



**The time to begin writing an article is when you have finished it to your satisfaction. By that time you begin to clearly and logically perceive what it is that you really want to say.**

—*Mark Twain's Notebook*

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Max,

There is so much about reading the Great Books and Dr. Adler has written also on the art of listening and the art of learning, but what one wants to learn the art of writing? How can one read great books if another cannot write them? Is there material or suggestive readings that Dr. Adler has or that you recommend?

David Quezada

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Dear David,

The key word in your inquiry is “art” and there is no shortage of books on the art of writing, as a cursory web search will prove.

As Dr. Adler has pointed out, “The English word “art” comes to us from the Latin “ars”, and that word is a translation of the Greek word “techne”, which is best rendered in English by the word “skill” or by the phrase “know-how”.

As a prolific writer (more than fifty books and hundreds of articles) Dr. Adler has been asked this question many times, but the best he can do is to tell you how *he* writes. The following is excerpted from his second autobiography *A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror: Further Autobiographical Reflections of a Philosopher At Large* (1992):

“People who have read my *How to Read a Book* have often suggested that I write a companion-piece entitled *How to Write a Book*. I have not done that because it does not need a whole book to do it. In relatively few pages, I can explain how I write a book in less than a month of writing days each summer at Aspen.

The title of the brief disquisition to follow should not be “How to Write a Book,” but rather “How I Write a Book,” for I am sure that one’s method of composition is idiosyncratic. For all I know, I may be the only person in the world who writes books this way, or there may be a very small number of us. Nevertheless, it may be of general interest, so here goes.



I should add before I start that I did not always write this way. It is the method I developed when I started writing books in Aspen and after I wrote *Philosopher at Large* the year my family and I lived in London.

In an otherwise very busy life, writing is a task that can be easily set aside or postponed. I make sure about any book I am planning to write that I am morally obliged to produce it and have the

manuscript ready for delivery at a fixed date. To impose that obligation upon myself, I first think of the title of the book I want to write (a tentative title seldom changes very much in the course of writing), outline a table of contents for the book, and write a brief description of its general theme or points of interest. This I send to my publisher and ask for a contract that carries with it a small advance royalty on signing.

When that comes through, the publisher sets the date for delivery of the manuscript (when the rest of the royalty advance will be paid) and also the date when the book will be published. That is usually a little more than a year later; for example, if I sign the contract for a given book in late spring of 1986, it will probably call for delivery of the manuscript in September of 1987, with publication six or seven months later in March or April of 1988. That gives me about a year to think about the book from late spring of one year to the beginning of the next summer, when I will go to Aspen mid-June or early July and start writing.

Getting a moral obligation to discharge is the first step; but the time schedule that follows from it is essential to my scheme of writing. That time schedule involves a sharp division between thinking and writing. I try to do all the thinking necessary to write a book before I ever start writing.

In my judgment, those two operations are better not mixed. I have found from long experience that whenever I combine thinking with writing, neither is very well done. One should have all one's thoughts in order before one starts to write, for if they pop into one's head in the course of writing, they are likely to be out of order and the writing will suffer in consequence.

Authors who think while they write often have to do a great deal of rewriting to iron out the blemishes that result from disorderly thought and from writing that stumbles back and forth. My first draft may undergo a number of revisions before it is set in type, but I have never had to rewrite a book, or even one or more chapters of it.

In the early autumn of the year in which I have previously signed a contract for a book, I start to jot down notes of the thinking evoked by my general idea of the book to be written. As these relatively random notes accumulate, I then become more systematic and have my secretary provide me with a set of file folders, each labeled with a chapter number and title, according to

my provisional table of contents for the book. With that done, I then start dropping the notes that record my thinking on this or that point in the file folder to which this or that point appears to be relevant.

This process goes on for many months, in which I may do some reading that is germane to my subject; in which I may have to look up a questionable fact or two (though that is infrequent because the kind of philosophical books I write are seldom concerned with research about matters of fact); or in which I may engage in conversation with my associates at the Institute for Philosophical Research or with other friends to test out one or another line of argument that I have been considering for inclusion in the book.

