SECOND EDITION, REVISED AND UPDATED

ACCIDENTAL GENIUS

Using Writing to Generate Your Best Ideas, Insight, and Content

MARK LEVY

An Excerpt From

Accidental Genius:
Using Writing to Generate Your Best Ideas, Insight, and Content

by Mark Levy
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Contents

Introduction

Your Mind Is Bigger Than You Think

Let's talk about your mind. It holds more than you could imagine in terms of experiences, stories, images, and ideas. Want proof? Just think about all the phenomena that appear in your mind without you willing it there.

Take dreams. You don't command them into being, nor do you steer their surreal content. Yet your dreams emerge from somewhere.

Memories act the same way. You're in the kitchen preparing soup and remember a day from childhood when your family was eating steak. You didn't summon that memory. It showed up on its own.

Other types of thoughts also turn up without help. You're sitting in traffic when the answer to a computer problem hits you. How did that happen? You weren't thinking about the computer problem, but your mind created the thought and somehow pushed it into existence.

Those dreams, memories, and thoughts didn't come from outside of you. You generated them through means hidden from you.

Our minds hold a vast invisible inventory of thoughts and expertise. These phenomena might better help us create ideas and solve problems if we could only reach them, play with them, develop them, and make them practical.

That, then, is what *Accidental Genius* is about: It teaches you how to get at what's inside your head, so you can convert the raw material of your thoughts into something usable, even extraordinary.

How do I propose to help you get to these extraordinary ideas of yours? Through writing. Or, more specifically, through something called freewriting.

Freewriting is one of the most valuable skills I know. It's a way of using your body to get mechanical advantage over your mind, so your mind can do its job better.

As expansive and impressive as the mind is, it's also lazy. Left to its own devices, it recycles tired thoughts, takes rutted paths, and steers clear of unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory. You could say that one of its primary jobs is to shut off, even when there's important thinking to be done.

Freewriting prevents that from happening. It pushes the brain to think longer, deeper, and more unconventionally than it normally would. By giving yourself a handful of liberating freewriting rules to follow, you back your mind into a corner where it can't help but come up with new thoughts. You could call freewriting a form of forced creativity.

This technique will work for you even if you don't consider yourself a gifted writer or thinker. The writing itself generates thought, which is why some refer to this technique as automatic writing. It often produces intriguing results without labored effort on the part of the writer. At times, the thoughts seem to pop up on their own.

How Did I Come across Freewriting?

It was 1995 or so, and I got a call from a friend who edited a local entertainment newspaper. He told me that one of my rock 'n roll heroes, Paul Weller, was coming to perform in nearby New York City, and would I want a free ticket?

Would I! Weller, a Brit, hadn't toured America for years. Who knew when he'd return? Of course I wanted a ticket. The catch? I had to review the concert for my friend's paper.

Writing a concert review might not seem like a big deal, but I hadn't written anything in a decade. Did I still know how to write? Even if I did know, how do you describe music? ("The drum went bum-bum, bum-bum, bum-bum?") Still, I took the assignment.

The concert wasn't happening for a week, so to prepare, I pulled a paperback off my bookshelf that I'd never gotten around to reading, Peter Elbow's *Writing with Power*. Its premise was wild: Even if you thought you were blocked and didn't know what to say, you could produce reams of ideas and words. I had bought the book years earlier, figuring this day would come. You know: In Case of Emergency, Break Glass.

One of *Writing with Power*'s chief techniques was freewriting, which I'd experienced in high school when teachers assigned it as punishment if the class was noisy, or to occupy us when they wanted to go to the teachers' lounge and smoke. I thought of freewriting as hollow busy work.

Elbow's approach to the technique was far different from the one taken by my teachers. To Elbow, freewriting was an all-purpose tool that was a spigot to the deepest part of the mind. It helped you generate words and ideas; write essays, poems, and stories; and access an authorial voice that was honest and thoughtful.

Elbow himself had started using freewriting when he had been blocked for years. Judging from the bulk of

Writing with Power, 384 pages of small type and even smaller footnotes, now he couldn't keep himself from writing. The technique had helped him become a prose geyser. I was inspired.

