

PART 1

# The Stairway to Earth



## CHAPTER 1

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### RIGHT MESSAGE

A songwriter friend once told me the trick to writing a great song: “First come up with the title. From the title, everything just flows.” I thought about this from the point of view of books, and I wondered: If you can come up with just the right title, can the book just flow?

I decided the answer could be yes, if the title captured the message *exactly*. That’s because the message is the refrain that repeats throughout the book, and a great refrain is what makes a song—and any written work—memorable.

The thought of this gave me a jolt. Whoa! Maybe all the pain I had experienced as an author was just from my lack of knowing the right tricks. But the thought quickly passed. Assuming you’ll be this lucky is like assuming you can whistle with perfect pitch, when you’ve never whistled before. True enough, if you’re a natural, you may get it right. But otherwise you’ll probably blow off-key.

Fact is, most of us aren’t naturals. So I advise authors, before anything else, to invest time in developing a message in a systematic way. The right message—and title—may come easily, but they usually come only after a process of creative struggling.

Why is a message so important as a first step? Because the secret of quality writing is focus, and developing a message forces you to narrow your focus before broadening your research and writing. If you start with too broad a focus, you risk letting your writing project spin out of control. Losing control will cost you time and energy. It may cost you money. It may even cost you your sanity.

So what is a “message”? Let’s start with what it isn’t. It’s not a subject or topic. It’s not “what the book is about.” It’s what the book says. It’s the point the reader takes away and tells friends about. Think about it as the “aha,” or the central insight. It is that refrain that appears throughout the book.

You could also call it the “thesis” or the “theme,” but those words can evoke angst. They will remind you of papers and dissertations in school. Who wants to be reminded of late nights and imperious teachers. Of whistling in the dark when you weren’t really sure what your song was.

To be sure, the teachers were often right. They said you needed to start with a statement that expresses your point in a compact sentence. I agree. And you want it to be catchy if you can, even turn a few heads. And what’s more, you want to capture some magic in a title.

### *Starting on the message*

Before you start popping words on paper, reflect a bit on where you’re going. First, is your message emerging in a way that expresses your passion? Books are exhausting projects, even when they go well. If you’re in for the long haul, you have to have a passion for your idea. Do you care so much that once someone gets you talking you have trouble shutting up? Does a current of enthusiasm course through your veins? No passion, no energy, no follow-through.

Next, have you thoroughly thought through your goals? Do you want to make a name for yourself? Disseminate your ideas? Build your business’s brand? Secure a step to tenure? Make money? Goals shape your writing at every step. So write them down. And be specific—and honest. Why are you going to all this trouble? If you’re going to exhaust yourself, by all means choose a worthy reason.

Third, ask yourself, Who are my readers? Are they forty-somethings in sweat suits at casino tables? Sixty-somethings trading stocks in their pajamas? Young-buck engineers out to save the world? What do they care about? Worry about? Want insights about? Need solutions to? How do they like to be spoken to?

Paint a mental picture of these readers. Or better yet, cut a good likeness out

of a magazine and tape it over your desk.

And don't even think about your audience as "everyone." Readers have so many choices in our multiplying media age. How will you shape your message so you have a loyal group of readers who will stick with you? When the amphitheater empties out, who will linger to ask you questions after the show? These are your *core* readers, and you need to please them first.

Finally, ask yourself if your subject or message or theme reflects who you are. Does it stem from your personality, preferences, and strengths? You will inevitably bake into your writing a bit of yourself, even if your subject is dry and technical. If you're not kneading into the dough the real you, you'll know your work lacks flavor and depth, and so will your readers.

You're now ready to work with words. I recommend three tasks in this first step in the Stairway to Earth process:

CIRCLING

AMENDING

FIRMING

### *Circling*

Ever notice that, at dusk, the most striking element in a landscape often pops up in your peripheral vision? That has something to do with the anatomy of the eye. (Better to see predators with.) The same thing is true about the most striking elements in a message. They often emerge from the periphery of your thinking. They come out of nowhere.

That's why it usually pays to resist the temptation to start work on a message by focusing on what's front and center. Better to circle the subject like a thief casing a robbery site. Don't act greedily, dashing for the jewels on the first pass. Explore the outside of the building. Look for a backdoor entrance. Make sure you haven't missed valuables hidden in the shadows.

I'm a big proponent of using a pencil and paper for circling. A pencil gives your work a relaxed feel compared to when you're punching words into a com-

puter. You can be playful, use a lot of arrows, carets, and sketches. There's no such thing as a mistake. You remain noncommittal, quixotic, and have fun. The temporary—or tentative—nature of pencil on paper pushes your mind beyond the straight-and-narrow alleyway of designated lines of thinking. You can examine the full breadth of your topical territory, surface unverballed thoughts, and shape new insights.

