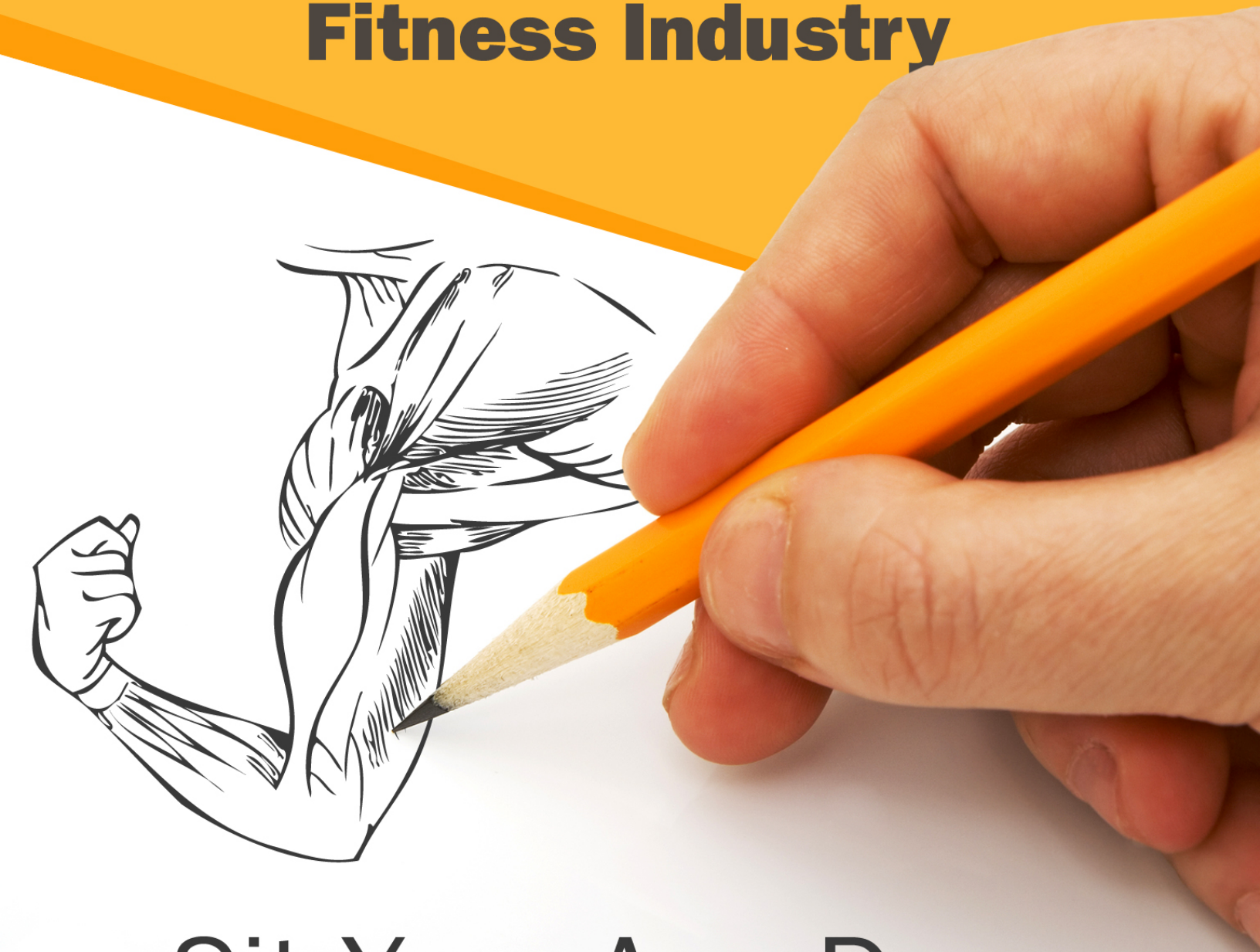
# How to Get Published

## Writing Domination in the **Fitness Industry**





## Sit Your Ass Down and **Write**

# By Lou Schuler

## I've been a writer my entire adult life.

I have a bachelor's degree in journalism and nine-tenths of a master's degree in professional writing. I've written millions of words, been gainfully employed in publishing more often than not, and won a few awards. I've also been fired from newspaper and magazine jobs and more than once been told I'm not especially good at my chosen profession.

