For my son, Oliver

To show you there is a way to
make a living that doesn't require
a soul-sucking job.

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On Writing

Consistent writing is the single best thing that I've done in the last year. It has transformed my finances, career, and business. Could writing do the same for you?

Why write?

Have you ever played the game Marco Polo? It's a pretty simple game and it's the most fun if played in a pool. The rules are simple: one person closes their eyes and tries to catch or tag someone else. In order to find people, the person who is "it" can say "Marco" at any time. Everyone else has to respond "Polo." By listening to where the sound is coming from the person who is "it" can more easily find their prey. Once they touch someone else, the game starts over with the person who was caught now trying to find everyone else.

It's a great game. At least it kept 10-year-old me quite entertained.

What does this have to do with writing?

Well, nothing. Except that I want to talk about Marco Polo. The explorer, not the kids' game.

The Explorer

Marco Polo was a Venetian explorer who lived from 1254 to 1324 and became famous for being the first to explore the Silk Road to China. At least that's how he is remembered. There is only one small problem. He wasn't an explorer at all. Like all good Venetians of the time, he was a merchant.

Plenty of people had explored the roads to the East long before Marco Polo. In fact, Marco's father and uncle had made their exploratory trips well before Marco was born. So why does Marco get all the credit? Why is he the one we remember and name silly games after?

Simple. He wrote about it.

Those Who Teach

Think through the people who are well known in your industry. Why do you know who they are?

Are they the most talented? Sometimes, but often not.

Almost always it is because they teach. I know when it comes to web design (my industry), the people I had heard of were the ones whose books, tutorials, and blog posts I had read. They weren't necessarily the most talented, but they shared and taught everything they knew.

That's how they became well known.

You can continue to create cutting-edge work and strive to be the best in your industry, but until you start teaching and sharing, your reach and influence will be limited.

Teaching Web Design

Back in 2007 Chris Coyier launched a site called css-tricks.com. It was a site dedicated to teaching people how to code websites. (CSS is the language that describes how websites should look.) When CSS-Tricks first came out I remember reading a tutorial and arrogantly thinking, "I know that already." Chris and I were at about the same skill level, so I didn't learn anything new from him.

This continued for a while as he kept putting out new tutorials. But over time, as friends started asking me CSS questions, I found it easier to link to one of Chris's articles (since they were really well written) than explain everything myself.

Years later Chris ran a Kickstarter campaign to redesign his site. Those who contributed would get behind-the-scenes access to additional tutorials and content related to the redesign.

The goal was set fairly low at $3,500. He quickly blew past the goal and by the end of the campaign had raised $89,697.

Incredible.

The point is that he did it with relative ease, all because he had built up an audience who loved his work.

He and I started at the same point and our skills progressed at about the same rate. The difference was that he taught and shared, whereas I kept what I was learning to myself. That made the difference between being able to make tens of thousands of dollars on a new project versus releasing to no one.

To be known, you must teach

Watching Chris's successful campaign, it finally sunk in that I needed to be teaching. My worth to the world wasn't in how well I knew CSS or how effectively I could code a website, but instead in how much value I could deliver to other people through teaching.

So I started to write my own tutorials and build my own audience. Within a year I had released two eBooks and made over six figures in profit from them.

The way I see it, you have two options: keep your skills and knowledge to yourself and be quickly forgotten (like the first explorers), or take the Marco Polo/Chris Coyier path and share what you've learned so that you will be remembered.

Which path is for you?

A skill that makes money

It's not just about being remembered. Those who teach, under the right circumstances, can make a respectable income as well.

The main idea I want to leave you with from this book is this: if you know a skill that other people use to make money, you can make a living by teaching that skill. Most people think that teaching is for school. After high school or college the belief is that you are done learning, and now you can work.

But the truth is that to be successful you need to keep learning every day, whether you are a programmer learning new languages or a businessman getting an MBA.

In order to get promoted or take a businesses to the next level, new skills are required. When a developer learns a new programming language, he is more useful to the company he works for, meaning he can make more money.

An accidental expert

An architect in Southern California wanted to find a way to make himself more valuable to his company. He wasn't being altruistic; he just wanted to be valued so that he would be promoted more quickly.

When looking at what made other architects stand out, Pat, the architect in our story, found the LEED certification for green buildings. Pat started to study for this very difficult exam, taking detailed notes as he went. Instead of putting these notes down on paper or a file on his computer, Pat put them in a program called WordPress. Using WordPress, Pat created a simple website to organize all his notes so that he could access them from any computer.

After months of studying Pat passed the exam and moved on with his life.

