



EIGHT STEPS TO GETTING OUT OF THE CLOUDS AND HITTING THE GROUND...WRITING

Stairway to Earth

How to Write a Serious Book

STEP 1: The Right Message

by Bill Birchard

The Stairway to Earth is the process created by book author and consultant Bill Birchard to turn book ideas into winning manuscripts. To learn more, visit and join the conversation at www.stairwaytoearth.com

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STEP 1: The Right Message

Bringing your book idea down to earth

A songwriter friend once told me the trick to writing a great song: “First come up with the title. From the title, everything just flows.” I thought about this from the point of view of books, and I wondered: If you can come up with just the right title, can the book just flow?

I decided the answer could be yes, if the title captures the message *exactly*. That’s because the message is the refrain that repeats throughout the song of a book, and a great refrain is what makes a song — and any written work — memorable.

The thought of this gave me a flash of relief. Whew! Maybe all the pain I had experienced during writing books was just from my lack of knowing the right tricks. With a little luck, book writing could be as easy as whistling Dixie.

But the flash quickly passed. To assume you’ll be this lucky, I realized, is like assuming you can whistle with perfect pitch — when you’ve never whistled before. True enough, if you’re a natural, you may get it right. But more likely you’ll blow a lot of boring hot air.

Most of us aren’t naturals. So I advise authors, before anything else, to invest time in developing a message in a systematic way. The right message — and title — may come easily, but they usually come only after a bout of creative struggling.

Why is a message so important as a first step? Because the secret of quality writing is focus, and developing a message forces you to narrow your focus before broadening your research and writing. If you start with too broad a focus, you risk letting your writing project spread out of control. Losing control will cost you time and energy. It may cost you money. It may even cost you your sanity.

So what is a “message”? Let’s start with what it isn’t. It’s not a subject or topic. It’s not “what the book is about.” It’s what the book says. It’s the point the reader takes away and tells friends about. Think about it as the “aha.” Or as that refrain.

You could also call it the “thesis” or the “theme,” but there is a danger in those words. They will remind you of papers and dissertations in school. Who wants to be reminded of that? Reminded of late nights and imperious teachers. Of whistling in the dark when you weren’t really sure what your song was. Ugh.

To be sure, the teachers were often right. They said you need to start with a statement that expresses your point in a compact sentence. I agree. And you want it to be catchy if you can, even turn a few heads. And what’s more, you want to capture some of the magic in a title.

For starters

Before you start popping words on paper, reflect on a few things about the book-writing journey. First, books are exhausting projects, even when they go well. If you’re going to hang in for the long haul, you have to have passion for your idea. Do you care so much that once someone gets you talking you have trouble shutting up? Does a current of enthusiasm course through your veins? No passion, no energy, no follow through.

“If you’re going to hang in for the long haul, you have to have passion for your idea.”

Next, write down your goals for the book. Do you want to make a name for yourself? Disseminate your ideas? Build your business’s brand? Secure a step to tenure? Make money? Goals will shape your writing every step of the way. So be specific — and honest. Why are you going to all this trouble? If you’re going to exhaust yourself, by all means choose a worthy reason.

Third, ask yourself, Who are my readers? Are they forty-somethings in sweat suits at casino tables? Sixty-somethings trading stocks in their pajamas? Young-buck engineers out to save the world? What do they care about? Worry about? Want insights about? Need solutions to? How do they like to be spoken to?

Paint a mental picture of your reader. Or better yet, cut a good likeness out of a magazine and tape it over your desk. And don’t even think about your audience as everyone. People have so many choices in our multiplying media age. How will you shape your message so your audience chooses to stick with you? When the amphitheater empties out, who will linger to hear your last words? These are your *core* readers.

Finally, ask yourself if your subject or message or theme reflects who you are. Does it play to your personality, preferences, and strengths? At every moment, you will bake into your writing a bit of yourself, even if your subject is dry and

technical. If you're not kneading into the dough the real you, you'll end up with bleached white bread. Where's the flavor, the depth? You'll know your work lacks nutrition, and so will your readers.