The concert rolled around and—using freewriting—I wrote it up. My friend the editor gave me more assignments, and I started writing for other media outlets, too. While I worked on these assignments, a funny thing would occur.

I'd be exploring my assigned topic through freewriting and, following the dictates of the technique, I'd digress. Often, my digressions concerned my day job and the problems I experienced as a sales director for a book wholesaler. While I was supposed to be writing a review of a TV show, I'd wander and write about a prospect my company was trying to win. While I was doing a profile on a punk rocker, I'd veer toward ways of coaching a troublesome employee.

In the end, I'd finish my article, but I also frequently came away with answers to my problems in the rest of my life. Accidentally, I was acting as my own consultant.

I was so enamored with the business results the technique was producing that I started searching for a book that would take me further. I found excellent volumes on using freewriting to improve one's prose, but none on using it as a problem-solving tool for business.

Eventually, I decided that if I wanted to know what a book like that would tell me, I'd have to write it. That's when I began work on what would become the original edition of *Accidental Genius*.

That original edition was released in the year 2000. In the time since, I've opened my own strategic marketing and ideation consultancy, and I use freewriting on nearly every project I take on.

How Can Freewriting Help You?

Freewriting is a fast method of thinking onto paper that enables you to reach a level of thinking that's often difficult to attain during the course of a normal business day.

This technique will help you understand your world, spot opportunities and options, solve problems, create ideas, and make decisions. It'll also help you become a better writer, both stylistically and idea-wise.

Throughout the book, I'm going to demonstrate freewriting with business problems as examples—problems concerning strategy, marketing, positioning, sales, business writing, and such. That's just my choice.

In reality, you can use the technique to help you explore situations of all kinds in any field you can imagine, such as world events, politics, science, health, mathematics, urban planning, architecture, engineering, psychology, philosophy, social media, food, entertainment, and sports.

So, if you were trying to figure out ways of structuring a joint venture with a business associate, freewriting could help you. But you could also use it to wrap your head around ways of balancing the state budget, decreasing overcrowding in schools, forming a neighborhood alliance, inventing a video game, writing a blog post, fixing a relationship, planning a party, mapping out a vacation, devising a workout regimen, and developing a recipe.

You could even use freewriting to help you find a purpose when you don't have a purpose in mind.

What you're reading right now is the revised, expanded second edition of *Accidental Genius*. While I was working on this edition, I asked writers and fans of the first edition what freewriting does for them. Here're some of their (paraphrased) answers:

Freewriting . . .

- Clears logjams in the mind
- Brings clarity
- Provides perspective
- Helps you become articulate about yourself and your ideas
- Provides a path to the core of who you are and want to be
- Prompts you to think differently from peers
- Makes you powerful
- Accesses knowledge you'd forgotten
- Enables you to write with an honesty attractive to readers
- Creates empathy for others
- Cuts resistance to thinking and writing
- Pushes you creatively
- Causes a chain reaction of ideas
- Creates ideas no one but you could have had
- Puts you in touch with your freak side
- Gives you something to feel good about
- Gets you high
- Centers and grounds you
- Creates accountability in a way that's easy and ongoing

How Is the Book Structured?

It's divided into sections: this introduction and three additional parts.

In the first part, you'll learn the six secrets to freewriting. In the second part, you'll explore methods of using freewriting to ideate and solve problems. In the third part, you'll discover ways of using freewriting to generate public works, such as blog posts, speeches, and even books.

More about these parts in a moment.

How Is This Revised Edition Different from the Original Edition?

I can think of four ways:

Difference #1. In the original edition, I taught readers "private writing." In this revised edition, I teach "freewriting." The techniques are identical. Why am I changing the terms?

When I wrote the original edition, I was dead set against anyone ever sharing their exploratory writing. Why? I figured if they knew they'd be sharing, they'd alter what they wrote. That means, instead of using their writing to dive into the raw, honest part of the brain, they'd stay on the surface and regurgitate the conventional, inoffensive ideas they were habitually getting.

