

Writing for Life & Ministry



A Practical Guide



to the Writing Process



for Teachers & Preachers



Brandon J. O'Brien

I Can Preach (or Teach or Coach . . .). Why Can't I Write?

You should see me swing a golf club. Knees bent, feet shoulder-width apart. I step into the swing, rotate my hips, roll my wrists. If I manage to make contact with the ball, it rolls a few feet and stops in the tee box. Usually I miss the ball completely. The problem is, I grew up playing baseball, and I can't shake the instinct to swing a golf club like a baseball bat. Some people can do both. Good for them. I can't.

People are often surprised to discover a similar dynamic at work in communication. They have years of experience with public speaking and are quite good at it. They can preach down the rafters, keep a classroom full of uninterested teenagers hanging on every word, and walk a cohort of adults through the most tedious of professional training exercises with joy. But when they sit down in a quiet room alone, stared down by a blank white page and blinking cursor, they feel helpless.

They think, *I can teach* (or preach or coach or whatever). *Why can't I write?*

Others feel the opposite. They can churn out coherent, compelling pages of print or blog posts all day long, but they panic in front of real live humans.

Very few people move confidently between oral and written communication. There are notable exceptions, to be sure. But odds are that the celebrity preacher you love to listen to and whose books sell gobs of copies didn't actually write the books. Odds are a team of people who are experts in written communication helped a great deal or did it for him, so that the gifted *oral* communicator could appear to be an expert writer. This process is called "ghostwriting." It's a common practice and not a nefarious one, but it is invisible. It gives the impression that the speaker/author is gifted at all forms of communication, which may not be the case.

Furthermore, it creates a set of expectations to live up to. Increasingly, those of us in ministry are expected to be good at both. If you are a popular speaker with a big or growing platform, it won't be long before a publisher asks you to write a book. Maybe your own congregation will ask. If you lead retreats or conferences or teach or consult and people are helped and encouraged by your work, someone will say to you, "You should really write a book about this." If you are in ministry, chances are you will someday feel pressure to write, whether you aspire to or not.

I don't think everyone should write a book. But you will have to write *something* that you don't want to write or don't feel qualified to write—a newsletter, a blog post, a Bible study. If you serve in ministry, you likely have some ability and some level of comfort communicating orally. And it may be that one of the reasons you don't write more or don't like to write is because it's *hard*, or unnatural, or exhausting. I get it. That's normal. You're not wrong or defective. Over the years I've worked with lots of pastors and

ministry leaders who start to write and feel discouraged. “I preach every week. That’s like writing a new chapter of a book every week. I thought I would be good at this. I thought this would be easier. I don’t know where to start.”

Writing can be difficult for every new writer. But people who communicate orally for a living—pastors and teachers, for example—will feel the differences keenly when they start writing because shifting from preparing and delivering presentations to writing articles or blog posts is a bit like switching from baseball to golf. Both involve smacking a white ball with a long stick. But the tools are different, and using them correctly requires different techniques.

Some Differences between Speaking and Writing

There are significant differences between speaking and writing, and switching between the two presents challenges.

1. A different set of tools available—and not available

Acclaimed American writer Kurt Vonnegut once said, “When I write, I feel like an armless legless man with a crayon in his mouth.”¹ If you are a speaker who is beginning in writing, you might feel similarly.

When you speak, you have gestures, tone of voice, volume, presentation slides, video clips, a PA system, screens, live music, hand-outs—snacks—and other means of capturing and keeping people’s attention, expressing shades of meaning, and signaling humor or sarcasm. Those tools are *not* at your disposal in print. And you can’t just make up for those things with bold type, all caps, and exclamation marks. (Seriously. You can’t. Please don’t.)

2. A different relationship with the audience

When you speak, at least in your own familiar context, you know the people well. You know what they find funny or helpful. You can change course in the middle of your presentation when you read expressions or body language and realize that something is unclear or didn't land right. In a real sense, the audience is helping you create the oral presentation in real time. With writing, you have to deliver a finished product to an invisible and possibly unknown audience. They don't know you. They may not be inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt. They can't read your mind and you can't read their faces.

The only constant in the shift from live to print delivery is you.