After these preliminaries, you're ready to start working with words. If you feel like taking a stab at your message without further ado, go ahead. You'll probably start with something basic. For example, say you're a management expert, and you're writing about loyalty. You want to take a bit of a contrarian view, so you pen, "Loyalty makes people do bad things." Hmm, okay, you have a subject and a notion of what to say about it. Good start.

Now start refining your message. I recommend three steps:

- 1) Circling
- 2) Amending
- 3) Firming

Circling

Ever notice that, at dusk, the most striking element in a landscape often pops up in your peripheral vision? That has something to do with the anatomy of the eye. (Better to see predators with.) The same thing is true about the most striking elements in a message. They often emerge from the periphery of your thinking. They may come out of nowhere.

***"Remain noncommittal, quixotic,
and have fun...opening your mind
beyond the straight-and-narrow
alleyway of designated lines
of thinking."***

That's why it usually pays to resist the temptation to start work on a message by focusing on what's front and center. Better to circle the subject like a thief casing a robbery site. Don't act greedily, making a dash for the jewels on the first pass. Explore the neighborhood. Make sure you haven't missed valuables hidden in the shadows. Look for a backdoor entrance.

I'm a big proponent of using a pencil for circling. A pencil gives your work a relaxed feel. You can be playful, use a lot of arrows, carets, and sketches. There's no such thing as a mistake. You remain noncommittal, quixotic, and have fun. The temporary — or tentative — nature of pencil marks opens your mind beyond the straight-and-narrow alleyway of designated lines of thinking.

If you go to a keyboard, you may get too serious, as if you're chiseling your message in cyberstone. With your pencil, you prepare yourself to embrace unexpected change — and especially to jump up the ladder to higher rungs of insight. That's what happens when you go round and round a subject. You realize that what's front and center is different from when you started.

Circling is a lot like doodling. But it's doodling you're going to preserve. When you scratch thoughts on a tablet, you're recording the course of your mental travels. Your doodles are like the notes and sketches of a naturalist. Examine the breadth of your topical territory, surface raw thoughts, and shape new insights.

Here are some aids for circling:

Browse books online.

On amazon.com or bn.com, search for books like yours — and books you like. What messages do they explore? What language do they use?

Check for trends.

Query sites like Google Zeitgeist for trends in language and subject matter. What words are emerging or fading in society?

Map associations.

Handwrite your subject on blank paper. Draw a circle around it. Extend spokes to other circles and fill in related topics. What are the gaps? The connections? The distinctions?

Stockpile keywords.

Make a laundry list of keywords related to your message. Reflect on their nuances of meaning. Which ones appeal? Which ones will be useful?

Mine the mother lode.

List related words from a thesaurus. Even if you don't use them, you mentally plant seeds that can sprout later in useful phrasings.

Inventory quotations.

Research pithy sayings related to your message. Absorb their novelty in expression. Can you play off them?

Now take another stab at your message. (Or take the first stab, if you haven't already.) Say you're writing that book on loyalty. You've considered various meanings of the concept, mapped elements of management affected by it, listed a few keywords, copied a few quotations. Now you might redraft to be more specific: "Loyalty subverts good decision making."

That's progress. Your language is more precise, your focus narrower. You probably don't feel like you've hit the bulls eye, but you have a better fix on your aspirations. Perhaps you could go farther, but you've shown, and documented, systematic thinking: You've thought through options and homed in on the best you can come up with.

Amending

When you're done with circling, your mind has toured a pretty big neighborhood. You've run down some blind alleys. You've peered in a lot of windows and maybe down a few bulkheads. Sorting through what you've seen, you've settled on an approach — a message — that best fits your tastes.

But you know the one you've chosen isn't perfect. You know you can do better. A common weakness is a lack of novelty. Try as you may, you're probably going to slip into some clichés. After all, few ideas are entirely new. You may well come to "fresh" realizations during an exciting process of personal discovery. Then you suddenly realize: I'm just repeating what's already been said. Geez! You slap your head.

***"Look early on for a way to express
an idea with an image or idiom."***

This may not happen to you. But you're in good company if it does. And it's not necessarily a bad thing. Great books appear all the time that restate ageless wisdom. They are fresh envelopes containing old maps. If you find yourself in this situation, you may be receiving a signal that you are ready to extend or enhance an old idea.