I'm here to tell you there's no magic to what I do. Any idiot can do it, and lots of them have. If you can talk, you can write. But if you write like you talk—like most of us talk, I should say—you won't do it very well.

The best writing is communication. It can be more than that, especially when someone with exceptional skill raises it to the level of art. But it can never be less than that. Communication requires two things:

1. Something to communicate.

2. Someone to communicate with.

Part 1 begins with a look at *what* you'll communicate. Then we'll discuss *how* to communicate. Finally, I'll offer some thoughts on *when* to communicate—that is, the progression from writing for yourself or a small circle of acquaintances to reaching out for a bigger audience with whom you can communicate on a regular, ongoing basis.

# What You're Trying to Say

Sean, Roman, and I practice *service journalism*. We help people learn to do things they don't know how to do, or want to do better. Mark Bricklin, the legendary editor at Rodale who launched *Men's Health* magazine, offered the best explanation of service journalism I've come across.

Typically, Bricklin told us, a good article (or blog post, or book idea) will have three parts:

1. A description or acknowledgement of a *specific problem* that a lot of the target readers might have.

2. A *specific solution* to that problem.

3. A *specific biological benefit* that will result from the solution you've presented. That is, the reader who uses your advice will, in theory, make some part of his body bigger, leaner, stronger, faster, more flexible, or less ravaged by pain, illness, or embarrassing odors.

This won't apply to everything you write, especially on your blog or in your newsletters (the subject of Part 2). Over time you'll write reviews, go off on rants, tell personal or inspirational stories, offer random observations, create sales and promotional copy for products, and occasionally ask readers to explain things to you.

But the core of what we do as health, nutrition, and fitness professionals is offer *specific solutions* to *specific problems*, with the payoff of a *specific biological benefit* to be attained by following your program.

Your status as a communicator, more than anything else, rises and falls with the quality of the solutions you offer to problems that your target audience actually has. The quality of your solutions, more than anything else, depends on the adaptations your readers achieve.

When you first start out, your track record as an expert who fixes problems will probably be short and limited to your own success and that of a handful of clients. I'll assume that you're good at what you do, and that the results you've achieved aren't limited to people you train or counsel one-on-one. That is, your methods can

be systematized for the benefit of a bigger audience, one that won't meet with you in person.

Once you know your methods can be systematized, and that your system can be applied successfully, the next step is figuring out what's different about your ideas, and how they'll be uniquely appealing to your target audience.

# Is Yours a Good Idea, or a Bad Idea?

Another principle of service journalism, courtesy of Mark Bricklin: Information is only as good as its converse.

Basic information isn't bad. It's just boring. If it's well known, universally accepted, and uncontroversial, your target readers already know it. They know vegetables are good and trans fats are bad. They know strength training is good and sedentary behaviors are bad.

*You don't want to base your message on promoting ideas that no one disputes, or arguing against notions that no one supports.*

The extreme application of Bricklin's principle would be ideas that no one supports and everyone disputes—or would dispute, if they thought the idea was worth engaging. I could come out tomorrow with a weight-loss plan based on Mountain Dew enemas and claim biological benefits out the wazoo (*literally* out the wazoo). But I couldn't support this new plan with any of that fancy-pants "evidence" the cool kids like to talk about, so I'd have to make shit up.

Would it work? Maybe. People in our field have made fortunes off crazy ideas that are only slightly less absurd than cleaning the drain with a caffeinated soft drink. (Although it might work better if I used *Diet* Mountain Dew …)

You're shooting for a spot in the middle, somewhere between "ridiculously obvious" and "obviously ridiculous." You want your plans and programs to be based on something you can explain with a straight face, and support with evidence that readers can check for themselves.

Recent history gives us countless examples. In nutrition, we've had Atkins and Ornish at the extremes. Even the Zone Diet, which split the difference between low fat and low carbs, was controversial when it came out in 1995. Exercise ideas have been turned upside down repeatedly. When I started out it was radical to promote strength training over endurance exercise. Different approaches to strength training have gone from "so crazy it just might work" to "okay, that worked. What's next?"

You might find your niche by advocating a new approach to low-fat diets that work better than cutting carbs. You might find reasons to recommend static stretching over dynamic mobility drills. Maybe you think traditional bodybuilding has gotten a bad rap, and it's time to bring it back, with your special tweaks and modifications.

