

W r i t i n g
a s C r a f t a n d
M a g i c



CARL SESSIONS STEPP

W r i t i n g a s C r a f t a n d M a g i c

CARL SESSIONS STEPP
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND



NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group
Lincolnwood, Illinois USA

Acknowledgments

pages 47–48: © 1992, The Washington Post. Reprinted with permission.

page 53: © 1996, The Washington Post. Reprinted with permission.

pages 133–134: © 1992, Los Angeles Times. Reprinted by permission.

Sponsoring Editor: Marisa L. L'Heureux

Product Manager: Judy Rudnick

Art Director: Ophelia M. Chambliss

ISBN: 0-8442-2053-1

Published by NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group, Inc.

4255 West Touhy Avenue, Lincolnwood, Illinois 60712-1975 U.S.A.

© 2000 by NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced,

stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means,

electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,

without prior permission of the publisher.

Manufactured in the United States of America.

99 00 01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09 VL 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stepp, Carl Sessions

Writing as craft and magic / Carl Sessions Stepp

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-8442-2053-1 — ISBN 0-658-00874-9 (trade)

1. Journalism—Authorship. I. Title

PN4775.S69 2000

808'.06607—dc21

99-056108

TO MY CHILDREN,
ASHLI, AMBER, AND JEFF

Preface

I was mowing my backyard when the breakthrough idea for this book pierced my daydreams. By the time I put away the lawn mower, I was deep into a brainstorm, atumble with thoughts, careening toward coherence. As I showered, the first few phrases were coming to me. As I exited the shower, wrapped in a towel, I began scrawling them on wet paper. You are reading them now.

It was magic—a classic burst of inspiration, the kind of transcendent moment that has blessed artists from Mozart to Toni Morrison to regular mortals like me. But it was more than magic. It was a payoff for years of hard work.

I had been noodling on this idea for five years. I had created an outline and filled manila folders with clippings, ideas, and shreds of sentences. I had drafted several chapters. The raw materials had been marinating inside me for an age. The magic moment—what my author friend Patricia Cornwell calls the “through-the-looking-glass experience”—had been prepared for by long years of craftwork. A sudden shot of magic was my reward.

What was this revelation? My breakthrough idea was that every great piece of writing needs a breakthrough idea. I suppose that sounds mundane enough, but at the time it forcefully brought together many loose strands of my thinking. I believe that writing involves endless rounds of hard work, which I call craft. But I also believe in the magic of writing: those inklings of inspiration that seize us unexpectedly and lift our work into the next stratum of excellence. What magic most often confers, I realized that day in my backyard, is the special breakthrough concept that gives an article its uniqueness, its appeal. Every piece of writing needs a breakthrough idea to make it special, and that is the starting point for the book you are holding.

This book proposes a system for success that combines craft and magic into a twin-engine approach for conceiving, reporting, organizing, and writing articles for the mass media. I call it the WRITE approach, an acronym representing Work, Release, Inspiration, Technique, and Energy. As I explain in the first few chapters, this approach capitalizes on the combined powers of the hard-working artisan and the inspired artist within every writer.

From the domain of craft, it is possible to derive a step-by-step guide to becoming a better writer. I can almost guarantee it will succeed. Hard work on the fundamentals of writing virtually always pays off.

Beyond craft, it is possible to enhance our access to magic by living, thinking, and working in ways that flex our imagination and provoke visits from the muses.

Together, craft and magic unite into a synergistic method for progressing toward writing excellence.

Unfortunately, writers both young and old sometimes regard craft and magic as polarized choices rather than an inseparable team. They tend to see themselves as artisans or artists, craftworkers or magicians, one or the other. In truth, I believe, artisanship and artistry are two dependent components of good writing. One without the other is incomplete. Show-stopping writing is like splendid jazz, both meticulously scored and extravagantly improvised. Or like gourmet stew, begun with a prosaic recipe but crowned with a chef's grand epicurean flourish.

To approach writing only as a craft or only as a magical art is, almost literally, to use only half the brain. Craft derives from the left brain hemisphere—the logical, orderly, serial side. Magic emanates from the right hemisphere—the visual, musical, intuitive realm.

