
CHAPTER 5

WRITE IT OR REGRET IT

Janeane Garofalo is a versatile comedian. She has done sketch comedy on *Saturday Night Live*. She's starred in movies such as *Reality Bites* and TV shows such as *The Larry Sanders Show*. She's been a radio host for *Air America*, and she even wrote a book, *Feel This Book*, with Ben Stiller. But throughout her tour de force of the comedy world, the consistent thread has been her stand-up.

You may not have realized that Garofalo is part of a comedy duo—with her notebook. She relies on it so much that she unashamedly brings it with her on stage. She's also not afraid to talk about it. From her self-titled 1997 TV comedy special:

The notebook. Yes, as you know, Garofalo's a little forgetful. Has to bring her notebook. Between the NutraSweet and the Fen-phen, I don't know whether to sh*t or wind my watch at this point. I gotta have a thing happening here because I don't wanna forget what I wanna discuss with you. I owe you that much.

No matter your industry, field, or expertise, there is one essential habit everyone should have. From capturing creativity to executing innovation, it all requires this simple yet all-too-often overlooked step: *write it down*.

WRITE THIS WAY

People tend to think of comedians as performers. Or degenerates. But really, 68 percent of the comedic brilliance is the outcome of writing as a craft. I want you to start thinking about writing the way that comedians think about writing.

Stand-up comedians are either writers who must invent themselves as performers (e.g., Seinfeld), or performers who must invent themselves as writers (e.g., Chappelle).

There are, of course, exceptions. For example, Mitch Hedberg was such a good writer that he could afford to not be a good performer. He would perform with his eyes

closed, his back to the audience, with sunglasses on, and his hair in front of his face. If it was up to him, he would curl up into the fetal position with his microphone and read his jokes.

Along with writers and performers, there are two other categories of people in comedy: people who want to do comedy, and people who want to get paid.

For the latter, being a comedy writer in Hollywood is steady work and it pays relatively well. Many comedians write material and perform on stage in order to get a writing job.

If you need evidence of how important writing is, just look at the 2007 Hollywood writer's strike. Without writers, the entertainment industry ground to a halt. Late night talk shows moved to reruns, and most scripted television programs either had their seasons shortened or canceled. This is why the Writer's Guild is the most powerful union in Hollywood. We think of Hollywood as these beautiful people on screen and amazing special effects. But those things don't matter if you don't have great stories. And for that, you need not-so-beautiful writers sitting around a rectangular table downing La Croix and riffing off each other for hours. If screen actors went on strike, they would be easier to replace than the writers. Well, except for Brad Pitt.

We often think of writing as a means of communicating to others. Like comedy, it requires an audience. This is true, but sometimes the audience is *you*. Writing can be as much about clarifying your thoughts and ideas for yourself as it can be about communicating those thoughts and ideas to others.

Like a yoga practice, creating a writing practice that is just for you brings benefits to both your personal and professional life. And from this solid foundation, you can level up your ideas for the world.

THE MIGHTY PEN

Oh, what's that? You're not a writer? Can't write? Don't like to write? Well suck it up. I had the same problem.

As a young man, I thought I could have a career as a professor, but I was too naïve to realize my chances were slim. I was a good enough student to believe I had a shot at getting into a top PhD program. But these programs typically take students with near-perfect GPAs and near-perfect GRE scores. I had neither.

After four years of trying, more than thirty applications, and thousands of hours of extra study, one university decided to take a chance on me. Thank you, Ohio State

University. Actually, it was one *person* who took a chance on me. Thank you, Barb Mellers.³¹

Ten years later I was an assistant professor at the University of Colorado's Leeds School of Business. I was facing a tenure decision (in other words, I was up for a promotion). And I had a huge hole in my skillset: writing.

As a researcher in academia, long-term rewards (i.e., tenure) come from being a Principal Investigator, or lead researcher, who leads projects that result in academic papers. A key skill is to write precisely, write persuasively, and publish frequently.³² Up to that point, I had been successful by assisting my fabulous co-authors. I would spend ten to twelve hours a day in the lab doing the things I was good at: creating experiments and analyzing data.