Your own ideas don't have to be counterintuitive. You don't have to reinvent exercise or turn nutrition science upside down. What you add to the conversation could be better application of accepted ideas, or better explanation, or better adherence.

If you can show readers a more effective way to do a deadlift, or a faster way to prepare a popular recipe, or a simpler way to remember all of the above, you're still helping your readers achieve the biological changes they want.

That's the type of information you'll present to readers. Now we'll look at how to present it.

# Master the Three C's

## 1. Connect

No matter how good your message is, it won't reach your intended audience unless you can connect with them. The audience must see you as someone they like, which usually means *they see you as someone who likes them*, someone who understands their challenges and wants to help them reach their goals.

That doesn't mean you have to be one of them. Elite athletes understand that the best trainers and coaches weren't necessarily all-stars. If that's your target audience, you have to be able to connect with them in a way that shows you not only *can* help them, but that you *want* to help them. They're the center of your universe.

Suppose your target audience is obese, sedentary people. If you're also obese and sedentary, they might want to invite you out for coffee, but they won't see you as someone who can help them become smaller and more active. They most likely want you to be the opposite of them. But at the same time they want to know that you understand their situation, are willing to invest your time and energy to help them improve it, and will treat them as worthy humans in the process.

## 2. Converse

The best communication is conversation. Even if you're writing a book with the goal of reaching a large, diverse audience, each person reading the book should feel as if they're in the room with you, and that you're sharing your thoughts with him or her.

You aren't shouting, lecturing, posturing, selling, condescending, or trying to score a date. You're having a conversation. Sure, it's a one-sided conversation, but you're still anticipating what the other person wants to know, and how you can best explain it.

How do you typically conduct yourself in a conversation? Are you the funny one in the group? The serious one? The one other people look to when they need a shoulder to cry on? Are you the Zen master, the big sister, the cool uncle, the stern professor? Whoever you are in a conversation with someone who represents the audience you're trying to reach, that's who you must be in your writing.

## 3. Convey information

Your message has to be more important than "pay attention to me" or "I'd really like to have your money and in return I'm willing to give you something that might help improve your situation (although it might not)."

You know this; I only mention it here because I've seen so many health, fitness, and nutrition professionals stumble when they get to this step. They may be good at connecting with people, and they may be fun to chat with in a one-on-one conversation. But as soon as they try to convey information—which, more often than not, they possess in abundance—they revert to a textbook style, filled with jargon and references that make the information inaccessible to most of their target audience.

No matter how complex the information is, you should be able to read it aloud and have it make sense to your intended audience.

I call it the radio test.

If you broadcast your article or chapter or blog post, would someone listening to it on the radio be able to understand and apply the information? When the answer is yes, you've mastered the three C's.

But that's getting ahead of ourselves. Let's step back and talk about some of the more fundamental aspects of writing.

# Writing Is Like Talking, Only Better

Few of us speak in well-crafted sentences that require minimal editing. Most of our conversation is filled with the linguistic equivalent of hamburger helper: "Well," "you know," "um …"

Those are tics we all deploy, including the most comfortable, experienced, and effective communicators. Reluctant and ineffective speakers use all those, plus the dreaded "and so on and so forth." (By the way, please don't ever conclude a statement with "so on and so forth." It may be the most annoying conversational tic in common usage.)

Good writing is conversational, yes, but it's an enhanced type of conversation, without the filler. It gets to the point quickly, but without coming off as hasty or abrupt. You can get there with the following steps.

## 1. Improve your speaking

Before you can develop an enhanced conversational style in your writing, it helps to know what you sound like when you speak.

Here's a useful drill: Record yourself describing something related to a topic you plan to write about. If you want to write about workout programs or diet strategies, describe a workout you designed for a client, or a conversation you had with a friend whose ideas reflect common nutritional misconceptions.

Or talk about something else—anything that comes to mind. Whatever it is, talk for at least two minutes.

Now transcribe the recording, and look at not only what you said, but how you said it.

Edit your transcript, and record that. If you're ambitious you can repeat this drill until you have a solid piece of writing that sounds like your conversational voice. But it's not important to go that far. The goal is to "listen" to yourself in a new way, to see what others hear when you explain fundamental aspects of your core topic.

## 2. Tell a story

Which of these blog posts would you rather read?

