

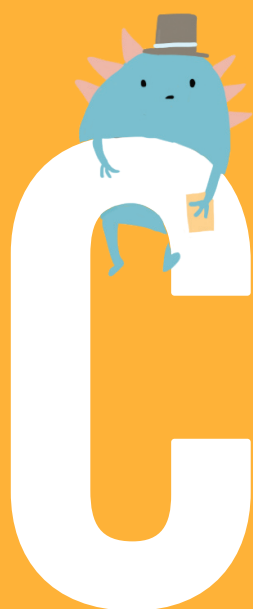
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IN TRO DUC TION

This book is designed to teach you how to write without hiding. What exactly does “writing without hiding” mean? It means that you’re being as clear and honest as possible in your writing — both in your writing process and the language you use. You are choosing to *be* yourself rather than *obscure* yourself.

You might not think of yourself as a writer who hides. “I do struggle with writing,” you may think. “Sometimes — or often — I don’t enjoy writing. On bad days, I think I’m pretty much the worst writer ever to disgrace the planet. But I don’t think I hide.”

Fair enough. But this book challenges you to think of those difficulties in a different way. What if they resulted not from a lack of talent or skill, but from an entirely human tendency to hide? And what if you could learn not to hide?

If you’re like most people, you’ve done one or more of the following:

- *Rushed through a first draft and presented it as final because you don’t have the time or patience to revise*
- *Given up on a project because you’re “not good enough”*
- *Chosen a subject matter or genre of writing that you think other people will enjoy, even though you find it deadly dull*
- *Written super-long sentences or used fancy words because you think they will impress readers*

The common thread? These are all behaviors that obscure both yourself and your message. They are ways of hiding. As a result, they keep you from connecting with other people. And that’s no good, because connection and communication are the very purpose of writing — some might even say of life.

WRITING IN THE NEW ECONOMY

Connecting with other people is important nowadays. It always has been — human beings are a social species. But today’s economy increasingly rewards those who know how to make deep connections with others.

Think about the way marketing works today. The old interruption-based way of selling products through advertising is extinct. People have nearly unlimited choices about how and what they consume. Don’t like a TV show or a website or news article? Switch to one of the billions of others — instantaneously. Assaulted by an ad you don’t want to see? Look elsewhere.

To succeed in this New Economy — what Seth Godin and others call the Connection Economy — is to cut through the clutter and connect with people who want what

you're offering. And to want it, they have to understand it. That's why learning to write without hiding has never been more important.

You say you're not writing for the money? You just want to find an audience or please a boss or teacher? Same thing: All about connection, and connection comes from clarity and honesty.

In the United States and other post-industrial countries, more and more work requires us to write clearly and well.

Whether you end up employed by a company or working for yourself, consider how many jobs now depend on the generation of ideas. In human resources, in technology, in mental health professions, in traditionally "creative" fields like arts and design, we're all looking for ways to say things that will connect with other people. Things that will matter.

And yes, we'll express a lot of those ideas through speech — or sometimes visual art or HTML or some other medium. But writing remains the most portable and consumable form of expression. Email, websites, reports, books, papers, Facebook, Twitter: Their foundation is the written word.

Here's Jason Fried, founder of 37Signals, a web application development company:

"If you are trying to decide among a few people to fill a position, hire the best writer. It doesn't matter if the person is a marketer, salesperson, designer, programmer, or whatever; their writing skills will pay off."

He goes on to say that "clear writing is a sign of clear thinking," and that the rise of social media and text messaging demonstrates that "writing is today's currency for good ideas."

You may be reading this book because you want to write better reports for work. You may want better grades on your school papers. You may want more readers for your blog. You may be trying to find your voice as a fiction writer or essayist.

They're all great reasons. And they all point you down the same path: Stop hiding.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Before I go on preaching, let me make a confession: I'm an expert writing hider. Over the years, I've often been paralyzed by fears that I'm a big old impostor with no talent (p. 21). I've spent months or years planning projects without getting started writing them (p. 24). I've dismissed my ideas as boring (p. 22). I've used the smoke and mirrors of fancy language to try to impress others (p. 51).

In short, I've pretty much done everything I warn about in this book — even though for years I've made my living at least in part from writing. That takes some doing, folks.

I remember one of my first wake-up calls about hiding. It happened in college, where I majored in Classics — the study of ancient Greek and Roman culture. One day, toward the end of my senior year, I was sitting in my advisor's office, waiting for his feedback on my thesis paper.

He leaned over his desk and gave me a little smile. He said something I still remember, verbatim, to this day: "The gorgon of your gorgiastic prose has turned me to stone." You probably gather that's not a compliment. But since it's practically in a foreign language, allow me to unpack it for you a bit.