All of this is part of the intellectual process of planning the book before writing it, and it is usually a year-long process. When it is performed adequately, the book is potentially done before I sit down to the typewriter; that is, it is written in my head so far as all or most of the thought process is concerned, and all that remains is to find the right words and sentences and their proper ordering, which is the task of actualizing what, before that, is only a potential book in my mind.

The more adequately the thinking is done before the actual writing begins, the more attention can then be paid to all the rhetorical and grammatical problems of writing, for the basic logical problems have all been solved. In short, my separation of thinking about the book to be written and actually writing it accords with a separation of logical questions from considerations of grammar and rhetoric that are so different.

Exceptions often occur to the procedure I have just outlined. Sometimes, when my family and I go away from Chicago for a winter vacation, I will take a typewriter and a few files of notes with me, in order to start writing a chapter or two before I go to Aspen in the summer. Having made that early start somehow facilitates and encourages the continuation of the writing process, instead of having to start from scratch when I get to Aspen.

Sometimes in the course of writing one chapter, I think of points or arguments to put in later chapters and, then, of course, I put notes of such thinking (that occurs during the days of writing) in the appropriate file for the later chapter. To this extent, the required thinking may not be completely done before I reach Aspen; but, for the most part, that is not the case.

The file folders that I take with me to Aspen, along with other relevant materials to which I may need to refer, such as earlier books of mine, contain the book *in potentia*. The task that remains is only that of putting words, sentences, and paragraphs on paper, which I do by typing them out on an old standard manual Royal typewriter. I cannot use an electric, and I have a more than efficient secretary, Marlys Allen, who has been with me for almost thirty years. That makes a word processor unnecessary. Instead, as will be seen presently, the only device that serves my purpose is a Xerox machine.

Let me explain how this works. First, an essential ingredient in my method of writing is to write every successive day once I start writing, with no time off on Saturday or Sunday, no breaks at all. The only exception to this, as I pointed out earlier, is the break in my writing on a week when I am conducting a seminar. That is why I prefer, when other factors make it possible, to get to Aspen fairly early in June, so that I can start writing and even finishing the book before my first seminar of the summer in mid-July. In the last decade this has fortunately been the case in most of my Aspen summers.



With the exceptions noted above and with this plan of work, I can usually complete the writing of a chapter of ten or fifteen pages in a day or, at the most, two days. That is accomplished in three or four hours of writing, beginning at seven in the morning and finishing well before noon. Accordingly, the first draft of a book of fifteen or twenty chapters will be completed in less than a month of successive days.

Each day, after I have pulled the pages out of the typewriter, I sit down either before lunch or immediately after, and write corrections by pen onto my poorly typed manuscript, correcting not only typographical mistakes but infelicities of phrasing or sentence structure and sometimes even an additional sentence or two. I also put paragraph signs in order to turn a long paragraph into a number of shorter ones, because I believe short paragraphs are easier to read.

With this done, I send post haste a corrected manuscript to Marlys in Chicago, who makes a clean copy, Xeroxes it, and sends the Xerox copy back to me for further corrections. At the same time, she sends Xerox copies of that first draft to a number of colleagues and friends who have become accustomed and responsive to my request for their recommendations of revisions to be made in the first draft.

With not much delay, they give these to Marlys or send them directly to me. What always amazes me about this process is that the overlapping in their revision suggestions is slight as compared with the quite different recommendations they make. They even call my attention to different typographical mistakes. I put all of the corrected and revised or commented on pages in the file folder for that chapter; and when I have finished writing the book early in the summer, I devote later weeks of it by doing a second draft of each chapter, incorporating in that revision not only all the typographical corrections but also all the suggestions for substantive or stylistic improvements that I have found acceptable. Changes in the main lines of my thinking—its insights or arguments—seldom if ever occur.