3. A different priority

Writing well requires time—time for brainstorming, time for preparing, time for drafting, time for revision. Lack of time is a challenge for most people who write. If writing is not your full-time job, there will always be something more urgent and perhaps more important for you to do instead of writing. A friend or church member will need counseling. A student crisis will need attending. An email will require a response. Crises crop up at the most inopportune times. If writing is something you do *in addition to* your job, you will have to make a conscious effort to prioritize your writing time.

In short, being a competent and confident preacher or teacher doesn't necessarily translate into being a competent and confident writer. You can become one, for sure. But you'll have to acquire some new tools and unlearn some habits.

Some Similarities between Speaking and Writing

When you consider the similarities between speaking and writing, you'll see how your experience as an oral communicator has its advantages. There are several ways speaking experience can make you a better writer.

1. As a communicator already, you know your audience well.

Understanding your audience is one of the writer's most important jobs. If you're a pastor, for instance, you definitely know your audience. You perform their weddings and funerals. You baptize or dedicate their children. You pray beside their hospital beds and celebrate their milestones. You have counseled them in their traumas. You have helped them overcome their addictions. Likely, these people also make up your readership, or at least part of it. If, as you write, you keep in mind the known needs and pain points of the people you serve, you'll be much more likely to connect with readers.

2. Your experience developing sermons and lessons and workshops has given you an education in the creative process.

By now you've probably discovered the answers to a few questions about your work habits that every writer needs to answer eventually: What time of day are you most productive? Where do you work best? How do you generate ideas, identify the strongest ones, and develop them into a presentation?

It took me years of writing to learn the answers to questions like these. You may know your answers already.

3. You have a voice.

Many new writers feel a great deal of pressure to write in a clear and distinct voice. They want the kind of writing style a reader can

recognize immediately as belonging to them. This distinct voice is made up of the writer's tone, choice of words, and turns of phrase. It takes many writers years to develop their voice.

An advantage of speaking and teaching is that you have likely found your voice. All that's left to do now, as journalist and best-selling author William Zinsser puts it, is to "Relax and say what you want to say."² This is easier said than done, of course. It will take some time to figure out how to translate your voice into print. But if you are accustomed to speaking, you already have something to say, you say it regularly, and you say it in your own unique way.

So take heart. Some of what we do together may be new to you. Some of it may be familiar. But believe me when I say: You can do this.

The most important step is simply to start doing it.

Do It: Reflect on Your Experience

What kind of experience, if any, do you have with preparing presentations, "talks," lessons, workshops, etc.?

What is easiest for you in this process? What's hardest?

What do you find the most fulfilling? Why?

Do It: Write Your Bio in Third Person

We've started talking a bit about your strengths and weaknesses. In the next section, we'll focus more on what makes you *you*—how to determine your unique contribution. To get the ball rolling, dedicate thirty minutes or so to this exercise:

Write a short personal biography in the third person (writing in third person means referring to yourself by your first/given name). Be sure to include the following information:

- Your name
- Your current job/title/position
- A brief review of your experience, education, and professional credentials
- Who lives in your house or apartment with you: spouse? children? pets? in-laws?

If what you are writing feels flat or boring, consider answering these questions/prompts:

- Write about your hobbies or interests. What do you do to relax?
- Share your personal ambitions and aspirations. How do you want to be remembered by history?
- Relate an experience that proved you were a proper adult. (Maybe, for example, you found yourself surprisingly excited about the sale price of laundry detergent.)

Don't worry about submitting a polished document. Write for *no more than* twenty minutes.

Example:

Brandon J.O'Brien (PhD, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is Director of Content Development and Distribution for Redeemer City to City, where he coordinates, edits, and shepherds writing projects with Pastor Timothy Keller and urban church planters around the world. Brandon has served in pastoral ministry, worked in publishing, authored a few books, and taught for state and Christian colleges and universities. He and his wife Amy and their two children live in Uptown Manhattan. They enjoy good food, good company, and exploring New York City.

Interested in the whole book?
Select your preferred book seller:

MOODY PUBLISHERS 

AMAZON 

APPLE BOOKS 

GOOGLE PLAY 

BARNES & NOBLE 

CHRISTIANBOOK.COM 