I loved my job, and I didn't want the school to get rid of me. So I took a cold, hard look at myself and faced facts: I wasn't good at writing. But I knew I had to *get* good at

31 I found out after I arrived in my PhD program how I got in. I had applied to the social psychology program, and unbeknownst to me, that had been summarily rejected. Barb was a new faculty member in the quantitative psychology program and was eager to build a lab with students interested in emotions and decision-making. Not satisfied with the crop of applicants, she walked down the hallway and got the "reject pile" from the admin. She looked through and pulled out an application—my application—and took a chance on me. True story.

32 There is a non-funny quip in the academy that PhD stands for "pile it high and deep."

writing. So I got my butt in the chair and started writing. A lot.

Becoming a regular writer saved my career. And when I say “regular,” I mean “daily.”

Not only did the quantity of my production go up (i.e., I published more), but the quality of my research went up. This is because I was writing early and often. It forced me to get much more precise about what it is that I was talking about. And I got better at answering the scientific questions I was needed to answer. I was promoted with tenure, and now my peers are stuck with me.

Writing is one reason I succeeded. Comedy is the other reason. As I began to study humor (through writing) and uncover all these insights about how comedy applies to business (through writing), my ideas developed clearly enough that I was able to apply them to my career and achieved astounding results.

To show you what I mean, let’s look at three reasons to write: to remember, to clarify, and to communicate.

WRITE TO REMEMBER

A notebook, not a microphone, is the most critical tool for the masters of comedy.

Many episodes of *Seinfeld* are based on a premise from Larry David's notebook which he wrote years earlier.

David Sedaris, renowned humor and memoir writer, needs to write down everything he sees and does in a journal. He has kept every single journal since age thirteen, some of which he uses as source material for his comedy. He even turns them into books.

The sooner you start writing, the sooner you begin capturing the building blocks of your future. But beware, there's a legacy of writers losing their notebooks.

Kevin Smith had all his notes for his breakout movie *Clerks* in a trash bag in his car. His car got broken into and he lost the bag.

Mitch Hedberg lost his notebook, and it's the only time his wife Lynn Shawcroft ever saw him cry.

Janeane Garofalo got mugged and her notebook was stolen. She has a joke about it:

I got mugged. And they got my knapsack with my comedy notebook in it. So if anybody sees two cholos bombing at the Funny Bone chain, that would be them. Just give me a jingle.

In a “woke” world, I am not sure we are allowed to say

cholo anymore. Nevertheless, losing a notebook may not matter as much as these comedians suggest. Yes, we write things down so we don't have to remember them, but the act of writing them down actually helps you remember it.

Research reveals the benefits of writing with pen and paper. It forces you to slow down your thinking and increases your memory of the material. Some professors are banning laptops during lectures because of the evidence in favor of handwritten notes. If it's a choice between typing it up or not writing it down, then by all means, type it. But be aware that phone and laptop are also horrific forms of distraction.

So chances are that if you've written it down, you'll remember it. But if you don't write it down in the first place...you've already lost it.

LET'S GET APPLICABLE

Writing things down has powerful results.

Joan Rivers kept all of her jokes—too many to count—on index cards in a set of files. The toughest part of dealing with the library-esque card catalog was deciding what category to put a joke in. No Boolean word searches were available in her Upper East Side apartment in New York City.

SHTICK FROM SHANE



I used to have a note pad *and* a voice recorder that I used religiously to capture ideas. If I didn't write down an idea, I felt like it was throwing money on the ground.

Jokes are my currency.

Like many comics, I now capture my ideas on my phone. There are some advantages. The ideas are easy to edit, they're searchable, they're easy to read (i.e., no terrible handwriting), and they're backed up to the cloud. But I am reconsidering my practice.

When I carry around a notepad, I am more mindful of joke opportunities. You know the old saying, "When you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail." Well, when you have a notepad, everything looks like a joke.

PS: This is also why I don't carry a gun.

You can use writing to remind you of what you want and inspire you to go after it. When Steve Harvey was a boy, his teacher gave him an assignment to write down what he wanted to be when he grew up. Harvey said he was going to be on television. His teacher told him to pick something realistic that he could actually accomplish. Distressed, he went home and talked to his dad. His dad told him to write something that would make the teacher happy, but encouraged him to stick with his dreams of TV stardom.