To make my privacy point, I borrowed a phrase from Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff and called the technique "private writing." Everything was fine until I started teaching it to clients during my consulting gigs.

We'd be working on their marketplace position or creating a publicity stunt, and I'd ask them to do private writing then and there as a means of shaking up their thinking. I warned them not to show me their work. Instead, they were to use the document as a scratch pad for our conversation.

Despite my request, clients would excitedly read aloud large portions of what they'd written. It happened 100 percent of the time. I can't blame them. They were psyched by what they wrote. More often than not, the ideas they generated were indisputable departures for them, and the language was distinctive. Much of it ended up in their books and keynotes and on their Web sites and social media sites.

Using the phrase "private writing" started making less and less sense. Yeah, the writing starts out as private—and you should absolutely assume that everything you write will remain private and unseen by anyone but you. But once you've used the writing to discover what you're thinking, then it's time to consider going public with some of what you've done.

Hence, a second difference between this edition and the original:

Difference #2. This revised edition contains a new section, "Going Public." It's seven chapters and ten thousand-plus words on freewriting-inspired ways of making your ideas and prose public. You could say that this section helps put you on the road to thought leadership, even guruhood. It'll help you use your writing to brainstorm with others and to write books, articles, posts, presentations, and the like. It includes the following chapters:

"Sharing Your Unfinished Thoughts" teaches you the joys of constructing a "talking document" that incorporates your best unrefined writing about some problem you're working on, so you can send it to others for help and conversation. I use talking documents all the time, even when I'm not totally sure about the direction my thinking is taking. At times, just assembling these collage-like documents triggers answers before you even send one out.

"Help Others Do Their Best Thinking" shows how to lead colleagues and clients through freewriting sessions as a way of getting them unstuck and productive.

"Notice Stories Everywhere" calls attention to a phenomenon I spot all the time in other writers: As you start regularly producing pieces for publication—be it for a book, a blog, or whatever—you see the world differently. Everything becomes material for your writing. You think in narrative. The world becomes more interesting, and it seems to make more sense.

"Build an Inventory of Thoughts" explains how I cut my freewriting into thought chunks and then stash those chunks into category-specific documents on my computer. That way, I always have material for future projects. It's kind of a squirrel-and-nut approach to writing.

"Write Your Own Rules" highlights the importance of having a few friendly rules to follow as you write. Doing so gets you to the page faster and keeps you on track once you've gotten there.

"The Fascination Factor" is a favorite of mine. When people want to write a book, they often look to the marketplace first. That approach leads to a boring me-too book. Instead, they should look to the things that have fascinated them throughout life: stories, ideas, observations, movies, and so on. Once they've catalogued that inventory, they can use the material to create a book that's one of a kind and jells with who they are.

"Freewrite Your Way to Finished Prose" starts by looking at how consultant Geoff Bellman approaches book writing through exploratory writing and segues into how I use a combination of freewriting ideas when I'm writing for print.

Difference #3. The revised edition contains seven additional chapters of thinking techniques to use while freewriting:

"Escape Your Own Intelligence" discusses how we can confuse ourselves by trying to use brain-spun abstractions to solve a problem. One solution: List the situation's obvious facts. It's easy and throws your attention into the tangibility of the physical world.

"The Value in Disconnecting" teaches the importance of collecting and evaluating thoughts to use as stepping stones to greater answers.

"Prompt Your Thinking" shows you how to warm up your mind by sending it in unanticipated directions.

"Using Assumptions to Get Unstuck" opens with a surprising story and then discusses ways you can consciously separate yourself from thought barriers.

"Getting a Hundred Ideas Is Easier Than Getting One" talks about how most of us play the "best idea game," when a far more liberating alternative is the "lots of ideas game."

"Learn to Love Lying" is about how to think your way out of a problem whose environment seems closed and unchanging. In such an environment, you need to alter how you're seeing things. Lying to yourself is one way to do this.

You tell a lie about a single factor and then follow the consequences of that lie. From fantasy, you might be able to craft an interesting pragmatic solution.

"The Writing Marathon" discusses how freewriting in sessions of six or seven hours allows you to completely separate from your normal ways of thinking. To do the marathon, you have to start each new session by artificially forcing your mind in a new direction—a hard skill to master made easier through freewriting.

