



# Book Accidental Genius

## Revolutionize Your Thinking Through Private Writing

Mark Levy

Berrett-Koehler, 1998

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## Recommendation

Mark Levy's short, snappy guide teaches you private writing, which opens the door to expressing, exploring and playing with your thoughts freely - without showing them to anyone else. This ongoing exercise is valuable for sparking creativity, imagination and problem solving. Levy's ideas are presented directly and humorously, with plenty of examples. The author has an extensive background in publishing, particularly sales, which comes through in his style - part sales team rally, part lingo-ridden pep talk. This approach, however, works. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to anyone who would like to explore idea-generating methods, or to apply some structure and purpose to all those notes you've been writing to yourself.

## Take-Aways

- You can use writing as a way to examine the world and gain new perspectives that will lead to greater success in business and in life.
- Private writing allows you to write your thoughts and ideas without having to show them to anyone.
- Private writing is related to, but not the same as, brainstorming.
- The first secret to private writing is, "Try easy."
- The second secret is, "Work fast and continuously."
- The third secret is, "Work against a deadline."
- The fourth secret is, "Write the way you think."
- The fifth secret is, "Go with the thought."
- The sixth secret is, "Redirect your attention with focus."
- Ideas are valuable currency in the business world, and private writing can free up your ideas.

## Summary

# Thoughts as Currency

Private writing teaches you to "use writing as a world-examiner and perspective-twister for greater success in business and in life." You don't have to be a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, or even a halfway decent writer, to achieve results using private writing. That's because style, grammar, and all other elements of "good writing" don't count in private writing - only thoughts and ideas do. Besides, you're never going to show any of this stuff to anyone. Private writing will improve your qualitative thinking and you'll delight yourself with vivid demonstrations of your own natural genius. That's what you'll learn: mind-popping methods of bringing your own genius to bear on business achievement.

“Writing in detail - about anything - elevates the subject out of the abstract class and into a hard nuts-and-bolts reality where our minds can rap their mental knuckles against it.”

Today's business climate is unique. We're living in a time where companies are making Godzilla-sized fortunes without inventories, buildings, or even workers. Hard assets are out; invisible assets are in. Ideas rule the business day. Microsoft, for instance, has only \$1.5 billion dollars in hard assets, yet (as of this writing) has a market value of more than \$318 billion. What does this mean? "The 'invisibles' of the company, that is 'good will,' perceived brand value and the thoughts percolating in Bill Gates' noggin, are worth three hundred times the company's 'touchables.'" (BooksInShort.com note: Figures compiled before recent court rulings.)

“Even the most tired subject has its intrigue, even the toughest problem has its solution, even the most obscured opportunity becomes evident, when studied from enough unconventional perspectives.”

In today's world, thought is the currency that drives industry. What does this mean to you? The ideas and observations inside your mind have a real-world value to them - if you can get to them, develop them, create with them, make them practical. Your tool for accomplishing that is private writing. It helps you to get at what you're thinking, so you can convert your thoughts into something useable, even extraordinary.

“If you're pursuing a subject that genuinely interests you, and you write about it in a loose, non-judging fashion, you never know what answers and creative possibilities the next sentence may hold.”

Two renowned writing teachers, Peter Welbow and Pat Balanoff, coined the phrase "private writing." Writing for yourself alone is fast and allows you to think on paper, enabling you to reach a level of thinking that's often difficult to attain during the course of a normal business day. The major components of private writing are:

- Don't show it to anyone.
- Allow yourself to think badly and write poorly.
- Write as quickly and continuously as you can move your hand.
- Set a deadline: Write about a situation or topic for a prescribed period and then move on to writing about something else.
- Tap into your most honest ideas by using "kitchen language" (casual conversational words) and leaps in logic.
- Allow your thoughts to extend beyond their normal bounds.
- Frequently redirect your focus.

“Human thought, by nature, bounces all over the place.”

