FROM GOOD IDEA TO GOOD READ

A six week writing project completion program

Writing is about moving stuff that has fermented in the back of your head through a filter to the front of your head, and then passing it down your arm and into a recording device. What is so hard about that?

A piece of writing flows from three decision levels. The first decision is what the story is about. The second level (the chapters in a book) is roughly twenty decisions, the stepping stones from start to finish. The third level is anywhere from a few hundred decisions to a few hundred thousand—the words. That is our journey together.

(Attention. From here on in there must be a note-recording device (paper or electronic) on or near your person at all times. The shortest interval of time known to you must become that between having a good idea, be it a sentence or a piece of structure, and writing it down. Good ideas are the raw material of any story well-told.)

WEEK ONE: The Approach

The lightning has struck. An idea bubble has burst in your head. Settle for now on a genre the idea might want to wear. Commit to the idea, and practice saying sorry, I’m busy. Work out your favourite places for subjective, back-of-head thinking and visit there often. For many this is in nature, or while pursuing a hobby. Try to discover the single poetic phrase that is the heart
of what you are wanting to say with your story (everything is story—even a memo), and of which your subject matter is an example. This can be your own quote or someone else’s you have come across in your widespread preparatory reading. Make a list of the noble nouns you want to be illuminated by the story viz, respect, survival, settlement. Then decide who is telling the story; will it be you, an omniscient guide, a novelist, a journalist and/or a combination of these. (Note: the hardest person to write in is the second person plural. Maybe for a short story: novella and up, nah.) Then come up with a working title that seems to sum all this up. Then take a break.

WEEK TWO: Organization of Research and Table of Contents

Identify the several areas, let’s call them pools, that you want to fill with facts, quotes, articles, interviews, first person accounts, journals. Study other books that are at heart in the same arena as yours. What you decide the title of each pool is will ultimately determine the architecture of your story and whether it will support and convince the reader. Purchase a piece of furniture with lots of drawers, literal or electronic, and assemble the several research areas. Your antenna will now be up for those little snippets of pertinent information hidden under rocks or in the brains of others. Tip: Don’t try and read all the books, talk to someone who has read all the books.

The table of contents is the map through the book, the essay, the article. Thinking it through now will provide the path of least resistance, the blueprint, that will take both you and the reader from start to finish of the journey through your story. The headings are also clues, when the browsing reader first comes on the table in the case of a book, as to the nature of the story and
where it will take them. The chapter, section headings should be clever little phrases, not cute, perhaps with some word play in them. Treat them almost as crossword puzzle answers, slightly cryptic, but likely to intrigue the browser.

WEEK THREE: Write Opening Chapter/Paragraph/Stanza

Prepare the nest, your chosen writing place, for your extended, frequent visits. Have your notebook open and to hand. Get a good night’s sleep, assume the position, be glad that you are finally about to begin. Begin. The first paragraph will actually be the last thing you write and rewrite, more than likely, when the rest of the work is done. But it is good to really concentrate on getting the opening line as this is the hook for the whole story. (No pressure.) Arrive at a working opening line and then paragraph for now. You will be holding the whole notion of the book in your head at this time, bursting with details and bits of beauty and cleverness you want to get down. Take a breath every now and then, walk away and think through where to go next. When you reseat, read through where you are up to and sure, make some changes, do a little editing, make notes to self for further research, further cogitation. Write on. Have a couple of writerly/readerly friends on speed dial to talk over the sticking points.

WEEK FOUR: Write Several Chapters/Paragraphs/Stanzas.

First Reader

The writing does not necessarily have to be in the order laid out in the table of contents. There may be particular sections or scenes you have found yourself favouring, and it is perfectly alright to go ahead and do those first. Gradually, as the word count increases, you will be honing your style, and the style that
the story idea requires. Style is personality. Be prepared to discover as you go along that your approach, say the genre you have chosen, may not be the right one. What you are writing may be a novel, not a memoir, or vice versa. That poem might be a short story, or vice versa. If your guts tell you it's not working, listen to them. Take a break. Decide whether to refine or begin again. Every writer does this every time.

Now it's time for your first reader. This is the first real judgement of the book, so the first reader should be selected carefully. It is probably wise to choose a friend, and someone who is coming to combine the role of editor (not copy editor, see Step 10) and first reader, but there may be a friend or family member willing to be first reader before the editor has a look at it. Preferably the first reader has not been hearing, bearing or advising along the way (this is what partners are for) but is the kind of person who might want to read a book or piece of writing like yours. Plan the gift you are going to give them when they hand it back with comments. Alter the piece in the light of those comments you think are valid. Don't be precious.

WEEK FIVE: Readability.

If it doesn't have readability, it won't get read. But what is readability? This lecture is perhaps the most vital of the six. Reaching the magic status of your story having a high readability rating is something to strive for, although it is not an easy thing to define. A book that has a low readability quotient is, surprise surprise, not really a book. It’s more like insurance policy fine print. The way to increase the readability is by making a series of passes over the book. For instance, have you included all the five senses in your descriptives. Have you used the word ‘that’ too much. It's OK to write a sentence now and
then. If there is dialogue, pick someone you know you can imagine saying it, and revise it in that light. Replace lots of commas with full stops. Improve the adjectives. Add a few stunning adverbs.

WEEK SIX and Beyond:  
Complete First, Second, Third Drafts. Prepare for Publication.  
The longest part, usually, and certainly the one requiring the greatest discipline. Discipline is another word for not stopping, for discovering and cleaving to a work pattern. It can be set hours in a day, which may or not be of your choosing if there are others living with you, or a set number of hours in a day. There may be quite a lot of foreplay. Rule of thumb, don’t leave the building.

At this point it may well be time to take a writing course. Get Googling. At a getaway writing course you can have your writing vetted by published people being paid to do it. You make attract a reference. You will discover how you handle criticism. (If you don’t handle it well, or at least not badly, try water colouring.) If several people say the same thing about your writing—too cute, dull, sub-ordinate clausey, strained, too many similes,—they are probably right.

Once you have a raw document, probably in Word, it is time to consider your options for publication. The first big decision, do I self-publish, or do I let the big publishing machine have my first born? The machine picks two books out of every thousand submitted, in every genre you can think of. Let’s look at this from several points on the map. First making the books. If you are self-publishing, you may well have to pay for a copy editor (essential), an illustrator, and an indexer (there are programs for this), and the set up and unit cost for going with books on demand. Second, markets and marketing. Assume you have boxes of
books, or an ebook. Find as many niches - organizations, magazines, businesses as you can that might have some overlap with your book. Selling five books in a hundred to any one of these niches is good going. On the other hand, a publisher will do all that for you, except come up with a tailored marketing plan, but how to hook one? Have a strategy. And send out multiple submissions, no matter what they say. What are the odds? Remember the contacts you made at the writing school. Beware agents. Most are bottom feeders. Ask for the contact information of someone they have worked with, and contact them for a reference. Embrace the Internet.