Here are some aids for circling:

- Browse books online: On [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) or [bn.com](http://bn.com), search for books like yours—and books you like. What messages do they explore? What language do they use?
- Check for trends: Go to sites like Google Zeitgeist for fashions in language and subject matter. What words are emerging or fading in society?
- Map associations: Handwrite your subject on blank paper. Draw a circle around it. Extend spokes to other circles and fill in related topics. Where are the gaps? The connections? The distinctions?
- Stockpile keywords: Make a laundry list of keywords related to your message. Reflect on their nuances of meaning. Which ones appeal? Which ones will be useful?
- Mine the mother lode: List related words from a thesaurus. Even if you don't use them, you mentally plant seeds that can sprout later in useful phrasings.
- Inventory quotations: Research pithy sayings related to your message. Absorb their novelty in expression. Can you play off them?

Now take a stab at your message: Let's say you start with something basic. For example, say you're a management expert, and you're writing about loyalty. You decide you want to take a bit of a contrarian view, so you pen, "Loyalty makes people do bad things." Hmm, okay, you have a general message. Good start.

Now start refining it with some circling. Consider various meanings of the concept, map elements of management affected by it, list a few keywords, copy

a few quotations. Now you might redraft to be more specific: “Loyalty subverts good decision making.”

That’s progress. Your language is more precise, your focus narrower. You probably don’t feel like you’ve hit the bull’s-eye, but you have a better fix on your aspirations. You have shown, and documented, wide-ranging and thorough thinking, perhaps benefiting from a mix of daydreaming, analysis, and synthesis.

### *Amending*

When you’re done with circling, your mind has toured a big neighborhood. You’ve run down some blind alleys. You’ve peered in a lot of windows and down a few bulkheads. Sorting through what you’ve seen, you’ve settled on an approach—a message—that best fits your tastes.

But you know the one you’ve chosen still isn’t perfect. If nothing else, your message lacks novelty. Try as you may, you slip into clichés. You may even realize that you have circled right back to the beginning, to the obvious. Geez! you exclaim.

This may not happen to you. But you’re in good company if it does. And it’s not necessarily a bad thing. Great books appear all the time that restate ageless wisdom. If you find yourself in this situation, you may be receiving a signal that you are ready to extend or enhance an old idea. You have a fresh envelope for an old message.

Whatever your message, it’s time to refine it. Here are some aids for amending:

- Express it with metaphor: In his essay, “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell advised writers to look from the start for a way to express an idea with an image or idiom. Can you find a sturdy metaphorical vehicle to carry your thoughts?
- Draw new distinctions: Clear thinking depends on distinguishing between one thing and something quite similar. People often conflate two, three, or more similar concepts. Can you tease yours apart and delineate nuances?

- Start journaling: Writing spurs thinking, so while cooking up your main message, play around with related ideas. Record your musings, brainstorming, questions, and ideas. Write fast, don't stop, don't delete.
- Personalize and humanize: State your message in the way you would to a loved one. Why should people you know intimately care?
- Float your idea: At every chance, try your message on friends. Don't tell them they're test subjects. See at the next barbecue which words evoke the reaction you seek.

Now take another stab at your message. Let's assume you're still working on loyalty. You've done some journaling, pondered distinctions, tried variations out on a few friends. You draft an update: "Loyalty poisons ethical decision making."

Okay, you've narrowed your focus again, and you've drawn a key distinction about the kind of decision making you're talking about. You've also chosen "poison" as a metaphorical way to express treachery, confusion, dysfunction, even lethality. You could try to go farther, but this is terrific progress.

Don't worry that your change in wording may be small; the tiniest change in an umbrella message can represent a huge turn in the treatment of your book. Making the right turn can make all the difference in driving toward your destination.

Don't erase obsolete thoughts from your pencil work. You may consider some of your expressions to be platitudes, worn-out metaphors, stale idioms, inaccurate distinctions, but if they marched across your mind once, they probably had a reason. Let them take up permanent residence. You may find them helpful tomorrow.

### *Firming*

Up to now, you've worked mostly by hand. Your notes are probably a mess. Arrows, circles, asterisks, cross outs, highlighting—a clutter spreads across your tablet like the flotsam on a teenager's bedroom floor. But that's okay, because you



haven't gotten overly attached to your ideas. In fact, you're dying to clean them up.

To finish this step in the Stairway to Earth process, abandon pencil and paper. Go to your keyboard and create two documents. This marks the beginning of your electronic paper trail, a trail of deliverables that will lead, eventually, to that winning manuscript:

MESSAGE STATEMENT

TITLE BRAINSTORMING

For the message statement, open a new document and draft the point of your book. Keep it to one sentence. If you've done your work up to now, you already have a serviceable message on your tablet. It may not be great, but it will be good. As you type it, try to go one better. Use potent nouns and verbs.