**Post #1:**

> "We started Bob's workout with self-myofascial release, followed by mobility drills and unilateral resistance exercises to correct his posterior pelvic tilt."

**Post #2:**

> "I started the day feeling good about myself. Two of my online clients reported better-than-expected progress, my daughter used her first four-syllable word (although, if you want to quibble, she only employed two of them when she said "ack-shly"), and my own workout was the best of the week.
>
> "Then Bob walked in.
>
> "Or, I should say, Bob's stomach walked in, followed by Bob. We've been working together six weeks, and if anything his posture has gotten worse. Technically, we call his condition a 'posterior pelvic tilt,' which is accurate enough. But it doesn't come close to describing just how bad his flattened-out lumbar curve makes him look, move, and feel.
>
> "Any trainer can take a healthy, energetic, functionally fit client and help him or her get leaner, stronger, faster, or whatever else the client wants to achieve. But it's going to take a special trainer to clean up the mess that is Bob. Six weeks ago I was sure I was that special person. Today my confidence is falling fast."

Yes, I cheated. Nobody would start a post the way I started the first one, and it takes a while to get confident enough in your writing to attempt the second type of introduction. (As a public service, Sean suggests you don't try the second introduction in short articles for his magazine. Most of the time you need a faster way to get to the point, which he'll explain in full detail in Part 3.)

But there is a lesson here. The second post sets you up for a tale. As soon as the author mentions that he started the day feeling one emotion, you know something is going to happen to change his mood. We've heard, read, watched, and experienced stories since infancy. We know the narrator is the hero of his own story, and we're conditioned to expect the hero's circumstances to change.

By mentioning his daughter in the second sentence, he shows that he's a family guy, someone whose life outside the gym probably isn't a whole lot different from yours or mine. His description of his client is certainly unflattering, but he's not really criticizing the client. He's calling into question his own skills as a trainer. In the process, he establishes a challenge not only for himself (how can he help Bob

improve his posture?) but also for his readers, who we assume are his fellow fitness pros. The readers are now invested in Bob's plight, asking themselves how they would approach the problem.

## 3. Minimize jargon

Does the second blog post look like a conversation?

Not really.

But it *is* conversational. The trainer uses the textbook term for Bob's condition, but he also tells us what it looks like, and how it affects Bob. It would suck to walk around with a body like Bob's, one that seems custom-designed for sitting on a couch with a TV remote in one hand and a handful of tortilla chips in the other.

Of course he could have saved a lot of space by using the technical term and leaving it at that, assuming anyone who reads his blog would know what it means and could imagine what it looks like. But even for his target audience, a little jargon goes a long way.

Here's what I mean:

If you're a fitness or rehab pro, and you read a reference to "excessive pronation in the frontal plane, creating shear forces and torsion instability throughout the back functional line," do you know right away that it's gibberish? Or do you have to stop and think for a moment?

Or, if you're a nutritionist, and you ponder the interaction of long-chain fatty acids and high-glycemic disaccharides as they affect acute ghrelin release under cumulus clouds in the moon's waxing gibbous stage, don't you sometimes wish you could see the question phrased in simpler, more common language? Or at least put into some kind of context?

All of us suffer jargon fatigue, and few of us enjoy reading textbooks, academic journals, or product catalogues. We read those things when we have to, but nobody *has* to read your work. Your job is to make them *want* to read it.

*The more work you put into your writing—including the effort it takes to minimize jargon, or at least put it into context—the easier it will be for readers to enjoy it, and to learn from it.*

### 4. Avoid clichés as you would highly communicable illnesses borne primarily by rats in medieval times

When my 80-year-old mother began the long slide into dementia, she developed a peculiar fondness for "walking the walk and talking the talk." I'd never heard her use that phrase before, but with Alzheimer's she includes it in almost every conversation. I give my mom a lot of slack. She lived through the Depression, World War II, and a bad marriage to an obese gambler. She raised seven children, one of whom was me. She's earned the right to use any cliché she wants.

You, on the other hand, can do better. Every fitness professional who's ever produced a book, manual, or DVD set works "in the trenches" to get "real-world results" for what I presume are grateful clients. Traveling to an imaginary world to get results would be terribly inconvenient.

If everyone makes the exact same boasts, and if no one's claims are in any way quantifiable, why not come up with different ways to describe your methods and achievements?