Sometimes your best thoughts must be coaxed out, and played with, before they reach their fullest potential. Private writing is an ideal tool for that. You can write about anything personal or professional - don't impose any limits on yourself. From the smallest idea to the largest concept, from the most abstract to the most concrete, from the most ordinary to the most unusual - write it down.

“We're living in a world where thoughts are a potent, industry-driving currency, where major corporations set up complex systems for managing intellectual capital and information technology just so they can mine and protect the valuable thoughts of their workers.”

Author (In Search of Excellence) and business guru Tom Peters, the man who taught baby boomers that they could and should do work that was simultaneously important and fun, offers this advice in his seminars: "Get a notebook. Write 'Cool' on the front, and 'Crappy' on the back, and fill it with cool and crappy stuff." When you do this, your notebook becomes a treasure chest, in which

you toss in loose observations and curious facts - and dip into it whenever you feel the need. Remember, in private writing, if it pops into your mind, you can write about it. Often, answers to our biggest problems come only after we've mulled over the little things.

“While traditional brainstorming asks that you withhold judgment on shouted-out ideas, we all know that's impossible. In public, you can curb your judgment a bit, but never suspend it. In your private writing, however - since no one but you will see it, and your edit-crazy mind is napping - you can access your wildest associations without fear of reprisal.”

Private writing is based on six techniques, the "Six Secrets."

## **Secret #1: Try Easy**

Robert Kriegel's experience defines and demonstrates this concept. Kriegel, a business consultant and "mental coach" for world-class athletes, once trained a group of sprinters who were competing for the last spots in the Olympic trials. During a practice run, he found that his runners were tense and tight - victims of "a bad case of the Gotta's." While conventional wisdom would have dictated that the runners train harder, Kriegel took the opposite approach. He asked them to run again, but this time they were to ease up their efforts, and go at about nine-tenths their normal intensity. The results amazed Kriegel. To everyone's surprise, each ran faster the second time, when they were trying 'easy.' One runner's time set an unofficial world record. Concludes Kriegel, "Trying easy will help you in any area in your life." Though usual business advice urges people to give 110% all the time, Kriegel says, "Conversely, I have found that giving 90 % is usually more effective."

“Private writing isn't writing per se; it's a means of watching yourself think.”

Think about how much you didn't accomplish when you tried too hard. For private writing, try easy. Start scribbling; remind yourself that you're only putting some decent words and ideas down on the page, you're not trying to produce deathless prose and world-beating ideas in the course of a single writing session. Don't demand perfection. Let your mind maneuver.

## **Secret #2: Write Fast and Continuously**

When you do this, you automatically adopt an accepting attitude and allow your mind to operate at a pace that's closer to its normal rate of thought, which will always be quicker than a regular writing pace.

## **Secret #3: Work Against a Time Limit**

In this brainstorming-with-yourself process of private writing, energize your efforts by giving yourself a time limit. Use a timer, preset for ten, twenty, or even forty minutes, so you can limit the duration of a single bout of writing. When the timer rings, even if you're in the middle of a thought, stop. The timer also enforces a self-imposed behavioral contract: You promise yourself to think and write deeply for a certain period, you do, and then you can put your feet up. This limit also keeps you writing. When you have a brain-dead day, don't worry. Most of what you write on days like that may be awful, but some of it may be brilliant, and that's because your freshest notions come when you've let your guard down, and you're writing absolute junk.

## **Secret #4: Write the Way You Think**

You've probably heard professional writers and writing teachers tell you to "write the way you speak." For a polished piece of writing, that's the best advice in the world. But, for your private, brainstorming writing, you'll want to write the way you think, instead. You're not looking to be a great communicator in private writing, only a prolific thinker. Private writing is actually a means of watching yourself think.

## **Secret #5: Go With the Thought**

When you "go with a thought," you begin by assuming that a particular thought you've had and written down is actually true. Then take a series of logical steps based on that thought. This lets you explore things, regardless of whether the initial thought was true or not, or had any great merit or not.