Then almost a year later the economic downturn hit the architecture firm Pat worked for and he was laid off. Since he had a few projects to finish up, Pat started to look at his options. During that time he started to learn about online marketing, which made him think about emails he had received recently about his study notes.

You know how Pat could access those notes from any computer? Well, they were put on a public website, so anyone could access the notes. That meant other people were using his notes to study also.

Curious about the emails he was receiving, Pat put a Google Analytics tracking code on his site, then waited until the next day. The results were incredible: four or five thousand people were coming to his site every day.

Search engines had indexed his notes and people were finding Pat's site through searches. Thousands of people were using those random notes—notes that most people would just put in a notebook and forget about—and using them to pass this exam.

Once Pat realized this and started to participate in his site, people asked questions.

Pat had become an expert without even trying.

Making money

Since Pat was out of a job, he needed to find a way to make money. Ads were the first route he tried. First he tried Google text ads, but those didn't pay much money. Later he tried selling banner ads directly to companies with related products. That worked, but still didn't bring in a huge amount of money.

It wasn't until he took all his notes and packaged them up as a study guide that Pat started to make meaningful money from his site.

The guide wasn't new content, just the same content that was available for free on his site, but organized differently and distributed as a PDF. People were happy to pay.

In the first month, October 2008, he made $7905.88 in sales, considerably more than he was making at his salaried job.

Sales continued to climb. Since launching the book Pat has made roughly half a million dollars in sales. And it all started with some study notes.

Pat learned a skill that other people used to make money, then made his own living by teaching that to other people, which is exactly what I did with software design. Better designed software is easier to use and makes more money for the companies that own it, so developers who can create well designed software are more valuable.

Just about every industry has new skills and certifications that are needed to advance in your career. Teaching those can be an incredible way to make money. You can also set much higher prices, since it is easy for your customers to calculate a positive return on investment. We'll cover that in more detail later.

The difference between Pat Flynn and the thousands of other people who have taken the LEED exam is that Pat made his study notes public.

Finding a topic

Now you understand the value of writing, but how do you get started?

Well, you need something to write about. What do you know? Chances are, if you are reading this, you already have something you could write about. But in case you don't, we'll cover that briefly.

What do people ask you for help with?

A good place to start is by writing about an area in which other people perceive you to be an expert. What do your friends and family ask you for help with?

Is it setting up their web pages? Running a business? Fixing their appliance? Removing viruses from their computers?

If people are asking you for help in a particular area, chances are they think you know something about it. That also means there is demand for that knowledge. After all, not everything that could be taught has an audience of people who want to learn it.

You don't have to be an expert to teach.

Even if you are learning a new skill or topic, you can still teach it. Chances are someone will always know less about it than you do. Learning web design? Share your progress and write simple tutorials about what you've just learned.

After all, they say the best way to make sure you understand a concept is to teach it.

If you get in the habit of sharing everything you know, it will be much easier to position yourself as an expert later.

Just be transparent about your skill level and people will be happy to follow along and will even be far more likely to offer to help when you get stuck.

Establishing expertise

I said earlier that you don't have to be an expert to teach, and that's true. Besides, who defines "expert" anyway? But if you want to make a living from your teaching, you should be perceived as an expert.

That's far easier. Assuming you are actually good at your craft, a few quotes from past clients combined with some in-depth blog posts or tutorials is enough to give you the credibility to write your book.

Just the fact that you are writing a book gets you half way there. Seriously. Name your book, set up a landing page, and then start calling yourself the author of "xxxx." People will take you a lot more seriously even before your book is published.

Working on The App Design Handbook is what transformed the perception of my blog from "an unknown designer writing about random topics" to "the author of a book on designing iOS apps."

There isn't some special club I had to join before starting to work on my book. You don't have to either. Just teach what you know, add as many credibility indicators as possible, and get to work. Ignore those who say you aren't qualified.

A few easy steps

Tim Ferriss first showed me how easy it is to become perceived as an expert in his book, The 4-Hour Workweek. I highly recommend reading the book for specific tactics and an overall mindset, but let me summarize his method (with my own variations) here:

1. **Join trade organizations with official-sounding names.** You need credibility indicators for people to take you seriously. A membership to a group is quick and easy. Designers can join the National Association of Photoshop Professionals. Listing that membership, even though it only costs $100/year, adds credibility.

2. **Read and summarize the top three best-selling books on your topic.** Completely original ideas don't exist. Everything you read is based on something else. So take your favorite concepts from these books and write them from your own perspective. Turn these into blog posts. It only takes a few really solid blog posts for readers to perceive you as an expert (more on that later).