This book rests in a simple premise: To become a great writer, you must cultivate both craft and magic. It offers specific advice for advancing in both domains.

Throughout the book I cite advice and examples from the dozens of outstanding writing books already on the market. Many talk about writing as a craft or process. Many talk about writing as magic or art. However, few combine both craft and magic into an approach specifically aimed at journalistic writing. To help fill that need is my goal.

Acknowledgments

Much of what you read here germinated elsewhere, in classes with my students, articles in journalism magazines, and workshops with professional writers and editors. I could never begin to name everyone who has inspired and helped in the development of my thinking, but I feel compelled to mention at least a few names.

First, I should especially acknowledge *American Journalism Review* magazine, where I originally explored many of these ideas, and its outstanding editors, Bill Monroe and Rem Reider. My dean, Reese Cleghorn, and my University of Maryland colleagues, especially Nan Robertson, were unflaggingly helpful and supporting. Friends and colleagues graciously cheered me on. My editor at NTC/Contemporary, Marisa L. L'Heureux, was a skilled and understanding collaborator who encouraged me from day one. I also want to thank every writer, editor, and publication whose work and words I cite. All were unfailingly generous. We are all part of an ongoing writers' conversation.

Finally, I thank my wife, Laura, and my children, Ashli, Amber, and Jeff. From them, I know what magic truly is.

Contents

Preface	xiii
--------------------------	------

Part 1

The Craft and Magic of Writing	1
---	---

Chapter 1 Writing in an Age of Change	2
--	---

The Mingling of Art and Craft	2
---	---

The Writer's Ideals	5
-------------------------------	---

The Writer's Changing Role	6
--------------------------------------	---

The Media's Changing Role	8
-------------------------------------	---

The Information Explosion	8
-------------------------------------	---

Information Supermarkets	9
------------------------------------	---

A New Dependence on Writers and Editors	9
---	---

The Mainstays of Writing	11
------------------------------------	----

The Writer	11
----------------------	----

The Setting	12
-----------------------	----

Summary	13
-------------------	----

Practicing Craft and Magic	14
--------------------------------------	----

Chapter 2 Writing as Craft	15
---	----

A Model for Writing	16
-------------------------------	----

Launching	17
---------------------	----

Reporting	19
Focusing	20
Limbering	21
Writing	22
Rewriting	23
Copyediting	25
Summary	26
Practicing Craft and Magic	26
 Chapter 3 Writing as Magic	28
The Magician Inside	30
The Creative Spiral	31
Conjuring the Inner Magic	33
Writing as a Way of Life	34
The Muse by Direct Address	34
Thinking	34
Talking	35
Prewriting	36
The Muse Addressed Sideways	37
Walking	37
Playing	38
Laying in Tools	39
Exercises for Magicians	40
Exercise 1: Stage Creative Moments	41
Exercise 2: Perform a Mindstretch	41
Exercise 3: Draw a “Mind Spill”	41
Exercise 4: Create a Web	42
Exercise 5: Brainstorm with Photos	42
Exercise 6: Listen	42
Exercise 7: Visualize Success	43
Summary	43
Practicing Craft and Magic	43

Chapter 4 The Three Qualities of Great Writing	45
Seeing the Story	47
Ten Ways to Find a Storyline	50
Surprising the Reader	52
Some Ways to Surprise the Reader	54
Writing with Style	57
Some Tips for Creative Wordplay	58
Summary	60
Practicing Craft and Magic	60

Part 2

Using Craft and Magic in Journalism	63
--	-----------

Chapter 5 The Very Beginning: Ideas and Reporting . . .	64
Why Writers Write	65
Why Readers Read	66
Finding Irresistible Ideas	67
Gathering Compelling Material	70
Interviewing	71
Using Documents and Databases	76
Energizing Your Reporting	79
Summary	80
Practicing Craft and Magic	80

Chapter 6 Beginning to Write: Leads	82
What Makes a Good Lead	83
Some Leads with Ambition	84
The Standard	85
The Snappy	86
The Whimsical	86
The Shocker	86
The Play on Words	87
The Suspenseful	87