The time schedule that I have outlined enables me to finish the writing of a first draft and also its first revision in plenty of time for Marlys to send a clean copy of the revised manuscript to the publisher, either on or before the day in September appointed for the delivery of the manuscript. My editors at Macmillan have told me that I am one of a very few authors, or even the only one, that is punctilious about delivering the manuscript on its due date.

Subsequently there are several months in which further revisions occur, made by my editor, made by the outside copy editor to whom the manuscript has been sent, and even by me when I see the copy-edited manuscript before it is set in type. This, moreover, does not preclude further editorial revisions that I cannot resist making when I read both galley and page proofs, because, for reasons I will never understand, reading what you have written in print rather than in typescript enables you to perceive infelicities of expression or *lacunae* of thought that you have missed on all previous readings of the manuscript. Even the change from the look of the galley proofs to the look of the page proofs causes such discernments.

One more, not unimportant, detail remains to be added. It concerns what I always do in the afternoon of any day in which I have spent the morning hours writing and correcting the manuscript

to send to Chicago. After lunch, and sometimes after a short nap, I spend several hours in what I call “Idling.”

I have defined idling in an earlier book, in which I dealt with the six activities that consume all of our life’s time—sleep (and other biologically necessary functions such as eating, cleansing), play, economically necessary toil or work, truly leisure pursuits, rest, and last, but not least, idling.

Human idling is like the idling of an automobile engine when it is turned on, but not put into gear to move in some determined direction. We idle when we are awake, but do no purposeful thinking, thinking driven by some aim or goal. If one has done highly concentrated and purposeful work in the morning, such as writing a chapter, that concentration and purpose cause things in the fringe of your conscious mind to be shunted into your unconscious. Then when you relax in the afternoon to spend an hour or two idling, those things, buried in your unconscious, come alive in your conscious mind.

Sometimes they are phrases or sentences to use in the chapter you are going to write the next morning or on some subsequent day that week. Sometimes they are an addition to the thinking process that you had assumed was completed before you started writing.

The writing of the chapter in the morning did not include the thought or two that pops into your mind while idling that afternoon. It was shunted out of your conscious mind into your unconscious because your attention was so concentrated in the morning on the task of writing. Knowing this, I never sit down for my afternoon hours of idling without paper by my side on which to take note of the words or thoughts that idling always produces.

The usefulness of idling in the process of writing a book is not peculiar to that process. It will occur in the busy life of professional persons, such as lawyers, physicians, or engineers, as well as in the busy life of top executives in commerce and industry.

It will occur, but only if they allow it to occur, which means they must *avoid being busy* all the hours of their waking life. Especially if they work hard in the morning, they should manage to find an hour or two for idling in the late afternoon or evening of the very same day. Postponing it for some other day or later in the week will not do. What was buried in the unconscious by concentrated attention to the tasks of the morning must be permit-

ted to revive in the afternoon or evening of the same day. Idling delayed is idling deprived of its efficacy.

*Editor's Note:* Although there are many good books on this subject, my own recommendation is Barbara Minto's *The Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing and Thinking*, (1987) ISBN 0-9601910-2-X

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Max,

When was the 103rd great idea, EQUALITY, added to the list of great ideas? Has there been a Syntopicon essay written for the idea? A Syntopicon index? If there has, could you send it to me?

Thanks,

Herminio Rivera

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Dear Herminio,

No it has not been added officially, except that Dr. Adler said it should be added—as it is THE idea of the 20th century. We do have an introductory essay that was published in *The Great Ideas Today* [see below].

“Though more than fifty years have lapsed since the 102 great ideas were chosen, nothing that has happened in the last half-century, with one exception, necessitates a single change in that list by addition or subtraction. That one exception is the idea of EQUALITY.” —Mortimer Adler

Those of you who have followed Dr. Adler's intellectual career are aware that his Institute for Philosophical Research published five “Idea of” books in an attempt to examine more fully the dialectical aspects of the ideas of FREEDOM, HAPPINESS, JUSTICE, PROGRESS, and LOVE.

However, unbeknownst to most, the Institute also published works on EQUALITY, BEAUTY, RELIGION, etc. These works were published exclusively in “The Great Ideas Today” of which Dr. Adler was Editor.

