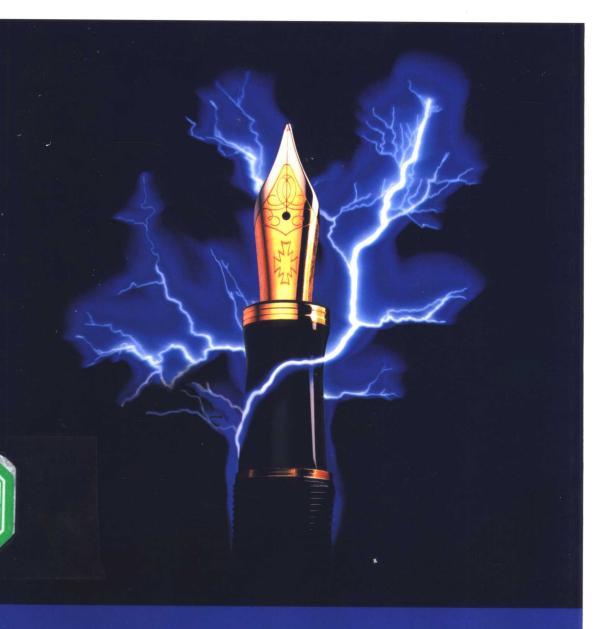
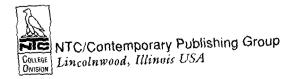
Writing as Craft and Magic



CARL SESSIONS STEPP

Writing as Craftand Magic

CARL SESSIONS STEPP UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND



Acknowledgments

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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.
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Manufactured in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

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

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Stepp, Carl Sessions
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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

ASHLI, AMBER, AND JEFF

TO MY CHILDREN,



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.

Convenus

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Part 1

The Crains and Winds

Company 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"?

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