3. **Write for other sites and magazines.** Most news websites are funded by ads, meaning they need fresh reasons for visitors to keep coming back to ~~look at their ads~~ read their content. For tech news sites this means up to a dozen new articles a day. Pitching a guest post or opinion is surprisingly easy—so long as you have something to say. Larger, more respected publications, like Inc or Forbes will take more work, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't try. Wouldn't your resume look great to say that you had written for the leading publication in your industry?

4. **Give a talk at a local university and local offices of large companies.** I've spoken on design, code, and marketing at Boise State University, not as a professor, but instead as a speaker at Boise Code Camp, a conference held at the university each year. I can still say I spoke at the university. You can extend this to give talks at well known companies as well. The Microsoft office in Boise hosts a de-

veloper group each month. If you speak at that—which is not hard—then you've spoken at Microsoft.

5. **Piggyback on other people for press.** I've been mentioned or quoted in Tech-Crunch, Mashable, The Next Web, and plenty of other popular blogs, but none were directly talking about me. I've become good friends with the people who run Gumroad (my e-commerce provider) and I promote their product any chance I get. Reporters aren't beating down my door to write about me, but they are writing about Gumroad every time they raise funding or hit major mile-stones. Each of those stories need quotes from Gumroad users, and the Gum-road team always refers them to me. I can now say I've been featured in all those places.

None of this is to trick or mislead people, just to demonstrate the necessary level of expertise so that people will take your book and content seriously.

Finding a market

Two factors define whether or not your book can be successful. First, does it teach a skill that other people use to make money? And second, do those people gather and communicate online?

Now I don't mean that a product targeted at hobbyists can't be successful; it certainly can. I've purchased plenty of woodworking books—one of my hobbies—even though I will never make money from woodworking. But to get people to pay the prices needed to be really successful, it's best if they will use your training to make considerably more money than they spent.

It's also important that you can reach this audience. If they don't gather online in forums or on blogs you will have a hard time getting them to read your material. So if you can't find existing online communities in your niche, then this method probably isn't for you.

Keyword research

An easy way to see if potential readers are searching for similar products online is with Google's keyword research tool. Just enter a phrase and see roughly how many searches it gets each month. Give it a try: https://adwords.google.com/o/KeywordTool.

Competition

When friends approach me with a business idea they usually excitedly say, "And there aren't any competitors!"

Yikes. That's not good.

What they see as a good thing, I see as possibly crippling their business. If there aren't competitors in your field you should ask why. When there are many successful competitors, it shows that there is a market. People are willing to pay for products and services in that niche.

I wasn't the first to write a book on app design. In fact, there is a great book called Tapworthy (published by O'Reilly) that covers app design well. The competition didn't affect my sales.

I was inspired to write my books by two other successful designers turned authors. Jarrod and Sacha's ebooks (I'll introduce you to them later) didn't make people less likely to purchase my book, Designing Web Applications.

Competition shows that there is a market. Embrace competition. See it as a good thing. There is plenty of room for everyone.

Be consistent

Have an idea for a book? Congratulations! You've made it to the same place as 80% of the rest of the population. Turns out, just about everyone wants to write a book. But very few people actually do.

So what separates the wannabes from the published authors? Well, actually writing.

I wanted to write a book for years. In fact, I started several. And by "started," I mean I came up with a title, wrote an outline, and maybe a couple other pages. Then the project got put on the back burner and I never came back to it.

Uggh. That's what a wannabe does. In order to become an author you need to actually write. Now you could write in random spurts of genius and try to finish your book that way, but that's unlikely.