Harvey completed the assignment, before penning a personal manifesto about his goal to be on television. He read it every night. And, of course, later in life he did get on TV—most famously hosting *Family Feud*. After fulfilling his goals in his manifesto, Harvey sent that teacher a brand-new television set. And he didn't stop. He continued to send her a new TV each year after.³³ At some point she told him, “You need to stop sending me television sets because my house is now filled with television sets!” Besides not being the world's most encouraging teacher, she couldn't figure out how to use eBay.

People have a tendency to be very good about remembering the things we're right about and bad about remembering the things we're not right about. So writing ideas down can actually improve our learning. It gives you this honest record that shows what you believed earlier, which may or may not prove to be correct as time passes. Management guru Peter Drucker would write down what he expected to happen and then come back and write down what actually happened. This helped him learn from mistakes, hone his instincts, and plan for the future. Journaling is useful for us mere mortals in the same way.

And if you need any more proof of the power of writing

³³ Kevin Hart once sent an \$8,000 bottle of wine to someone who gave him a poor review.

things down: Einstein is famous for writing a handful of academic papers, but he made 80,000 pages of notes.

WRITE TO CLARIFY

Recording to remember is like dumping ideas on a page. It's crappy first drafts and aimless journaling. But writing can also help with clarity. Writing exposes weakness in thought and reason. Writing helps you to workshop an idea. The precision that is necessary when writing down words and ideas demands a level of clarity. It slows you down and makes you acknowledge what you don't know.

Darwyn Metzger is the founder and CEO of Phantom, an advertising, branding, and marketing firm that specializes as a business accelerator. He is so good at what he does that all of his work comes from referrals. Consequently, his firm went years without even having a website. Metzger is out-of-this-world creative. Not surprisingly, I met him in an improv class while researching my first book.

I invited him to give a guest lecture to my MBAs. This is somewhat ironic: he's an MBA program dropout. I often start class by discussing current events related to marketing. Normally when I have a guest speaker, they use this time to review their notes or scroll through their phone.

Not Metzger. Instead, he furiously scribbled in his yellow

legal pad. After I introduced him, he said, “Thank you very much. Before I begin, I’d like to comment on your current events.” He went on to make numerous observations that no one else had come up with (over fifty students in the class), demonstrating his wide-ranging knowledge of business, art, technology, finance, and cryptocurrency.

It was his ability to write *and* to hone his ideas in the moment that allowed him to contribute to the class in breathtaking fashion.

IF IT DOESN'T FIT, YOU MUST QUIT

The value of writing to clarify applies especially well to business planning. Gone are the days of long business and marketing plans. Things are fast and lean—or ought to be. That leads us to the beauty of the one-pager (aka the one-sheet).

Whenever I talk to people contemplating any creative endeavor (business or otherwise), I ask them if they’ve written their one-pager. Some of them say, “No, not yet.” Others say, “What’s a one-pager?”

A one-pager is exactly what it sounds like. I learned about the one-pager late in my career when my co-author and I began to write *The Humor Code*. We took six weeks to write the one-pager, and after that, we only needed three weeks

to write the book proposal. And when you look at the one-pager and the book, it is amazing how close they feel.

A one-pager includes an attention-getting lead description that identifies who your idea is for, what it does, and how it's different. You must revise, revise, revise, revise, revise, revise, revise, revise, and revise. You can't be sloppy with your thoughts. Because. It. Must. Fit. On. One. Page.

Every potential project I do (and every major project I don't do) has a one-pager, including this one. I need the one-pager to figure out if the project is worth doing. When I'm finished, I often decide, "Nope. I'm not going to do this project." If I decide, "Oh this needs to happen yesterday," then my one-pager shifts from clarification to communication.³⁴

Amazon has a conceptually similar practice when contemplating a new product. Before management can decide to take on any new project, the person spearheading the project must write the press release. The press release must be consumer-centric and feel newsworthy and important to the target customers. This helps the team probe how customers would think and feel about the product or service before they even begin creating it.

³⁴ *The Humor Code* one-pager and the one-pager for this book are in the workbook that you can download from my webpage.

Amazon has another writing process for new projects: the six-page memo. This process not only clarifies the idea and communicates to the team what is required, but it cuts back on meetings, because everything they've thought of has been documented in a clear and meaningful way. The first thing they do is give everyone time (up to an hour) to read the memo.