Difference #4. To make room for this new material, I've cut eight chapters from the original text. Those chapters were good, but the ones I swapped them for are better. I've learned a lot in the years between editions.

How Did You Go about Revising a Book You Wrote Ten Years Earlier?

I hadn't planned on revising *Accidental Genius,* but my publisher asked and I thought, Why not? How hard could it be? Most of it had already been written in 1999. Revising it would be like cheating off myself.

They e-mailed me the original manuscript and let me have at it. I opened the file, took a look . . . and froze.

Staring at all those words made me realize the project's enormity. After days of worry, I decided to move things forward through the best way I know how: freewriting.

I did a bunch of freewriting sessions focusing on what I'd learned about writing and ideation since the book's publication. In particular, I thought about the moments in my consulting practice that woke clients up and helped them do good work. What did I say? What did I do? What did I in turn learn from clients?

Once I had that material, I made a list of all my fascinations (Chapter 27), culled through my "thought chunk"

documents (Chapter 25), and added those ideas to the mix. I also interviewed several writers and fans of the first edition, so I'd have additional perspectives and stories to draw on.

I studied all this conceptual inventory and picked out the ideas and techniques I found most valuable. Then I got down to the "real" writing (Chapter 28).

Using a combination of freewriting and conventional writing techniques, I started drafting—in no particular order—chapters. By the time I'd written six or seven new ones, I'd pulled myself back from the ledge.

Having faith in the new material gave me confidence to approach the old. I tweaked some language, cut a handful of chapters that didn't seem as important as I once thought, and added seventeen or so fresh ones.

Thank you, freewriting. I can always count on you. You force me to be creative and productive when I'd rather hide.

Part One

The Six Secrets to Freewriting

We all have an internal editor that cleans up what we're thinking so we can sound smart and in control, and so that we can fit in. This editor helps us live politely among other people, but it hurts our ability to think differently and powerfully.

Freewriting temporarily forces the editor into a subservient role, so you can get to thoughts that are raw, truthful, and unusual. It's from thoughts like these that big ideas are more likely to come.

Here are what I consider the technique's six easy-to-use secrets…

Chapter 1

Secret #1: Try Easy

Robert Kriegel, business consultant and "mental coach" for world-class athletes, tells a story in one of his books that has critical implications for you in your quest to lead a better life through writing.

Kriegel was training a sizable group of sprinters who were battling for the last spots in the Olympic trials. During a practice run, Kriegel found his runners to be "tense and tight"—victims, apparently, of "a bad case of the Gotta's."

Conventional wisdom would have dictated that these highly skilled athletes train harder, but Kriegel had another idea. He asked them to run again, only this time they were to relax their efforts and run at about nine-tenths their normal intensity. Of this second attempt, Kriegel writes:

> The results were amazing! To everyone's surprise, each ran faster the second time, when they were trying "easy." And one runner's time set an unofficial world record.

Fine for running, but does that idea hold for any pursuit? Kriegel continues: "The same is true elsewhere: Trying easy will help you in any area of your life. Conventional Wisdom tells us we have to give no less than 110 percent to keep ahead. Yet conversely, I have found that giving 90 percent is usually more effective."

For freewriting, too, Kriegel's "easy" notion hits the nail on its relaxed head.

Rather than approach your writing with your teeth gritted, demanding instant, virtuoso solutions from yourself, loosen up and ease into your best 90 percent effort. Here's how:

Begin your writing by reminding yourself to try easy. I liken this to the prep work of a baseball player stepping into the batter's box. The player adjusts his batting glove and cup, spits, kicks at the dirt, stares at the barrel of his bat, and eases into a few practice swings. These rituals accomplish two things: They allow the hitter to set up the mechanics of his swing, and they get him in the correct frame of mind to face a pitch.

That's what I'm asking you to do. Get your mechanics down, then do a psych job on yourself. Or, put another way: Start scribbling, then remind yourself that you're simply looking to put some decent words and ideas down on the page; you're not trying to produce deathless prose and world-beating ideas in the course of a single night's writing.