## Secret #6: Redirect Your Mind with Focus-Changers

A focus-changer is a question you ask yourself on paper, which requires you to comment on something you've just written. Redirecting questions might include: "What was I thinking here?" or "How else can I say that?" These will prompt you to go more in-depth, and go more sideways in your thinking. Other focus-changer questions you can use include: "How can I make this exciting?" "What else can I say about this subject?" "Why am I stuck at this particular point?" "How can I get unstuck?" "What am I missing here?" "What am I wrong about here?" "Why?" "How can I prove that?" "How can I disprove that?" and "If I continue to think that way, what might happen? You can use hundreds of different questions as focus-changers, making them as specific or as broad as you like. These focus-changers help you redirect your mind toward the unexplored parts of a situation.

### Powerful Refinements

Writing is just another way of expressing yourself. Since human thought, by nature, bounces all over the place, the act of writing it down forces you to focus on your thoughts, notice them, and explore them. Writing keeps your main idea at the forefront of your mind, gives you something solid to examine and to use as a creative springboard. Your writing shows you where you've been and suggests where you haven't been.

“Some people thrive from a more structured approach to private writing. They sit down regularly to write, and channel their genius through a codified series of steps.”

In private writing, focus on word choice, think about which words other people use a lot, what your words really mean and what those words mean to you. Focus also on why you think what you think. Often, you'll realize that you have no basis for your belief. Apply a little mental elbow grease, and come up with a belief that will serve you better. Private writing shows you more about yourself than you ever consciously knew before.

“Forget about making your sentences interesting. Your ideas needn't flow sequentially. Don't bother with correct grammar. And if you spell poorly, that's perfectly okay.”

You can even put a spin on reality: Radically alter one detail of the situation you're studying, then go with it, and discover how your radical alteration plays out, and exponentially changes the entire situation. For example, if an element in your situation is small, think of it as even smaller, or as jumbo. If it is important, think of it as trite, or as a matter of life and death. If it is clever, think of it as stupid, or as genius. Think of something time-sensitive as either late or not due for fifty years. Think of a nuisance as a blessing, or as something completely intolerable. And so on. Within the domino effect of what plays out when you do this, you will find valuable new insights. When you use fantasy in private writing, you're testing alternative universes and ways of acting.

“In effect, you're going to take your mind and drop it onto the page in front of you.”

On paper, you can also hold a conversation between yourself and anyone else. As you write both sides of the conversation, you'll gain insight into the other person's beliefs and attitudes even though they're not even there. Try imaginary dialogs with:

- A co-worker who's acting like a jerk, and find out why.
- A co-worker who has successfully handled a project you're currently working on and find out how she did it.
- Someone who holds an opposite opinion on a particular topic.
- Yourself any number of years ago or any number of years in the future.

You can also remove yourself from the picture and write a conversation between any two people, even your accountant and Madonna, or Bill Gates and a talking dog. Have a conversation with anyone you loathe or admire, living or dead. Whose brain would you like to pick? Allow all of your characters to act freely.

Remember, your private writing is simply a way to drop your mind on paper. Do it as often as you'd like, wherever you'd like, about anything you'd like - or nothing, just ramble and see where it takes you. While your private writing may contain your thinking at its best, it also contains it at its worst. All of it will help you grow.

## About the Author

**Mark Levy** is Director of Special Projects at the international book wholesaler, Bookazine. He has been a book publishing sales rep and has been nominated three times for the prestigious *Publishers Weekly* "Sales Rep of the Year" award. Levy has also written for many newspapers and magazines, including *The New York Times*. He is a magician who serves as co-creator (with David Pogue) and magic consultant on *Magic for Dummies*. He is the co-author of another book on magic, *Mac King's Tricks with Your Head*, which will be published by Crown. He is a writing, creativity and sales coach who regularly presents seminars and workshops.

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