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WRITING AS THINKING

PRACTICES FOR TECHNOLOGY
PROFESSIONALS

Writing as Thinking

Practices for Technology Professionals

Diana Montalion

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Introduction

“Simple can be harder than complex: you have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it’s worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains.”—Steve Jobs

Before my tech career, I was as an aspiring actor and writer. I loved occupying creative potential—the space where we “see” something true and matterful, then do the hard work of bringing it to life. I especially loved doing that work with others. Even though we were a wild bunch of melodramatic youngsters who took ourselves too seriously.

For awhile, I combined writing and acting, creating comedy sketches for improv shows. I tried to write the Great American Novel in the morning, while performing in summer theater at night. (That ... did not go well.) Off season, I “got serious” about writing, bought a Writer’s Market, the tome listing all the places to submit writing, and tried earning money as a freelance writer. I don’t remember how much I earned but it definitely didn’t pay my rent.

Eventually, I stopped acting because it’s tricky to balance with parenting. But I never gave up on writing. Writing, for me, isn’t necessarily about publishing. Writing is an embodied practice of listening and crafting and cultivating my thinking.

Writing is creating something from nothing—something then seems like it was always there.

Writing is a constant intellectual journey with no roadmap. People I respect have hiked the trails: John McPhee, James Gleick, Anne Lammot, David Sedaris, Tracy Kidder, Mary Roach, Micheal Pollan

and so many others. They know something about how to avoid being eaten by a bear or dying of hypothermia. They inspire me. But they can not map my journey. Other people can't know what lessons I need to learn or how I need to learn them.

I have to trust the process.

I was never very good at trusting ... anything. Going with the creative flow requires vulnerability, a thing I generally avoid. Instead I try to control the process, with schedules and research and changing fonts and installing a different writing app and and making up dramas like “omg which website blocker tool should I use so I can focus?”. (Perhaps you’ve worked on technology initiatives that are run like this?) Micromanaging while trying to “flow” is a waste of time and energy. Very little actually gets done. (Again, perhaps that sounds familiar?)

In my 30s, I went back to college and studied both writing and computer science because I couldn’t decide between them. By that age, I’d learned to distract myself endlessly with “getting shit done”. My todo list was more important than my writing schedule. After I finished school, I invested money, earmarked for paying rent while I wrote, in an independent bookstore. I hoped the bookstore would support me. Hahahahahahaha.

The bookstore was a wonderful adventure and a friend to writing. It taught me a lot, while also being a drain on my time, energy, attention and, goodness knows, my bank account. This has been a reoccurring theme in my life, a defect of character: putting myself in situations that are a massive drain on my attention, then wondering why I never get creative work done. It took me too long to learn that focus, gathering my own attention, is the key to writing ... and thinking ... and being happy.

When I closed the bookstore, I thought I’d quit writing. I just wanted to code. I’d finally deciding between writing and tech! So, I moved to the “little Silicon Valley”, Austin Texas (USA).

I dove into my new career with gusto. Which means, I was a bit of

a workaholic. Which means, I was a workaholic. In part because, as previously mentioned, “get shit done” it is. And in part because I absolutely loved it. Along with coding, architecting, leading teams and initiatives, I gave talks and workshops all over the world. I learned anything and everything that interested me.

I say that I loved my work but the truth is, sometimes, I hated it. In tech culture, there is a constant tension between seeking power and control (see: Twitter at the end of 2022) and actual innovation. The amount of time, energy and attention wasted on ego trippin’ is high.

Over the years, I watched many initiatives get stuck in the same rut I did, seeking to maintain control while trying to create. Those two things do not get along. Innovation arises from insightful, well-crafted and learning-driven processes that support people thinking well together. Not military deployment.

During the low times, I thought “I just need solitude, time (mostly) free of responsibilities. Then! I’ll! Create!” I’d retreat, temporarily. That strategy kinda worked but it mostly didn’t. Regardless, it’s not sustainable. I’ve seen organizations use this strategy. Isolate individual contributions, treat them like the Golden Goose, then be disappointed when they deliver more problems than value.

My work in tech is sometimes maddening and exhausting. Sometimes satisfying and exhilarating. Sometimes all those things and more, simultaneously. Just like life.

On a sunny day in March of 2020, I first heard the word “Covid”. There was a lot of solitude and time for creating, while also working as a system architect. In the midst of that hazy time, a magic realization arrived. I hadn’t “quit” anything. The processes and patterns I’d learned through writing were present in my technology career. (Except the poverty part, I earn more than enough to pay my rent.)

Otherwise ...

I loved occupying the creative potential of building technology, the space where I do the hard work of “seeing” something true and tangible and impactful, then bringing it to life. I loved doing that work with talented others, even though we were a wild bunch of mostly guys who took ourselves too seriously.

Coding and technology architecture isn’t just about what you push to production. It’s an embodied practice of listening and crafting and cultivating your thinking and problem-solving recommendations. It’s creating something from nothing that then seems like it was always there.