WRITE TO COMMUNICATE

Once your idea is developed, your writing moves from an internal document to become an external document.

When you're writing to communicate, you are not writing for yourself anymore. You are writing for others. They simply do not care about your message as much as you. They also don't know your message to begin with.

When it comes to communication, people struggle with the curse of knowledge. How is that a problem? When someone knows everything about a topic, they don't realize what their audience doesn't know, so they leave out important information that would bridge the gap. The solution for this is to first identify the *singular important idea* you're trying to communicate. Then determine the necessary prerequisites to understanding that idea. Finally, ensure that those prerequisites are addressed in some way in your communication.

WRITE FAT, GET SKINNY

Recording to remember is all about quantity. It's writing fat. Your job is just to get it down. As you clarify, you continue to add more fat, but in specific places, until you have everything you need. Editing is about trimming the fat, but keeping the meat.

A problem writers have is that they are overly wordy—failing to capture the *essence* of what they're trying to say.

You must strip away the non-essential. This is the art of editing.

Editing is obviously a big part of comedy. As Shakespeare wrote, “As are your words more briefly and expertly expressed, incised of droll baggage and heft, so does your quotient of wit and wisdom increase.”

Kidding. He wrote, “Brevity is the soul of wit.”

When writing jokes, shorter is almost always better. The masters of editing are one-liner comedians such as Henny Youngman. Comedians will compete to see who can create the shortest joke. Norm Macdonald thinks the perfect joke is when the setup and punchline are identical.

Mitch Hedberg has a funny five-word joke:

I think Big Foot is blurry.

Not to be outdone, Jimmy Carr has a four-word joke:

Venison's dear isn't it?

Carr has a two-word joke too, but it can't be repeated here.

One tool for getting skinny is to create a constraint. I favor the 10 percent rule. If I have a piece of writing that I feel pretty comfortable with, I then look to eliminate 10 percent of the words. The goal is, obviously, not to sacrifice any of the meaning or the ideas, but to find the fat I originally refused to see.



SHTICK FROM SHANE

Hemmingway is believed to have said, "Write drunk and edit sober." My variant is write long and speak short.

I just write to be writing. I don't write to be funny. I don't write to be good. But what happens is that a single line will pop off the page that grabs my attention. That is the tiny idea that turns into a one-liner.

PS: I wrote this while drunk and edited it on Adderall.

LEVERAGING BREVITY

When working on *The Humor Code*, I teamed up with my colleague Phil Fernbach to conduct an analysis of *The New Yorker* cartoon caption contest. In this contest, the magazine publishes a captionless cartoon, and thousands of readers submit captions that they believe make the drawing funnier. Cartoon editor Bob Mankoff would make a short list of the most promising captions, and then chose the best three for readers to vote on.

One factor that Fernbach and I examined was the length of the submitted captions. It turns out the shortlisted captions were shorter by one word on average than the rejected ones. That doesn't sound like a lot, but the captions were only 9-10 words on average.

Contest 281 was won by Roger Ebert, who, along with being a renowned movie critic, was a regular caption contest player. The cartoon is of a couple carrying shopping bags, apparently looking for their car, who have ended up in a vast desert. They come across a parking lot signpost with a large letter "F". The winning caption: "I'm not going to say the word I'm thinking of."

NEARLY EVERYTHING IS TOO LONG

When people complain about an experience—a comedy set, a movie, a novel, a lecture—they almost never say,

“That wasn’t long enough.” Instead they say, “Could have cut ten minutes off that movie,” or, “You know, there were a bunch of jokes that he told that weren’t very funny.”

Why does that happen?

Let’s walk through it. The process of making an experience usually occurs in a create-then-cut sequence. Say you’re making a film. You shoot all the footage, arrange it into a rough cut that’s five to seven hours long, and then you trim the fat down to a mere 120 minutes. But it probably only needs to be 110 minutes. Think they’ll cut it down that far? Not likely.

When you’re looking at a cut/no-cut decision, there’s both a potential loss (of not being able to use it) alongside the gain (the benefit of not having it), but since losses loom larger than gains in our minds, people tend to leave things in more often than they should.

This is compounded by the sunk cost fallacy; that is, people are reluctant to give up the time, effort, or money that went into creating these things. A comedian might work on a joke for months and, even if it’s not as strong as it should be, they leave it in because it’s too painful to cut. They’d have to emotionally write off the sunk costs into the making of that joke.