Whatever your message, it's time to refine it. Here are some aids for amending:

Express it with metaphor.

George Orwell, as teacher, advised writers to look early on for a way to express an idea with an image or idiom. What is the right metaphorical vehicle to carry your thoughts?

Draw new distinctions.

Clear thinking depends on distinguishing between one thing and something quite similar. People conflate two or three concepts; you can tease them apart and delineate the nuances.

Start journaling.

Writing spurs thinking, so while cooking up your main message, play around with related ideas. Record your musings, brainstorm, questions, and ideas. Write fast, don't stop, don't delete.

Personalize and humanize.

State your message in the way you would to a loved one. How does it affect others? Have you put it in familiar, human terms? Why should people care?

Float your idea.

At every chance, try your message on friends. Don't tell them they're test subjects. At the next barbecue, see which words evoke the reaction you seek.

Now take another stab at your message. Let's assume you're still working on that loyalty idea. You've done some journaling, pondered distinctions, tried variations out on a few friends. You draft an update: "Loyalty poisons ethical decision making."

Okay, you've narrowed your focus, and you've drawn a key distinction about the kind of decision making you're talking about. You've also chosen "poison" as a metaphorical way to express treachery, confusion, dysfunction, even lethality. You could try to go farther, but, again, this is progress.

Don't worry that your change in wording may be small; the most measly change can represent a huge turn in thinking. Getting the turn right can make all the difference in arriving at the right destination.

By the way, don't erase obsolete thoughts. Let these thoughts take up permanent residence on your tablet. Platitudes, worn-out metaphors, stale idioms, inaccurate distinctions — if they marched across your mind once, they probably had a reason. Like loyal but tiring friends, they may look good in the morning compared to the lively folk you go out for a drink with today.

Firming

Up to now, you've worked mostly by hand. Your notes are probably a mess. Arrows, circles, asterisks, cross outs, highlighting — clutter of the most personal variety spreads across your tablet page like the flotsam on a teenager's bedroom floor. But that's okay, because you haven't gotten overly attached to them. In fact, you're dying to clean them up.

To finish this step in the Stairway to Earth, abandon pencil and paper. Go to your keyboard and create two documents. This marks the beginning of your electronic paper trail, a trail that will lead, eventually, to that winning manuscript:

- 1) Message statement
- 2) Title brainstorming

For the message statement, open a new document and draft, in a sentence, the point of your book. If you've done your work up to now, you already have a serviceable message on your tablet. It may not be great, but it will be good. As you type it in, try to go one better. Use potent nouns and verbs.

You may question why it's so important to wait until now to go to the keyboard. Isn't waiting a matter of preference? Or isn't it a quirk or tic? Maybe, but my experience is that going to the keyboard puts your mind in a different place. You pass from the playground of possibilities to the lobby of professional practice. You no longer feel like you're just fooling around. You're getting serious.

***"The mind is a pretty big playground.
You've got to get all the children
in your head under control and
walking in step."***

Do yourself a favor and treat this transition as an opportunity. It's a chance to step outside yourself, as if the "you" at the keyboard doesn't intimately know the "you" who prepared the tablet. Everyone needs the help of an outsider to improve his or her writing. Everyone, that is, needs an editor. At the juncture of pencil and type, try to be that editor.

"Everyone needs the help of an outsider to improve his or her writing. Everyone, that is, needs an editor."

If you're still working on that loyalty message, what might go on here? Maybe your friends asked at the barbecue for an example to illustrate your point (they always do). At first, you couldn't seem to fire them up with the message you had in process. So you ratcheted it up. You said, "Loyalty poisons ethical decision making in Washington, D.C." Ooh boy, that got their attention.

That was a good feeling. Your politico friends were riveted, and you had a core audience. But then a book about Washington politics is not quite what you had in mind. You're a management expert, not a political scientist. So you want to firm your message in another way. Maybe you need to relate it better to corporate life. I won't suggest a message, but take a minute to imagine the possibilities.