The Impressionistic	87
The Casual	88
The Eloquent	88
The Rule-Buster	89
Organizing and Outlining	89
Selecting Between News and Narrative	93
Drafting a Lead	95
Follow Your Focus	96
Write Several Leads	96
Think Subject-Verb-Twist	96
Make a Literary Leap	97
Summary	97
Practicing Craft and Magic	98
 Chapter 7 Managing the Murky Middle	 99
Where Trouble Begins	100
Problem: The Second Paragraph as the Runner-Up Lead	101
Problem: The Second Paragraph That Repeats the Lead	101
Problem: The Second Paragraph That Drops Back to	
Background Too Soon	101
Solutions: Second Paragraphs That Sizzle	102
Nut Grafts: Why Are We at This Party?	103
The Middle Becomes Muddle	104
Frosty	107
Interconnections and Transitions	108
Showing Consideration for the Reader	110
Good Writing at the Core	111
A Touch of Magic	113
Summary	113
Practicing Craft and Magic	114
 Chapter 8 Writing for Clarity	 115
A Simple Test for Clarity	117

Strategies for Clarity	119
Don't Avoid Complex Subjects—Master Them	119
Think of Yourself as a Translator	120
The More Complicated the Subject, the Simpler the Form	121
Simplify Without Oversimplifying	121
Strive to Make It Easier Rather Than Harder for Your Readers	122
When in Doubt, Err on the Side of Clarity	122
25 Trade Secrets for Clearer Writing	123
Summary	131
Practicing Craft and Magic	132
 Chapter 9 Writing for Drama	 133
What Makes Dramatic Writing?	135
Surprise	136
Impact	136
Force	136
Tension	137
Strategies for Dramatic Writing	137
25 Trade Secrets for Dramatic Writing	139
Summary	153
Practicing Craft and Magic	154
 Chapter 10 Polishing Your Work	 155
Revising Copy	156
Polishing Copy	159
Coaching: Editors and Writers as a Team	161
The Best Gift	162
The Six Conversations	162
The Specific Goals	163
The Ground Rules	163
Editing Copy	163
Teamwork in Editing	164
The Editor's Technique	165

Summary	165
Practicing Craft and Magic	166

Chapter 11 Packaging and Presentation 167

Writers as Partners in Packaging	169
Readers as Partners	171
Strategies for Writers	172
The Print Format	174
The Broadcast Format	176
The Online Format	177
Summary	179
Practicing Craft and Magic	180

Part 3

Achieving Excellence 181

Chapter 12 Models and Common Story Types 182

The News Model	183
The News Event	184
Special Qualities	185
Structure	187
The Nonevent News Story	187
Special Qualities	188
Structure	188
Speeches and Meetings	189
Special Qualities	189
Special Problems	190
Structure	190
Human Interest Stories	191
Special Qualities	191
Structure	191
Police, Fire, and Disaster Stories	192
Special Qualities	192

Special Problems	193
Structure	193
Court Stories	194
Special Qualities	194
Special Problems	195
Structure	195
Government Stories	196
Special Qualities	196
Special Problems	197
Structure	198
Specialty Stories	198
Special Qualities	198
Special Problems	199
Structure	199
Obituaries	200
Special Qualities	200
Special Problems	201
Structure	201
Summary	202
Practicing Craft and Magic	203
 Chapter 13 Mastering the Feature	 204
Special Challenges	205
Winning Reader Commitment	206
Establishing a Compelling Theme	206
Unifying Complex Material	207
Sustaining Voice and Tone	208
Reporting for Feature Stories	208
Shaping the Feature	210
Structures for Feature Articles	211
The Classic Narrative	212
The Terrapin	213
The Chronology	214