We all use clichés in our everyday conversations. At best, they provide us with universally understood ways to simplify complex situations and emotions. When we say we avoid certain types of clients "like the plague," our conversational partners understand the feeling, even if we don't go into the particulars. But the shortcuts that are so convenient in conversation make your writing look tired and unoriginal.

Let's say that Barbara is one of those clients who ruin your day, who make you wish you'd spent the past two years on a Mormon mission (even though you aren't Mormon), who wouldn't be worth the aggravation at double the rate she pays, which is already twice what you charge your other clients.

There are lots of ways to describe your frustration with Barbara (including the three examples I've just provided) without resorting to clichés like "she drives me up the wall and in the future I'll avoid similar clients like the plague."

# Appearance Matters

Every single one of your target readers has more information choices than he or she can manage. So how do you make your work stand out from all the other posts, articles, and books that cover the same topics?

Ideally, you'll write about your topic in a unique way, with original observations, information, and advice, all of which is uniquely helpful to your readers.

But that's not always enough.

I've learned over the years that appearance matters more than most of us want to believe. It's one of the most important lessons of my many years in magazines, ranking right up there with "don't piss off the person who decides if you get a raise."

The easier it is for readers to engage with your content—to access and absorb it—the more effective it will be.

Remember something I mentioned earlier: *Nobody has to read your work.* You have to make them want to read it. The following techniques give you a better shot.

## 1. Break it up

Sportswriters have a great trick, especially columnists for major newspapers.

They make each sentence its own paragraph, more often than not; at most, a paragraph will include two or three short sentences.

I'm sure the practice began as a crutch for columnists on deadline who didn't have much to say about the day's hot topic, but still had to fill their designated space in the next day's paper. By doubling or tripling or quadrupling the white space within their column, they could do their jobs with fewer words and less effort, giving them more time to drink.

Never mind the trick's disreputable roots. You can use it to make your own work more accessible and appealing. Readers accustomed to browsing and moving on can quickly decide if your article or post has what they're looking for. It's the literary equivalent of a "welcome" sign.

Consider the following text, and see how different it looks broken up sportswriter-style vs. left in a single block, as you often see in academic journals and textbooks:

| | |
|---|---|
| If you want to improve your writing instantly, create more paragraphs. Not more words. Not more sentences. More paragraphs. I can tell you anecdotally that 10 out of 10 frustrated writers have no idea how much better their writing would look if they simply broke up the copy in a way that made it look like they went into this writing thing with a plan. Here's an exercise that would prove my point, assuming anyone has enough time to conduct the exercise: Make a list of the 10 top highest-paid sportswriters in the country. Count how many paragraphs they have in an average column. Compare that to the number of paragraphs in any other column or article anywhere else in the newspaper or magazine. | If you want to improve your writing instantly, create more paragraphs.<br><br>Not more words.<br><br>Not more sentences.<br><br>More *paragraphs*.<br><br>I can tell you anecdotally that 10 out of 10 frustrated writers have no idea how much better their writing would look if they simply broke up the copy in a way that made it look like they went into this writing thing with a plan.<br><br>Here's an exercise that would prove my point, assuming anyone has enough time to conduct the exercise:<br><br>1. Make a list of the 10 top highest-paid sportswriters in the country.<br><br>2. Count how many paragraphs they have in an average column.<br><br>3. Compare that to the number of paragraphs in any other column or article anywhere else in the newspaper or magazine. |

The words and information (such as it is) are identical. However, one is accessible and the other might be intimidating to a casual browser or first-time reader.

## 2. Mix it up

Writing has no formal rules. Sentences can be short or long. Grammar can be simple or complex. You can spend a lifetime learning new and better ways to express thoughts, explain ideas, and deliver instructions, or you can find a style that works for you and stick with it.

My view is that your writing will be easier to read when you mix it up. At minimum it will appear more interesting, which is to say potential readers will be more interested in it. That makes them more likely to retain the information, and perhaps even put it into practice.

I offer this advice with a bit of trepidation. Nothing matters more than the content of your material. Style without substance is best left to the Kardashians. But the two things aren't opposing forces. They aren't "black and white" so much as "brown and bucket." The bucket isn't better because it's brown, but if your business includes selling buckets, and a consumer has it in her mind that a bucket should be brown, it behooves you to make sure your bucket is available to her in that color.

