never Exceed Time Spent Writing

Reading doesn't make you a better writer.

Only writing makes you a better writer.

This is polarizing advice, and yet it's always the aspiring writers who seem to disagree.

Aspiring writers like to believe reading makes them a better writer—because reading is more comfortable than writing. But notice how those are the people who, as a result, spend exponentially more time reading. And they get quite good at it. But then years, decades, a lifetime goes by and what have they written? Not very much.

Professional writers, on the other hand, always agree. Some advocate for reading more than others, but one hundred percent of successful writers agree that what made them successful wasn't hundreds (or thousands) of hours spent just reading. It was hundreds (or thousands, or tens of thousands) of hours spent writing.

If you want to be a writer, does reading help?

Sure. Just like watching reruns of games helped Michael Jordan become a better basketball player.

But watching reruns of games isn't how Michael Jordan became Michael Jordan.

Reading should be an addition to your writing practice, just like stretching is to physical exercise. But under no circumstances should reading be a replacement for your daily writing habit.

Which is why your mantra should be this:

"Time spent reading will never exceed time spent writing."

The moment consumption overtakes creation, you're done.

You've stopped making progress, pulled off the side of the road and decided to take a break. And every once in a while, that's fine. Just remember that in order to get to where you want to go, you have to keep driving.

Reading makes you a better reader—and as a tangential benefit, can make you a more self-aware writer.

But only writing can make you a better writer.

(So start writing!)

Thank You For Reading

Thank you for reading *The 22 Laws Of Digital Writing!*

Looking for more digital writing resources?

Here are a few we think you'll enjoy:

1. Start Writing Online: <https://startwritingonline.com/>
2. Ship 30 for 30: <https://www.ship30for30.com/>
3. Ship 30 for 30 Office Hours Recordings: <https://www.youtube.com/c/Ship30for30>

You can also follow Dickie and Cole on Twitter:

1. Dickie's Twitter: <https://twitter.com/dickiebush>
2. Cole's Twitter: <https://twitter.com/nicolascole77>