Instead, I found the best way is to make consistent progress every day. For me that meant making a commitment to write 1,000 words a day. Every day. I tracked this in an iPhone app I developed called Commit. Each day you meet your goal you track that day. Gradually you build up a chain of days in a row. At first that is just three or five days, but over time it turns into a meaningful number. Then part of your motivation to stay consistent each day is that you don't want to break the chain. After all, skipping a day would mean that your days in a row count would be reset to
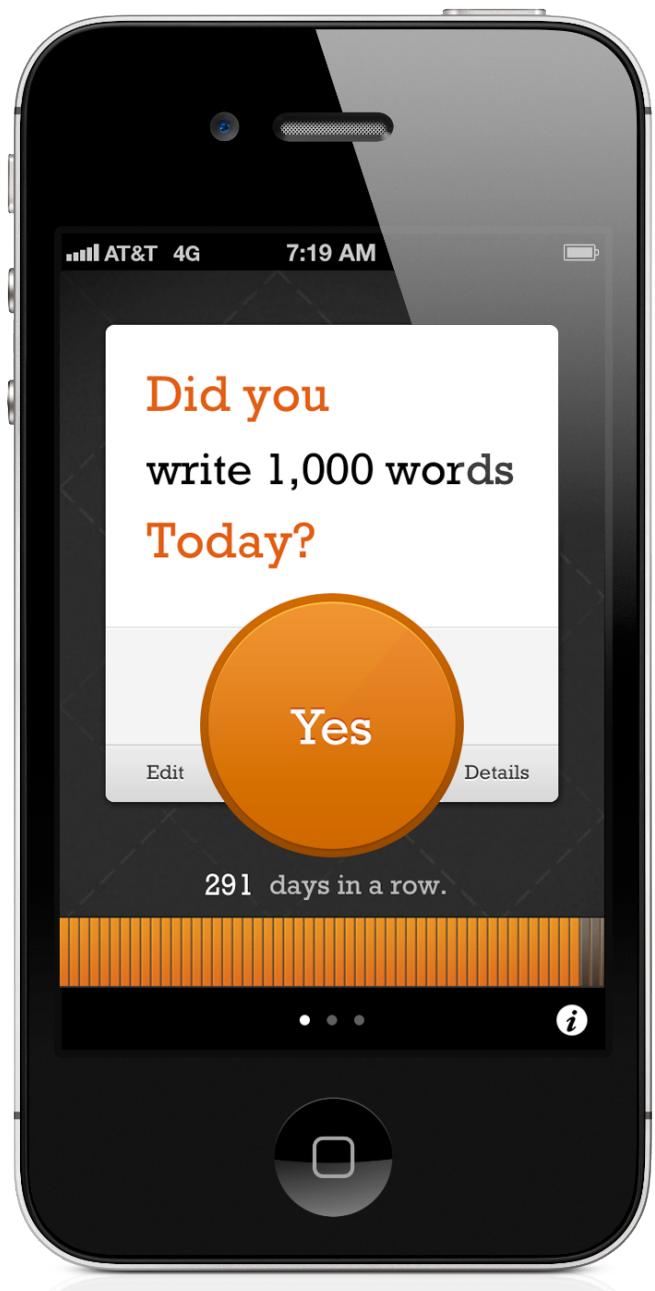
zero.

As I write this I have 291 days in a row of writing 1,000 words a day. You can be sure that I am going to write 1,000 words tomorrow as well in order to not break my chain. The more you do it, the stronger the incentive to keep going.

Maybe maintaining a perfect streak of your habit isn't quite your thing, but the point is that to actually write your book you need to make consistent progress every day. It doesn't matter whether your daily goal is 100 words or 1,000 words; you just need to be consistent.

A decent length for an eBook is 25,000 words. If you were to maintain writing 1,000 words a day (which is really just 2 or 3 pages) for 30 days you would have 30,000 words. Do some editing and cut down your content (which is necessary), and you have a book written in 30 days. That's quite an accomplishment.

But what if you just can't put the words down on paper?

Writer's block

Have you ever tried drawing and gotten stuck because you can't get a specific line right? The process goes something like this: draw, shake your head in frustration, erase, redraw, and repeat. I used to get stuck quite often writing and rewriting the same sentence. The problem is that if you erase your work and start over you often repeat the same mistakes.

In drawing, you are far better off drawing your new line before you erase the old one. That way you can know how the new line needs to be different from the old, incorrect line.

The same is true for writing. Starting from scratch again and again won't get you anywhere. You need to write something and then edit it into its proper form. The editing can happen right then or you can put it off for later.

The one quote that made the biggest difference for me with my writing is this:

"When faced with writer's block, lower your standards and keep going."

- Sandra Tsing Loh

It's far better to write something than it is to write nothing while trying to achieve perfection.

Seth Godin claims he never gets writers block. Why? Because he writes like he talks. And "No one ever gets talker's block."

You don't wait days to say something while trying to find the perfect way to phrase it. Instead you speak, hope the message gets across, and add extra explanation if needed.

We have much lower standards for talking, so we don't get stuck.

My story

When I was growing up I had the great privilege of being home schooled. For me that meant personalized attention, learning at my own pace, and ultimately being able to graduate a few years early. Once I learned that I had input in the speed and quality of my education, I became much more motivated. Rather than having to continue high school for a set number of years, I was given a fixed amount of schoolwork I needed to complete to graduate. I saw that as a checklist and dove in.

You shouldn't get the idea I was a perfect student. Far from it. I'm sure my mom could share a lot of stories, but I'll stick to just one.