The following techniques create internal variety:

- **Vary sentence length**. A couple short sentences, a long one, another short one, two long ones … There's no rule about how long sentences should be, but variety helps keep readers engaged.

- **Vary sentence construction**. When in doubt, make one sentence different from its predecessor. If you start one sentence with the subject of that sentence ("Bob walked into the gym"), start the next one with something else ("Putting one foot in front of the other comes naturally to most of us, but with Bob it always seemed like a process he learned from an instruction manual that was missing a page").

- **Start consecutive sentences with different words**. One of my college instructors advised us to start each sentence within a paragraph with a different word, and start each paragraph on a page with a different word. Again, this isn't a rule, and if it is it's one that's often broken to good effect. It's just one more tool that makes your writing appear more polished and professional.

Focusing on the mechanics of writing serves another function: It pulls us out of our own perception of our work and allows us to see it as a first-time reader might.

## 3. Give readers multiple points of entry

Sometime back in the late 1980s or early '90s, I noticed an annoying trend in magazines.

Inevitably, a writer on assignment would begin an article by "setting the scene." That is, he would write about a person or place just because his editor had sent him to that place to speak to that person. Travel is expensive, and the writer justified the cost by starting the article with a detailed description of where he was and why he was there.

The real substance of the article would begin in the next section. That's when the writer would explain the context of his story, or the history or background of the person or event or trend that inspired it.

I figured out that I could skip the opening paragraphs, which typically served no purpose beyond justifying the writer's participation, and not miss out on any information. Same with the final paragraphs, which would merely circle back to the article's beginning, to remind us that the writer traveled somewhere and got face time with someone who may or may not be important to the story.

Don't get me wrong: setting the scene is a perfectly fine technique, particularly if it involves breaking news about wars and natural disasters. But it's one that spilled over into everything from celebrity coverage to health and fitness journalism, and it's been overused. A generation of readers now skips around to see if they can get to the meat of the story without having to endure the fat.

Magazines then encouraged it by giving readers multiple points of entry:

- short sections separated by subheads
- sidebars
- charts and graphs
- photos with sometimes-lengthy captions that provide even more bite-sized information

Readers now expect more than one way to engage with articles and posts. I suspect that nonlinear readers are the majority, and few of us read any nonfiction—book, article, blog post—from beginning to end without skipping around at some point to decide if the entire piece is worth our time.

My suggestion is to *find ways to break up any copy that exceeds 500 words*. You don't necessarily have to use subheads. Setting off copy in block quotes can serve the same purpose. Numbered lists and bullet points are also useful ways to give readers multiple points of entry.

Now let's talk about the final topic in Part 1. As you'll see, "when to write" is really two separate topics: when to sit your ass down and write (and what to do when you get there), and when to reach out to a bigger audience.

# The Writing Habit

If you spent a day watching me work, you might find my process bewildering. (This assumes you didn't die of boredom before then.) You'd wonder how I get anything done. There's hardly any pattern at all. Didn't I get the memo that I'm supposed to produce a predetermined amount of work within a specific block of time?

I did get the memo. But it doesn't apply to me. I do this for a living, juggling a variety of assignments, employers, and interests. In between paying gigs I write long emails to friends, family, and readers, and I write fiction when I can take time off from paying work without jeopardizing my family's welfare. I don't know how many words I write in a typical day, but it's probably north of 3,000.

However, I rarely write more than 1,500 words *for publication* on any given day. When I do, I find myself deeply exhausted by 5 or 6 p.m. I'll write as much as 10,000 words in the final week before a book deadline, but it takes so much out of me that I struggle to produce anything for the next few days.

In other words, writing for me is a lot like training or dieting. I have to manage stress and fatigue. Overwriting is as much a risk for me as overtraining is for athletes, or overly aggressive dieting is for someone trying to lose weight. Knowledge work isn't physically fatiguing, but the neural fatigue still requires a period of recovery.

My advice to you, as someone who wants to begin writing or improve your current skills, is to treat the process as you would a training or diet program. Physical therapist Gray Cook advises readers and clients to first move well, then move a lot. The same applies to writing: *First write well, then write a lot.*

For a complete beginner, the best approach would be something like this:

1. **Establish a writing schedule**. Choose the time of day that works best for you. Morning, afternoon, evening—anything can work, as long as it's a time when you feel mentally sharp and able to focus.