Building modern technology is a constant intellectual challenge with no roadmap. People I respect have traveled the path: Peter Senge, Eberhardt Rechting, Donella Meadows, Russel Ackoff, Eric Evans, Kent Beck, Netflix, Spotify and so many others. They know something about how to build performant systems, avoid constructing the same thing again and again with different tools, wasting millions of dollars “transforming” nothing. Other people’s experiences help. But they don’t describe what this software system needs. Other people can’t know what lessons we need to learn or how we, as a team or an organization, need to learn them.

We have to trust the process.

I discovered that I was better than most organizations at trusting. Going with the creative and intellectual flow, discovering, requires vulnerability, a thing most organizations generally avoid. They want “transformation” without risk. So they make a lot of unnecessary drama along the way. So much noise, endlessly distracting ourselves with “getting things done” for the sake of delivering.

My career has taught me a lot. It has also been an unnecessary drain on my time, energy and attention. The bigger the drain, the fewer the results delivered. The more a situation spun out of control, the more control was added, which increased the blame doled out but not the transformation.

When my teammates and I were focus on figuring out tough chal-

lenges, working hard and investing our attention in activities that led to impactful insights, we moved mountains. And, generally, we were happy together doing it.

Apparently, there is little difference between the lessons writing teaches me and the lessons technology systems teach me. Different languages. Different, less poetic, group of colleagues. But overall ... **crafting knowledge is crafting knowledge.**

As knowledge workers ... we craft knowledge. Regardless of our role, we endlessly weave other people's ideas and experiences into our own. We construct recommendations. We hope our ideas will benefit the technology system, people processes, products and organizations whose mission we serve.

We try to see what is not yet visible and bring it to life.

Alas, despite our good intentions, we often become lost in the forest of strong, disparate opinions. We head down a promising path and discover a dead end. We do this again and again. When we do find a path that leads to change ... almost nobody follows us.

Buffeted by the forceful winds of organizational politicking, we are screaming into the wind.

Crafting knowledge involves constructing something whole and actionable from the raw materials of abstract ideas. This requires consistently creating conceptual integrity. Conceptual integrity helps us figure out what is best to do.

Responsibility to yourself means refusing to let others do your thinking, talking, and naming for you; it means learning to respect and use your own brains and instincts; hence, grappling with hard work.—Adrienne Rich

Unfortunately, we are truly terrible at creating or maintaining integrity of thinking, in ourselves and with others. Unless we practice.

Fortunately, writing is inherently the practice of crafting conceptual integrity.

We can use writing to strengthen our metacognition – awareness and understanding of our own thought process. Thinking is a process we can observe, understand and improve.

Writing can be used as a method of inquiry. We write to explore questions, assertions, new ideas and insights. We reflect on, and detangle, our experiences. We consider answers and invent new, better, questions.

Writing can structure learning. When we can proactively learn, we improve our ability to navigate uncertainty.

Writing can synthesize knowledge, experience and sound judgement into the best-possible recommendation, in the midst of ever-changing circumstances. When we write, we are not making things concrete, except when we need concrete. We are synthesizing and prioritizing. When done together as a team, this becomes thinking well, together.

Thinking well together generates better outcomes. And makes daily life more enjoyable for everyone. When people cooperatively strengthen their thinking, and reasons for acting, they make better decisions together.

All these practices strengthen conceptual integrity. When we are good at creating conceptual integrity ... we can lead learning teams and structure sociotechnical systems where knowledge grows and people flourish. This approach is integrative leadership—and lays a strong foundation for generating true and lasting change.

Exercises

1. Select a notebook and pen.

2. Set a timer for 10 or 20 minutes and write your story ... why are you reading this book?
3. Select a creative nonfiction book to read.

Further reading

- [Atomic Habits¹](https://bookshop.org/a/86792/9780735211292)
- Good creative nonfiction like [An Immense World²](https://bookshop.org/a/86792/9780593133231) or anything by [Mary Roach³](https://bookshop.org/contributors/mary-roach-117aafbf-b342-4baa-a077-f3652e22c2af) or [Sapiens⁴](https://bookshop.org/a/86792/9780062316110) or [anything on this list⁵](https://www.thoughtco.com/major-works-of-modern-creative-nonfiction-1688768)

¹<https://bookshop.org/a/86792/9780735211292>

²<https://bookshop.org/a/86792/9780593133231>

³<https://bookshop.org/contributors/mary-roach-117aafbf-b342-4baa-a077-f3652e22c2af>

⁴<https://bookshop.org/a/86792/9780062316110>

⁵<https://www.thoughtco.com/major-works-of-modern-creative-nonfiction-1688768>

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Just write

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How to (just) write

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Three options (pick one)

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Advanced note

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Frequently asked questions

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Focused Writing

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Focused work is hard

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Do it anyway

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What is knowledge?

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On being a knowledge worker

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Reconsidering authority

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Support for your practice

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Systemic Reasoning

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What is systemic reasoning?

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Improving our judgment

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Systemic reasoning is a practice

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The two blockers

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A method of inquiry

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The hard part

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Strengthening the reasons

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Architecting your recommendation

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Model your writing

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Eliminate the weak reasons (and add more)

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Delete generalizations

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Tidy up and clarify your text

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Give examples

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Outline what you need from others

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Examine your emotions

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Examine your intentions

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Check your grammar

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Strengthening the reasons

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Reliable

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Relevant

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Strong

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Well-defined

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Sufficient

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Cohesive

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