The <i>Wall Street Journal</i> Story	214
The Cinematic	215
The Map	215
The First-Person Essay	216
The Hourglass	218
The Swinging Gate	218
Beginnings	221
Endings	222
Summary	225
Practicing Craft and Magic	226
Chapter 14 Reaching Higher Levels	227
Advanced Craft	228
Better Ideas: Raising the Degree of Difficulty	228
Better Material: Perfecting Information Gathering	229
Better Storylines: Applying the Complication-Resolution Model	230
Better Writing: Stocking Up on Technique	231
Better Writing: Exploiting the Tiniest Opportunity	233
Advanced Magic	233
Desire	234
Setting	235
Stimulation	236
Summary	239
Practicing Craft and Magic	240
Chapter 15 Learning from Others	241
Index	253

Part 1

***The Craft and
Magic of Writing***

Chapter 1

Writing in an Age of Change

Let's begin with the joy of writing. What joy of writing, you may ask? Doesn't everyone understand that writing wreaks pain and anguish? Isn't the tormented author a stock character? Can't every pretender quote sportswriter Red Smith's observation that "There's nothing to writing; all you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein"?¹

Here is a secret from the inside: Writing is fun. To be free to write is one of life's grandest gifts; to be paid for writing is a treasure. Writers work hard and face frustration, they whine and they brood, they occasionally even suffer. But few would trade places with their landlord or their accountant. Writing is a calling, and those who follow it feel the privilege of the chosen.

Writers enjoy artistic power and independence that others can only envy. They cruise blissfully through the marketplace of ideas. They dare to create, to trawl for fresh truths, to savor the tastes and sounds of word and thought. Writers know the thrill of composing a faultless phrase, the satisfaction of encountering their byline, the fulfillment of unveiling their work before admiring audiences.

How many other professionals can enjoy the gratification of laboring over a precious article and then seeing it within weeks, days, or hours, emblazoned in cover-story print or home-page glory before thousands of eyes? To this day, I tenderly recall the tingle of my first byline some 35 years ago, a reaffirming and revitalizing spark that I wanted to repeat again and again and again.

Sometimes writing even seems easy. Some days writers, like athletes and musicians, glide into a mysterious zone of creativity and productivity, and

¹ Jon Winokur, ed., *Writers on Writing* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1987) 78.

glorious prose pours onto their pages. Words flow as if from a cistern deep inside the soul. Stories unfold spontaneously in seamless entirety.

This is the joy of writing. Few feelings are more exhilarating, and to a writer who has struggled they bestow sublime redemption: a payoff more than worth the suffering.

Yet do not discount the struggle. Writing is a complicated enterprise, at times exasperating. It demands a trunkful of discipline and not a little luck. It is hard on the impatient. It looks so easy; it turns out to be so hard. This book is intended to help. This chapter offers an overview of today's writing environment and introduces an approach—simultaneous attention to both craft and art—designed to help writers improve at every level.

THE MINGLING OF ART AND CRAFT

To write is to inhabit paradoxical realms. First comes the humdrum but vital world of craft, consumed with attention to technique and method. This is a realm of outlines and outtakes, of false starts and fifth drafts. It concerns itself tediously with every detail from commas to cohesion.

Then comes the mystical, magical world of art, apart from yet intimately linked to the routines of craft. Here, writers draw on the mysterious creative chambers of the subconscious, sometimes confounded by a barrenness of imagination, occasionally blessed by unheralded visits from the muse.

This book treats both domains. Its premise is that writers improve the most by heeding lessons from both the realm of craft and the realm of magic. In parallel, these forces offer an ideal approach that inspires the best possible writing—whether news or features, investigations or profiles, conventional or innovative.

The book offers a system and something of an antisystem: an explication of the rigors of craft and an entreaty to the gods of magic. It is a combined approach that banks on hard work and great artistic leaps. The objective is to adapt for media writers a creative spiral that for centuries has characterized the work of phenomenal artists: *hard work, followed by a period of detachment, followed by a shock of inspiration, followed by more hard work.*

This spiral can be abbreviated into an acronym called the WRITE approach: Work, Release, Inspiration, Technique, Energy. Respect and apply the approach, and you can catch a natural wave that will redouble your creative powers:

- **Work:** It begins with step-by-step attention to every detail of the writing process, from idea to research to focus to writing to revision.
- **Release:** Intermittently as you think, research, and prepare to write, you must release yourself from the material, back off for a bit, let your mind