I've opened my computer's freewriting file to find a few examples of how I remind myself to try easy. I don't have to look far.

Nearly every entry begins with a reminder, invocation, plea, entreaty, or declaration of assurance from me to myself to stay centered during the writing and not expect wisdom, insight, or shining prose. Most of the time, I don't specifically say to myself, "Try easy," although the sentiment is there. Here are some samples:

Remove the "Mighty Specialness" of writing, until there's nothing to stop you. This kind of writing is dirt simple, like putting on a sock.

Just some brain-draining, some noodling, going on here. Don't expect lightning bolts.

Okay, a little sticking here to start, like a computer key that hasn't been deep struck for a while. Keep moving and the stickiness may or may not leave, but at least you'll be moving.

Here it is, on the line. I'm squeezing some words onto the page, but I'm scaring myself with demands of originality. If words don't come out of me in interesting arrangements, tasty strings, then my writing fingers slow down, my mind stops. Wait, Mark. That kind of thinking is going to guarantee you no new ideas. Better just forge ahead, and get some stuff onto the page—great or stink-o.

These are hardly inspiring openings, I grant you. But if you, like me, suffer from wanting to accomplish too much, right away, an honest attempt to calm your expectations can improve the quality of your thinking in the long run. You, though, might be wondering, will all this self-reassurance act as an anchor on my thinking and weigh it down far below what is helpful? Might I, in effect, be courting my own dumbness?

The answer is no. Despite your pleas and cautious self-instruction, your mind still begs to solve problems and do extraordinary work. By giving yourself this "try easy" ground rule, you'll ease up on your perfectionistic demands and give your rampaging mind more room to maneuver.

But wait, I have another way—a way virtually guaranteed to move you into that "try easy" zone.

➔ Points to Remember

- A relaxed 90 percent is more efficient than a vein-bulging 100 percent effort.
- When you begin freewriting about a thorny subject, remind yourself to "try easy."

Chapter 2

Secret #2: Write Fast and Continuously

That's right: When you write fast and continuously, you pretty much have to adopt an easy, accepting attitude—you don't have much choice.

My assertion—that fast, continuous writing improves thought by relaxing you—needs clarification, though: Just how fast? Just how continuous?

First, just how fast? I'd say about as fast as your hand moves when you scribble a note to your best office buddy, saying "Couldn't wait for you anymore, went to lunch at Giuseppe's," because your colleagues were already piling into a car. You know, fast.

By writing fast, you invite your mind to operate at a pace that's closer to its normal rate of thought, rather than the lethargic crawl you usually subject it to when you write sluggishly.

Here's what I mean, crafted into an experiment: In your

mind, summon up the image of something that happened to you yesterday—a meeting with the boss, a decision you made about the market, whatever. Take pen and paper, and start to write about that image, but write slowly, perhaps at half your normal speed. Spend a few seconds on each word, as your hand traces out the line and curve of each letter. Keep this slowness going for two minutes.

Difficult, isn't it? Did you find, in a sense, that your mind followed your body, that your thinking slowed down to accommodate the snail's pace of your hand? It's almost as if your mind were saying, "Why should I give that situation a good thinking through, if my hand isn't going to have time to record what I'm pondering? Nuts to this." Your mind then either slowed down to match your hand speed, or it wandered off and distracted itself in trivia.

Now do the opposite. Conjure up the same image, but use the next two minutes to get it down on paper twice as fast as you normally would. You needn't push yourself toward bionic speed—just move as quickly as you can without cramping your hand. Try for, say, forty words in a minute. If you want to vary your speed, by all means do, but don't drop back too far. And if you want to talk to yourself on the paper as you're speeding along ("This feels interesting, but awkward"), go ahead and talk.

How was that for a difference? Forget about the quality of your words, and just look at the product of your labor. You've doubtless used ten times the amount of ink, gotten further in your story, and shown more advanced thinking than you did at your slow speed. You may not have done anything impressive yet, but you've demonstrated to yourself, in a small way, that there's a radically different level of thinking going on when you write at a speed closer to the speed of thought.