You may question why it's so important to wait until now to go to the keyboard. Isn't waiting a matter of preference? Maybe, but my experience is that composing on a keyboard puts your mind in a different place. You pass from the playground of possibilities to the lobby of professional practice. You are no longer just fooling around.

If you're still working on that loyalty message, what might go on here? Maybe your friends asked at the barbecue for an example to illustrate your point (they always do). At first, you couldn't seem to fire them up with your message. So you ratcheted it up. You said, "Loyalty poisons ethical decision making in Washington, D.C." Ooh boy, that got their attention.

And that was a good feeling. Your politico friends were riveted, and you had a core audience. But then a book about Washington politics is not quite what you had in mind. You're a management expert, not a political scientist. So you want to firm your message in another way. Maybe you need to relate it better to corporate life. How about: "Loyalty poisons ethical decision making in hiring, firing, and promotions."

After drafting the message, open another new document. This one is for brainstorming titles. Type in all the titles you can think of. Many will come from your pencil notes. Again, be sure to keep everything you write down. Not only

might you like something tomorrow that you didn't like today, new patterns will emerge from old streams of thinking.

Throughout the first step in the Stairway to Earth process, you may feel you're going to way too much effort to accomplish a simple task. Truth be known, the task is far less simple— or easy—than it appears. The mind is a pretty big playground. You've got to get all the children in your head under control and walking in step.

Remarkably, message development often takes days—a chunk of hours spent here, a chunk there, some deep thinking in the shower, and a long talk with a friend or two. To increase your effectiveness, keep some added rules of thumb in mind:

- Search for the box: Though many people praise “out-of-the-box” thinking during the creative process, remember that, to define your message, you eventually need to define the box. What's in? What's out?
- Capture everything: Essayist E. B. White suggested in his classic, *The Elements of Style*, that writers had to take “occasional wing shots” for “bringing down the bird of thought as it flashes by.” In other words, don't let good game get away. Keep a pencil at hand to skewer good ideas as they pop in front of you.
- Engage intellect *and* emotion: Humanizing a message engages a reader's feelings. Drawn by the heartstrings as well as by curiosity, readers lean close to hear your story.
- Develop your message on two levels: Explicitly address your concrete topic. Implicitly, if only via inference, address life. A book about loyalty in business can teach a lot about loyalty in life.
- Prize simplicity: In the same way that powerful designs (think iPod) package complex technology in simple products, powerful insights package complex ideas in simple words.
- Put accuracy first: Create a message that's clear before getting caught up in

creating one that's catchy. Give preference to saying the right thing. Then figure out how to say it in the right way.

- Count on the unconscious: Your mind does an awful lot of work while you're asleep, mowing the lawn, and slouching at the beach. Don't bear down too hard. Your neurons, given a little R&R, will reward you.

If all goes well, you will find just the right message early on—and of course the right title. But set your expectations appropriately: Don't count on ringing the bell of perfection at the start. Instead, consider your message and title works in progress. You'll have plenty of chances to tune them later.

When I started this book, I knew I wanted to write about “How to Write a Serious Book.” I tried to come up with catchy titles: “Getting with the Program,” “Write Right,” “Think Write,” “The Missing Link in Book Writing,” “Overcoming Writing Vertigo.” But I also wanted to follow Orwell's advice, capturing my idea in metaphor. Could I somehow come up with an image to reflect the stepwise nature of the process?

In my head, I had this picture of the main problem: a writer struggling in a netherworld of confused ideas, looking for a systematic path to developing a clear argument. “Stairway to Heaven” occurred to me as representing a magical yet stepwise way of transporting the writer to clarity. (Clichés always seem to pop to mind first.) But then it hit me: Just the opposite fit much better: “Stairway to Earth.”

Bear in mind that you will iterate your message all the way through the completion of your manuscript. You shouldn't feel that you have to “finish” on this first step. Although I came up with the Stairway title before writing, I usually don't find a title nearly so early. It is enough to brainstorm, rework prototype language, and rethink insights. The point is to come up with something good that you can move ahead with.

You will never stop wishing you could develop a message with the same speed as a star musician develops a melody. Who doesn't wish he or she was like, say, George Harrison, for whom “Here Comes the Sun” poured out all at once at sunrise at Eric Clapton's house? (And that wasn't the only time that happened.)

But this wish is unrealistic.

The good news is that even if you're not a natural, you can employ a logical process to mature your ideas. It does take time. Days may stretch to weeks. But that's not such a bad thing. The hunt for a simple truth in the beginning can be the most thrilling part of writing a book. Take time to savor the chase.

The message you come up with is more valuable than it looks. You may think, Hey, it's just one sentence. But that one sentence gives you an unadorned statement of direction to guide your journey. It will serve as your refrain—your personal “Here Comes the Sun”—as you take the next step on the Stairway to Earth, Step 2: Right Argument.

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YOUR PAPER TRAIL

STEP 1

✓ MESSAGE STATEMENT

✓ TITLE INVENTORY

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