2. **Start with a modest goal**, perhaps 30 minutes per session, three times per week. Treat this as a *process* goal, rather than an *outcome* goal. Establish the writing habit without putting pressure on yourself to produce material for publication. If you do produce something, great. The point is to train yourself to sit down and write at regular, predictable intervals, building skill, confidence, and endurance that will allow you to produce high-quality work when you're ready.

3. **Increase your writing time in a stepwise fashion**. Add 15 to 30 minutes per session when you're ready, then go up to four days per week, then five.

4. **Stop when you hit a reasonable limit**. When you get to 60 minutes per day, five days per week, you've probably gone as far as you can while holding down a full-time job. Focus on getting more done, or improving the quality of your work, rather than expanding the time devoted to it.

You're probably curious about point #2. Why would I promote process over outcome? What's the point of sitting down to write if you aren't going to end up with articles or blog posts that you can share with readers and advance your career?

Suppose an untrained, overweight woman came to you and said, "My goal is to run a marathon. How many miles should I run each day, starting today?" Or if you're a nutrition pro, imagine that same woman coming to you and saying she wants you to give her a carb-cycling diet so she can lean out for a bodybuilding show. Would you give her what she wants, or would you instead explain to her what she *needs*, including all the steps that go into preparing her body for a high-stress activity like long-distance running or extreme fat loss?

You're still putting her on the path to her goals. It's just not the part of the path she mistakenly assumed was the starting line.

*I think articles and attention-seeking blog posts are the equivalent of intermediate-level training. If you try to start there, you'll only frustrate yourself*.

I recommend these drills instead. Complete at least one per session, and start the next session by reviewing and editing it.

1. **Write a letter to a friend or loved one**. Not an email. This is an old-fashioned letter, describing an event in your life, or something funny your kid did, or the joys and frustrations of your work.

2. **Write a response to an article or post you read recently**. It could be one you liked or hated. The key is that you had a strong reaction to the piece. You aren't going to send this, but you want to compose it as if you were. If you loved it, explain why it's important, and add your own insights. If you hated

it, take the writer to task. Explain exactly why he's wrong, and what he should've written instead.

3. **Describe the best professional advice you've ever gotten**. If you're a trainer, explain how a workout system or business tip changed your approach. If you're another type of health professional, describe a moment when you learned a new approach or application—where you were and how you reacted when that light bulb came on. Make sure the story has a beginning, middle, and end. You thought you knew what you were doing, and then you got taken down a notch, and finally you emerged as a better, smarter, more complete professional.

4. **Describe the worst advice**. Again, give the story a beginning, middle, and end.

These are all creative exercises. One of them might give you a pretty good post, or even the basis for an article you can sell. Either outcome would be pretty sweet, but not the point of the drills.

Another exercise:

Spend a session a week on something purely mechanical. Take a piece of someone else's writing that you absolutely love, and retype it. This can help you find the rhythm of words as they fit into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and paragraphs into fully realized expressions of ideas and insights.

Just make sure you delete it afterward. The the last thing you want to do is find it on your hard drive five years from now, convince yourself that you wrote it, and publish it under your own name.

# Are You Ready to Publish?

The next three chapters of *How to Get Published* give you specific, actionable tips and instruction on how to publish your work. Roman covers blogging and newsletter writing in Part 2, Sean explains magazine publishing in Part 3, and then in Part 4 I tell you how to make a billion dollars with your first book—or, at least, how to put together a book proposal, find and work with an agent, and get your work into the hands of an editor who can commission it and see it through to publication.

All those chapters assume you're ready to put your work out to the public. But are you?

I'll preface this by admitting that fitness and nutrition pros like us have a bias toward action. Which is great. If you're ready to start now, now is the best time to start. Even if you have nothing specific to write about, you can still use the exercises in this chapter to sharpen your skills.

But writing and publishing are two different things. Once you put something out on the Internet, it's there for keeps. How many times have you laughed at videos of novice lifters trying to use too much weight with too little instruction?

I don't say this to make you paranoid or cock-block your confidence. Mostly, I want to offer a corrective to some of the advice I've heard and read the past few years that tells you to hit the ground running:

- **Day One:** Start a blog and a Facebook fan page.