After drafting the message, open another new document. This one is for brainstorming titles. Type in all the titles you can think of. Many will come from your pencil notes. Don't worry if some are stupid or cliché. And again, be sure to keep everything. Not only might you like something tomorrow that you didn't like today, new patterns will emerge in old streams of thinking.

Throughout the first step in the Stairway to Earth, you may object that I'm making a simple process complex. Truth be known, the complexity can be much greater than I make it. The mind is a pretty big playground. You've got to get all the children in your head under control and walking in step. That's why message development might take just a few hours, or it might take days — a chunk of hours spent here, a chunk there, some deep thinking in the shower, and a long talk with a friend or two.

To increase your effectiveness, I find it helpful to keep some rules of thumb in mind. Here's my short list. Some I've touched on already:

Go circular not linear.

Remember the analogy to peripheral vision. Keep checking the periphery for language and ideas. Metaphors can come from the forest at the edge of your vision — or from under a leaf in front of your nose.

***“Figure out how to say the right thing.
Then figure out how to say it
in the right way.”***

Search for the box.

Though many people seem to exclusively praise “out-of-the-box” thinking during the creative process, remember that, to define your message, you eventually need to define the box. What’s in? What’s out?

Capture everything.

Essayist E.B. White wrote in his classic *The Elements of Style* about the importance of “occasional wing shots” for “bringing down the bird of thought as it flashes by.” Don’t let good game get away.

Engage intellect and emotion.

Humanizing a message engages a reader’s feelings. Thus drawn by the heart strings as well as curiosity, readers lean close to hear your story.

Speak on two levels.

Address readers on at least two levels. Explicitly address your concrete topic. Implicitly, often via analogy, address life. A book about loyalty in business says a lot about loyalty in life.

Prize simplicity.

In the same way that powerful designs (think iPod) package complex technology in simple products, powerful insights package complex ideas in simple words.

Put accuracy first.

Create a message that’s clear before getting caught up in creating one that’s catchy. In other words, give preference to figuring out how to say the right thing. Then figure out how to say it in the right way.

Count on the unconscious.

Your mind does an awful lot of work while you’re asleep, mowing the lawn, and slouching at the beach. Give your neurons breathing room. Don’t underestimate them. They will reward you.

If all goes well, you will find the perfect message during the firming process — and of course the right title. But set your expectations appropriately: Don’t count on ringing the bell of perfection. In fact, don’t even become attached to the idea. Attachment can be the source of much suffering later. Instead, consider your message and title a work in progress. You’ll have plenty of chances to change later.

Bear in mind message development is iterative. You follow a process because you want a controlled system to brainstorm, rework prototype language, rethink insights, and feel like you’re moving ahead. But you’ll still keep coming back to improve old work to make it better. Returning again and again to “pass go” is a sign of progress.

You will never stop wishing you could develop a message with the same speed as a star musician develops a melody. Who doesn't wish he or she was like, say, George Harrison, for whom "Here Comes the Sun" poured out all at once at sunrise at Eric Clapton's house? (And that wasn't the only time that happened.) But this wish is unrealistic.

The good news is that even if you're not a natural, you can employ a logical process to mature your ideas. It does take time, days maybe weeks. But that's not such a bad thing. The hunt for a simple truth in the beginning can be the most thrilling part of writing a book. Take time to savor it. Enjoy the pursuit of the message both when you're holding a pencil and when you key a sentence into your computer at the end.

The sentence you come up with is more valuable than it looks. It gives you an unadorned statement of direction to steady your focus for your entire journey. It may not resonate quite like the refrain from "Here Comes the Sun." But it will be a refrain you can count on as you take your next step in the process of creating a winning manuscript: Stairway to Earth, Step 2: **Right Argument.** ➡

More Info



About the author

Bill Birchard is a veteran author, writer, and journalist who specializes in management, the environment, and social responsibility. He has written four books, edited or ghost-written a host of others, and coached authors in book writing for more than ten years. He invites all writers to visit www.stairwaytoearth.com to discuss the process for turning book ideas into winning manuscripts.

Join the conversation and learn about all eight steps in the Stairway to Earth. Bill lives in Amherst, New Hampshire. See also www.billbirchard.com.

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