Since most of you do not own or have access to “The Great Ideas Today” series of books published annually since 1961-1998,



we are planning to offer these works to our members for a modest donation of \$5 each [as of now, we only have Equality]. We can provide these as an attachment (MS Word or an Adobe .pdf file). These works are generally replete with notes and bibliographies.

Here is a listing from *The Great Ideas Today* index:

**On The Idea of Beauty.**

Donald Metric. 1979: 184-222.

**The Idea of Civil Police.**

(John Van Doren). 1983: 182-202.

**The Idea of Dialectic.**

Mortimer J. Adler. 1986: 154-177.

**The Idea of Equality.**

Editors (Otto Bird). 1968: 301-350.

**The Idea of Freedom—Part One.**

Charles Van Doren. 1972: 300-392.

**The Idea of Freedom—Part Two.**

Charles Van Doren. 1973: 232-300.

**The Idea of God and The Difficulties of Atheism.**

Etienne Gilson. 1969: 237-274.

**The Idea of Happiness.**

V. J. McGill. 1967: 272-308.

**The Idea of Justice.**

Otto Bird. 1974: 166-209.

**The Idea of Nature, East and West.**

Hajime Nakamura. 1980: 234-304.

**The Idea of Religion in *Great Books of the Western World*.**

Editors. 1967: 70-80.

**The Idea of Religion—Part One.**

John Edward Sullivan. 1977: 204-276.

**The Idea of Religion—Part Two.**

John Edward Sullivan. 1978: 218-312.

**The Idea of Revolution.**

A Symposium (Arnold J. Toynbee, Ivan Illich, Paul Goodman, William F. Buckley, Jr.). 1970: 1-84.

**The Idea of Revolution in *Great Books of the Western World.***

Editors (William Gorman). 1970: 79-84.

**The Idea of Tradition in *Great Books of the Western World.***

Editors (William Gorman). 1974: 77-90.

**The Idea of World Community in *Great Books of the Western World.*** Editors (William Gorman). 1971: 89-120.

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Dear Max,

Actually, I was unaware of Dr. Adler's work on language when I started. I had read a few of Dr. Adler's books after seeing him on Firing Line and the Bill Moyers PBS show (Six Great Ideas, Ten Philosophical Mistakes, Aristotle for Everybody, Haves Without Have Nots, How To Think About God). Then I discovered The Difference in Man and read that. At this point (with no background in Philosophy whatsoever) I had an Epiphany: Dr. Adler was making sense to me in a way that no one I had read before had.

I felt as though I understood, but could not successfully explain Dr. Adler's philosophy to others, and certainly could not successfully answer the questions they had. So I started on the 10 year reading program, which made me think it would be great to get out of the business world and into education, so I stopped the reading to go to school at Cal State Fullerton (I have an AB in English from Boston University (1972). The school is "impacted" so I had to take whatever classes the Profs would let me into (being an "Extended Ed" student), so I started out in 400-level linguistics classes, and became intrigued. I am now reading Dr. Adler's *Some Questions About Language*.

Reading Dr. Adler has had a profound effect on me, and so I started using his ideas in papers I was assigned, and I developed an idea, which is contained in a paper I wrote for my Diachronic Linguistics class, a paper upon which I am continuing to work. I will send you a copy in a separate e mail.

In the little bit of reading I have done in the area of Syntax, it has become evident to me that the fields of Psycholinguistics and

Syntax will likely never connect because, as Dr. Adler says, “we do not think with our brains even though we cannot think without them.” Now, that is a statement that ought to make anyone take pause.

Max, every time I listen to a political debate or discussion, I wish I could hand the participants a copy of *Haves Without Have Nots*, and tell them to read the book, promising them that their arguments will not be the same after finishing the book, and that they can expect to have much more productive discussions in the future.

As Dr. Adler says, “Philosophy is everyone’s business” and so I am happy to be a member of the Center.

Best regards,

Bill Pickett

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## **WELCOME NEW MEMBER**

**Bill Pickett**

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