- **Day Two:** Write and submit articles and guest posts.

- **Day Three:** Self-publish an ebook.

I exaggerate, but not by much.

I speak as someone who's at the receiving end of this advice. Several times a month I get requests from complete strangers to publish guest posts for my website, louschuler.com. One glance at louschuler.com tells you that it has one purpose: to promote the work and interests of Lou Schuler. That's why it's called louschuler.com, and not anydipshitoffthestreet.com.

And yet, I get a couple dozen emails a year from entry-level writers asking if they can publish their work on my site.

Why are these people doing this? Because someone told them this is how you get started. You annoy people you don't know with offers they don't want.

Let me tell you this, speaking as your mentor, your friend, and perhaps your future collaborator: There is no advantage to be gained by annoying people. And a lot of the advice I see for entry-level writers compels them to annoy people with inappropriate, premature, guaranteed-to-fail proposals.

So how do you distinguish between those proposals, and the kind of persistence you need to get ahead? Let's explore, starting with …

## The obligatory sports metaphor

All of us agree that you shouldn't give fitness advice if you don't know your way around a gym. You shouldn't give nutrition advice if you don't know a carbohydrate from a prostate. I think it's the same with writing. You need to polish your communication skills in the appropriate venues before you offer your work to a mass audience.

A personal blog, the subject of Part 2, is a great training vehicle. It's a way to develop your chops, interact with a limited audience (probably just your friends, colleagues, and clients at first), and get some sense of your strengths and weaknesses.

That's where the sports metaphor comes in. Most good basketball players start in the driveway or local park, where parents, siblings, and neighbors teach him or her how to dribble, shoot, pass, and defend.

But you don't go from your driveway to a travel-team tryout. You'll get cut before you finish lacing up your sneakers. There are lots of steps in between—neighborhood pickup games, rec-league teams, probably a camp or two—if you want to make the travel team.

You learn the sport on two levels throughout your development. If you love basketball, you're probably going to play pickup games every chance you get. That's how you develop your signature moves and your money shot. You learn to create, to adapt, to play the game at different speeds, depending on the day's competition. There's no permanent record of what you do in any given pickup game, but over time you see big changes in your skills:

1. **You get tougher**. Basketball is an asshole magnet, and the better you are, the harder you're going to get hit.

2. **You gain confidence**.

3. **You learn how to win**. It's the only way to stay on the court.

4. **Just as important, you learn *not to lose***. That is, you learn not to do stupid things that cost your team the game.

But no matter how good you are at pickup basketball, if that's all you do, you'll never make a living at the game. It's a team game, and you need the discipline and structure that comes from working with a coach who molds your game to his or her system.

You may not like the coach's system, but it's a mandatory step in your progress toward a tangible payoff, like a college scholarship or professional career. A structured system forces you to focus on conditioning and athleticism, which in turn make you a better player.

Publishing, like basketball, is a team effort. The writer is rarely the star of the team, and if it happens all, it won't be anytime soon. (Trust me!)

It doesn't matter how popular your blog posts or Facebook updates or tweets may be. Those are the editorial equivalent of street ball. You still start from zero when you submit your work to venues where it has to be accepted and edited before it appears online or in print.

Once you've made the team, you get opportunities to develop your skills in new ways:

1. **You learn to work faster**. Deadlines are everything in publishing, and more often than not your paychecks depend on meeting them.

2. **You learn to accept criticism**. You may even come to appreciate it. A bad editor is like a bad boss in any business, but a great editor makes you look better than you otherwise would.

3. **You learn to fix problems, based on that criticism**. You aren't going to rewrite a blog post based on somebody's reaction to it. But in publishing you don't get paid until you fix what the editor decides is broken.

4. **You learn to edit your own work**. That is, you get a sense of what an editor will flag, and you fix problems before you send it in. This not only saves your editors a lot of trouble (making you more likely to score future work, sometimes for better pay), it saves you the *Groundhog Day* aggravation of returning to something you thought was finished.

These things don't happen overnight. It's a process, like diet and training. You can't expect to be good your first week, month, or year. You probably won't publish your first article, not even as a guest post on whatever blog actually accepts such things from first-time writers. But over time you will get better.

With that out of the way, it's time for the next step in your development as a writer: blogging for fun and profit.