When I was about 12 I was working on an essay with my mom. Frustrated with the entire process, I exclaimed, "Why do I have to learn to write? I'll never be a writer!" My patient mother calmly explained something about how we need to be balanced in our skills and how writing is very important. I don't remember the details.

At a Christmas party a few months ago I met some of my wife's friends. Later one of these friends was talking to my wife and said, "I didn't know your husband was a writer." When Hilary, my wife, relayed that to me I was surprised. I'd never thought of myself as a writer. Sure, I'd written two books, but those were about teaching design. My focus was always on teaching.

That offhand comment reminded me of just how wrong I was while working on that school essay years ago. I did turn out to be a writer. In fact, even though I consider myself a designer rather than a writer, writing is the most important factor in my business.

I owe all of my marketing success, recent income, and lifestyle changes to writing.

I am also very thankful to have a mother who made me stick with writing and encouraged me along the way. Being a writer and copyeditor herself, she even edited my first two books (and this one, too!). So thanks, Mom. I owe you a ton.

Waiting to be picked

Have you ever felt that your success is entirely in the hands of someone else? The artist waiting to be discovered, the musician waiting to be signed to a record label, and the author waiting for a publishing deal all come to mind as examples.

They are all waiting for someone to pick them, to say, "Your work is good enough."

But most people don't get picked. That's why the very idea of waiting can be so depressing. Everything is out of your control.

As an awkward kid whose friends were all older, I know what it's like to be the last person picked for a game. It sucks. That's why I don't wait to be picked.

I self-publish.

That means I don't have to wait for permission to start publishing my work and building an audience. Sure, I have to do more work. I don't have the support of a team, but I also don't have to wait for someone to pick me.

That's not to say I won't ever work with a publisher, just that I am not waiting for their approval to get started.

You can take control, set a plan, and execute on that plan to bring your own ideas to life.

Let me show you how.

Start small

Writing a book seems like such a daunting task. When I heard about book authors who spent years—even decades—writing their books, I figured it was nearly impossible to finish a book. And it often is, for certain types of books. But just because someone else spent thousands of hours on their life's work, doesn't mean you need to do that for your first book.

My friend Sacha Greif wrote, designed, and published his first book in three weeks. His book, Step-by-step UI Design, is not a complete guide to designing software. Instead it is a guide that teaches you interface design through the process of designing a single application. Sacha's hands-on approach makes it easy to learn, and you see the results right away.

The entire book is only about 30 pages long, so it makes sense that it didn't take years to write. And that's just fine. Sacha sells it for $6, with a deluxe package that includes the source files for $12. That may not have been the best way to make the most money, but the book has done very well and opened up a ton of opportunities.

Best of all, had it failed (it didn't) he would have only been out a couple weeks worth of effort. Not years like many first-time authors.

Sacha was kind enough to answer a few questions about his process.

An interview with Sacha Greif author of Step-By-Step UI Design

How long did it take you to write your book?

It took me about two weeks to write it, and then one week to format/edit it.

What inspired you to write a book in the first place?

Seeing the popularity of my post about designing the CodeYear.com landing page made me realize that there was a big demand for this kind of visual step-by-step design tutorial. So I decided to write a more in-depth tutorial, but this time try charging for it.

How much money have you made from your book and over how long?

I've made about $25,000 total over a period of one year, with a good half of that in the first month.

How has writing a book changed your business, career, or life?

It has changed my life in two ways. First, I became known as "that design eBook guy", which has both its good (people ask me a lot of questions) and bad points (they're always the same questions…).

Also, earning that much money in a short period of time enabled me to focus on personal projects like The Toolbox rather than take on new freelance clients.

What marketing methods were most successful for selling books?

The only two things that had a serious impact of revenue were posting the book to Hacker News, and doing various deals with sites like AppSumo, Dealotto, and MightyDeals. Those were by far the most effective marketing channels, and combined they probably account for 90% of revenue.

How did you distribute your book?

At first I sold it on my site through Gumroad and Pulley, but then also did deals with AppSumo & co. Although I'm aware of other distribution channels (like Amazon for example) I haven't explored them yet.

What was the biggest surprise in the entire process?

Just how lucrative a book could be. I made more money with a single $2.99 eBook than most startups do over their whole lifetime. This is especially clear for me since at the same time I was also working on my own startup, Folyo, which never made anything close to the book's numbers.

The lesson for me is that the revenue potential of digital products in general (books, fonts, icons, etc.) is probably underestimated compared to the SaaS model that most startups favor. That doesn't mean one is better than the other, but it was an interesting realization nonetheless.