The third reason is ego. You think that it's brilliant or hilarious, even if no one else thinks it is. Being in love with a joke is one of the worst things that a comedian can do because it doesn't matter if the person who's delivering the joke likes it; it matters if the audience does.

As a writer, your words are like your children, your darlings. But as the saying goes, "Kill your darlings."

Ego makes it hard to remove those darlings. And if *nearly everything is too long*, this means that *nearly everything could be better*. The mixture of loss aversion, sunk cost, and egotism convinces entertainers to leave in jokes, scenes, and sentences that don't actually serve the audience.³⁵

And audiences notice the bad things more than they notice the good things. Time may fly when you're having fun, but it slows down when you're not. So if you fail to cut and instead leave in things the audience won't enjoy—unfunny jokes, boring scenes, and bad special effects—the audience cannot help but notice them. The negative aspects of the experience overshadow the positive, making it feel like nearly everything is too long.

So the solution? Cut the unnecessary, no matter the cost. Cut till it hurts.

35 You probably noticed that in chapter two. My apologies.

Now this might sound contradictory to what I said previously about writing jokes that you love, first and foremost, but it's not. You should write whatever you love first, then test it—with your target audience. If it doesn't land, change it. If it still doesn't land, cut it. This is the painful beauty of creating—managing the tight-rope tension between what you love and what gets results.

IMPLICATION: SUBTRACT. SUBTRACT. SUBTRACT.

The lesson of making deep cuts in order to improve a message—and the risk of not cutting something that needs to go—applies to a wide array of non-writing decisions, professional or otherwise. Bear with me as I apply a writing lesson to product design more generally.

Our natural tendency is to add things when we want to make them better. But removing has benefits, too. Verna Fields, the editor of *Jaws*, is widely credited with “saving” the movie by convincing director Steven Spielberg to cut early scenes of the mechanical shark. This removed several scenes with bad, distracting special effects. But it also significantly increased the build-up of suspense. The audience had to wait much longer to finally see the shark.

Ren & Stimpy was originally called “Your Gang” and *Calvin & Hobbes* originally had a bunch of other stuffed

animal friends. In both cases, they were cut down from an ensemble to a classic double act.

Remember that status quo we need to be wary of? Well, the status quo in business is to 1) launch new products and 2) support existing product lines. There are many reasons to support existing products: you want to keep your retail partners happy, underperforming products may still bring in revenue, and employees' livelihoods are linked to those products. There is also the issue of sunk costs—the time, money, and effort getting those products launched. However, reversing course to cut out-of-date product lines or non-profitable products has a benefit: it frees up time, money, and effort to pursue more-promising projects.

After he recaptured his position as CEO of Apple, Steve Jobs cut 70 percent of the company's product line. There were too many unprofitable projects obstructing growth. The status quo bias made these cuts unpopular, but they were the right decision for the company. They made way for the creation of the iPod.

Google regularly asks, "What products can we kill?" The Google Graveyard has 194+ products, apps and services—and growing with the likes of Google+, Google Reader, Google Play, Google Hire, Google Trips, and of course, Google Glass.

BEWARE OF FEATURE CREEP

Sometimes it's not the product itself that needs to go, but specific aspects of the product.

Look at your remote control or microwave. How many of those dozens of buttons do you actually use? Software is notorious for this, too. Most designers and engineers (especially novice ones) think that experiences are based on an additive property. They keep adding features that actually get in the way of what you need for the product to function. The reason is that people choose products with more features, but they tend to only use a few of them—and the others get in the way.³⁶

Sometimes removing what seems to be the most essential feature of a product is a good move. That is what behavioral economist Dan Ariely and his co-founders did with Shapa.

Do you pee *and* poop in order to lower your weight before you climb on your scale in the morning? As scales have become more precise with their digital readouts, every tenth of an ounce seems to matter (Wait. I ate four salads yesterday, and I gained .387th of a pound??).

³⁶ Thompson, D. V., Hamilton, R.W. & Rust, R. (2005). Feature fatigue: When product capabilities become too much of a good thing, *Journal of Marketing Research*, 42, 431-442.