In Greek mythology, the gorgons were three really ugly sisters. You've heard of Medusa? She was one of them. Medusa and her sibs had hair made out of poisonous snakes and wore big, frightening grins. They ran around turning anyone who looked at them to stone. My paper concerned how Greek artists depicted these ladies on vases and wall paintings.

"Gorgiastic" rhetoric, meanwhile, refers to the Greek philosopher Gorgias. His much more famous contemporary, Socrates, liked to make fun of Gorgias' long, empty sentences. Socrates invented the term "Gorgiastic" to refer to language stuffed full of empty calories: Poorly argued points adorned with useless adjectives, adverbs and dependent clauses.

The translation of my advisor's feedback? Your writing has too much style, too little substance.

I was pretty mad at my advisor back then. I thought he was mean. I spent a few days — OK, more than a week — sulking about what he'd said. But then I got down to work and did what I needed to do: More research. More thinking about what I was trying to say. Clearer language, less wordiness.

And my paper got better. Not perfect, but better.

The "gorgon" statement has guided my writing ever since — in my jobs as a reporter and urban planner, and also in my creative writing and journaling. It also gave this book its monster theme, the idea that hiding techniques are monsters that we can subdue through awareness.

THE GORGON OF YOUR GORGIASTIC PROSE HAS TURNED ME TO STONE.

You know that old adage, teach what you want to learn? That's the philosophy behind this book. As much as I hope it's a guide for others, it's also a challenge to myself to stay honest in my own writing. It's like what Austin Kleon says in his book *Steal Like an Artist*: The advice he gives is what his adult self would tell his younger self. Even his one-day-younger self.

So now that we're all in this together, let's get started.

HOW W

WE HIDE





Different people hide for different reasons. Some may lack confidence. Others haven't prepared enough to know what they want to say. Still others may be telling themselves that they don't care about writing, hiding behind the persona of the "non-writer" even though that's debilitating in today's economy.

These aren't things anyone should feel bad about. They could stem from any number of common external or internal factors. You got discouraging feedback from your third-grade teacher, for example. Or maybe it's in your nature to please others first. And heck, just about everyone in today's society feels the need to rush. To produce, produce, produce even if they haven't had time to prepare.

This book provides some tools that will help you see past all that stuff. What you'll find are not so much rigid instructions as ways to overcome the hiding mentality. Best news of all? No exercises, and no homework! For me, change happens subtly and often slowly. So think of the advice in this book as seeds planted in your mind. Let them take root over time.

THE TWO WAYS OF HIDING

There are two main ways of hiding in writing: In the *process* and in the *language*.

Hiding in the process involves using inefficient or self-defeating writing techniques. Hiding in the language are ways of obscuring meaning by using passive voice, fancy vocabulary, cliches and other crutches.

So how do you know you're hiding? Here are some signs:

HIDING IN THE PROCESS

- *You tell yourself you can't write, that you either don't care or don't have "talent."*
- *You choose (or accept from others) topics you find dull because you think they will interest someone else.*
- *You start with answers instead of questions.*
- *You begin writing before you have enough to say. (Common when we have deadlines or are impatient.)*
- *Or the opposite: You get stuck in an endless research-and-preparation loop. (Common when we don't have deadlines.)*

- *You antagonize instead of use your deadlines, waiting until the last minute to start work.*
- *You tweak sentences you've already written instead of moving ahead.*
- *You finish an first draft, but then refuse to revise it.*

HIDING IN THE LANGUAGE

- *You give in to the temptations of lazy writing: passive voice construction, the verb "to be," clichés, and lots of mentions of a mysterious creature called "It."*
- *You rely on verbal costume jewelry: long sentences, semicolons, adverbs and fancy language.*

Do you see yourself in any or all of the above points? If so, welcome. Welcome to the I Like to Hide Club. It's a very human club. Just about everyone in the world either is a member or has been one — myself included.

Luckily, there are some simple practices to help you stop hiding. Let's get right to the cheat sheet, and we'll discuss them in detail later.

HOW TO STOP HIDING: THE WRITING PROCESS

- *Embrace the fact that you can learn to write, and that in today's world writing is how you are most likely to be heard.*
- *Trust yourself and your instincts, and choose topics that interest you.*
- *Start with questions instead of answers.*
- *Do enough but not too much preparation and research, including making a road map of your paper (don't worry, I didn't say "outline"!).*
- *Write forward instead of backward.*
- *Don't be afraid of your first draft. Instead, take it on a date.*
- *Use, don't antagonize, your deadline.*

HOW TO STOP HIDING: LANGUAGE

- *Steer clear of language hobgoblins by using active voice construction, throwing away the “to be” crutch, being aware of your use of clichés and your use of “it.”*
- *Choose substance over style.*
- *Liberate your sentences to be short and to the point.*