On to the second question: Just how continuous?

I'd say about as continuous as your grip on the report you spent weeks preparing, only to find out that you didn't

address the issue dearest to your CEO's heart. You know, continuous.

> By writing continuously, you force the edit-crazy part of your mind into a subordinate position, so the idea-producing part can keep spitting out words.

What I just wrote is true, but somehow the rich ideas bundled up in that lone sentence need more room to breathe. If your attention inadvertently lagged eight seconds back—maybe your toddler plopped her plate of spaghetti on her head like a hat, or a passing car blared its radio—you'd miss one of the most critical conceptual statements in the book. Here, then, is that same sentence, with its root ideas unbundled, expanded, restated, and dressed up in smart-looking bullet points:

- If your mind knows your hand won't stop moving, it'll ease up on trying to edit out your "inappropriate" and underdeveloped thoughts.
- Normally, your controlling mind censors you because it wants you to look good to yourself and to your public. Now, though, it knows it's been backed into an impossible position; it can't possibly examine your rapidly appearing thoughts for public correctness, so it recedes into the background.
- Your "inappropriate" thoughts are where the action is, and the more quickly you get to them, the more effectively you can fashion solutions for yourself.
- What are "inappropriate" thoughts? They are bone-honest notions you wouldn't normally air in public, things like "I hate my payables department" and "Just for kicks, I wonder what kind of products we would have to invent if we junked our cash cow?" These thoughts, in large part, contain your genius. They're where your originality and distinction reside.
- Your continuous writing acts, in a sense, like a brainstorming session with yourself, but in many ways it's better than traditional brainstorming. While traditional brainstorming asks you to withhold judgment on spontaneously voiced ideas, we all know that's impossible. In public, you can curb your judgment a little, but you can never completely suspend it. In your free-

writing, however—since no one but you will likely see it, and your edit-crazy mind is napping—you can access your wildest associations without fear of reprisal.

- Because you have to come up with something to say while you're writing continuously, you stay focused on what you're writing. You know that if you lose your place, you'll have to stop, double back, and pick up the thread of your logic, thus breaking your self-made promise to write continuously. Your normal writing approach doesn't have this Zen-like, stay-in-the-moment focus.
- Continuous writing shows you that individual thoughts are cheap, since you always have new ones following on the heels of current ones. But what if you have to stop because you've run out of things to say? Write meaningless stuff while you wait for your mind to redirect you. That's right: vacuous, senseless, meaningless stuff.
- Babble onto the page: "I went to the hen for twice times two phone drake dreg parala…"
- Repeat the last word you wrote: "The data show show show show show show…"
- Or just repeat the last letter you struck on your keyboard: "The profit I I I I I I I I I I I I I I…"
- Just keep your writing hand revved up and occupied, while your mind quickly considers its options, and then get on to a new thought.

Got it, then? The plan is to move fast and don't stop writing, with the understanding that the more words you pile onto the page, even if they're lousy words, the better your chance at finding a usable idea.

In the freewriting game, think quantity before quality. As sci-fi great Ray Bradbury says about story writing: "You will have to write and put away or burn a lot of material before you get comfortable in the medium." To apply it to freewriting, I'd change this quote to read: "Write with a fast, haphazard hand, because you'll need to burn through all the awful stuff you smear onto the page in order to get to something halfway decent." That's the way to think: The bad brings the good, and there's no way around this natural order.

➔ Points to Remember

- If you write as quickly as your hand can move or your fingers can type, and you continue to generate words without stopping, astonishing things will happen. Your mind will eventually give you its grade A, unadulterated thoughts to put on the paper because it realizes it won't be criticized (no one but you will see them), and you might be able to use them (thoughts can be tweaked and developed, once they're on paper).
- If you temporarily run out of things to say, keep your mind and hand in motion by repeating the last word or letter you wrote. You can accomplish the same thing by babbling onto the page in a nonsensical, scat language.
- Your best thought comes embedded in chunks of your worst thought. What's the only way to reliably mine your best thought? Write a lot. Think "quantity." Think "word production." Think of yourself as a word and thought factory.

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