You may remember old scales where the needle never settled on one number. It just quivered in the general vicinity of a number. Well, the Shapa doesn't have a number. It doesn't have a readout at all. You still weigh yourself every day, and the Shapa sends your weight to a server. At the end of the week (or a month), you learn your average weight. The number is much more accurate than your standard scale because it gives you a more stable assessment. You can track your average over the month, six months, or a year. The benefit of no readout is that because of loss aversion, people are overly sensitive to when they are slightly heavier than they expect than slightly lighter than they expect. By presenting averages over time and away from the scale, you can get a steadier assessment of how you are doing—and can feel better about your progress.

The Shapa ends up giving more than it takes away.

DEVELOP YOUR SHTICK

Writing is hard. Writing is hard. Writing is hard.

This might be the most difficult chapter for you to implement in your life. I commend you for reading it.

Reading is like nutrition and writing is like exercise. Time to start exercising.

WAYS TO WRITE IT SO YOU DON'T REGRET IT

- If you want to get the gist of a topic, read a book about it. If you want to be proficient, read ten books about it. If you want to be an expert, write about it. Start reading and writing regularly. Put it on your calendar. Make it a priority.
- In writing, people err in two ways. They let the editor take too much control (often keeping them from creating at all, or at least never finishing), or they create and never edit. Which one are you? What are you so afraid of?
- Buy a journal. It's okay to spend some money on it—especially if it helps you write in it, so as not to waste money. On the other hand, if having a fancy journal makes it so sacred that it inhibits your writing, just get a cheapo spiral for 44 cents. Do what sets you free.
- Practice taking notes during a meeting. The meeting goes by faster, and you won't space out and start drooling, then get fired and replaced by a robot.
- Have a project idea? Start a one-pager. Someone pitching you an idea? Have them write a one-pager.
- Practice cutting your writing (use the 10 percent rule). When making other things, practice removing the non-essential from the things you're making. Removing the number of things to be made. Do less. And let what remains be better for it.
- Start tracking your writing. Note the days and times you do it. What gets measured, gets maximized.

The more you write—to remember, clarity, and communicate—the more you will take control of your ideas. You can architect your reversals, your steps, your chasms, your teams. You can intentionally sequence your actions to have the most impact. Because as you'll see in the next Act Out, the order of experiences matters.

ACT OUT: START STRONG. END STRONGER.

Comedian Phyllis Diller said, “Comedy is like a plane flight. The most important part is taking off and landing.”

The landing part is obvious. Everyone knows how a good story has a great climax, and how a good joke has a punch line.

Stand-up comedians typically finish with their best material: the closer. It’s the strongest material designed to get the most laughs. They open with their second strongest material: the hook. They hide their weakest material in the middle (which is the best time to go to the can during a comedy show).

I love the TV show *The Office* for countless reasons, but the cold opens are my favorite part of the show. You have seen the cold-open trend in film and TV—perhaps an action sequence that immediately hooks the audience—before the opening credits run. Sometimes they relate to the story, but they don’t need to. When *The Office*’s writers don’t have to worry about moving the story forward, they can turn up the comedy and do something outrageous, such as where Michael hits Meredith with his car or Kevin drops his huge pot of chili in the office.

It's just an isolated bit, but it's hilarious. And then they hit you with the theme music.

Starting with strong material suggests that good quality material is going to follow. A lull after a strong start is okay because the audience knows what you're capable of and will be patient with you. I call this the *Promise Effect*.

Starting strong also helps you create an emotional reaction than leads to more emotional reactions. In the case of comedy, this emotion would be amusement, which helps make subsequent moments more amusing because you're already in a good mood. I call this the *Momentum Effect*.

If you don't have a captive audience—in other words they have an option to “escape,” such as changing the channel or clicking to a different video, it is even more important to leverage the *Promise* and *Momentum Effects*. You can see that play in the creation of radio-friendly pop songs. They've got to hook you in seven seconds. In songwriting, the weakest verse is often the last.

Businesses create experiences for customers: events with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Most famously, Disneyland is a series of experiences, from the beginning of the ride to the end of the ride. Retail is also a series of experiences, from walking in the door to walking out the

door. Customer service is an experience, from dialing to hanging up. A customer's experience must be positive in the moment, but maybe even more importantly, they must be positive in *hindsight*.