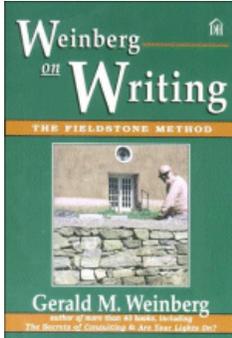


developer.***Book Excerpt****Weinberg On Writing:
The Fieldstone Method**

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Most people never publish an article. Of those who do publish an article, most write only one. Most people never publish a report. Of those who do publish a report, most write only one. Most people never publish a book. Of those who do publish a book, most write only one. Most people never publish a script. Of those who do publish a script, most write only one. If you ask them why they don't write more, they will say they are stuck, or "blocked." But these are just labels, and explain nothing. Most often, they stop writing because they don't know how to work with the essential randomness involved in the creative process.

The Structure of Creation versus the Structure of Presentation

Please don't get the impression that I read in the random way I write. Reading, by its nature, is more or less linear, like a string of beads, and I tend to read most works through from beginning to end. But written works can be created by superimposing any of a variety of organizations on that linear string of words. For instance, novels, being stories, are more or less linear; but novelists may use flashbacks, stories within stories, or parallel stories to break the linearity.

Dictionaries, encyclopedias, and reference manuals—though consisting of a bound sequence of pages—are generally organized for random access by the addition of tables of contents and indexes. Internets and intranets allow us to hyperlink written works in much more complex structures, though in order to use them, we frequently need aids such as index pages and search engines.

But none of these reading organizations have much of anything to do with the organization of the creative process by which the works came into existence. These reading structures are presentation methods, not creation methods. Creation doesn't work in any such regular way; it's more accurately modeled by the Fieldstone Method. Every day is different; every idea is different; every mood is different; so why should every project be the same?

Writer's Block and the Goldilocks Questions

"Of course every day is different," you may say. "Some days, I'm entirely paralyzed by writer's block, and I don't accomplish anything at all."

If this is your problem, I can help, as I've helped many other writers. I didn't always understand how I was helping, until one student wrote the following:

"As evidenced in some conversations with other students of yours and in my own writings, I think there are a number of intangibles that you offer—in much the same way that a coach or therapist does. These include motivating, raising self-esteem, building confidence in writing, considering self-other-context, teaching the true meaning of discipline, thinking more clearly, and raising awareness, to name only a few."

Writer's block is not a disorder in you, the writer. It's a deficiency in your writing methods—the mythology you've swallowed about how works get written—what my friend and sometime coauthor Tom Gilb calls your "mythodology." Fieldstone writers, freed of this mythodology, simply do not experience writer's block. Have you ever heard anyone speak of "mason's block"?

Many writing methods and books assume that writer's block results from a shortage of ideas. Others assume the opposite—that writers become blocked when they have a surplus of ideas and can't figure out what to do with all of them. But it's not the number of ideas that blocks you, it's your reaction to the number of ideas.

Here's how it goes. You have the wrong number of ideas, and that bothers you, causes you discomfort, or even pain. To lessen the pain, you turn to some other activity—coffee, beer, sex, movies, books, sleep, name your poison. This diversion relieves the pain in the short run, but eventually your mind turns back to that unfinished piece of writing. Now you feel worse because you've avoided the task. You might try writing again, but your mind keeps returning to what a bad, blocked writer you are. So, eventually, you turn to your relief—coffee, beer, sex, or whatever.

Do you recognize the addiction cycle? The Fieldstone Method allows you to break this cycle in exactly the same way you break any addiction, by using your intelligence and creativity. I sometimes begin to feel “blocked,” but when I do, I simply ask myself what I call the Goldilocks Questions:

“What state am I in now?” “Do I have too many ideas?” “Do I have too few?”
“Or, like Baby Bear’s porridge, is it just right?”

If I have too many ideas, I begin some organizing activities, such as sorting ideas into different piles. If I have too few ideas, I concentrate on gathering more. Usually, the first place I look is in my own mind, staying in the flow of the moment, one idea building on the next.

For instance, when I’m writing dialogue, I don’t stop to search externally for just the right conversational “stone.” That approach leads to overly clever dialogue, rather than the more natural-sounding stones that just pop out of my head from my familiarity with my characters and millions of past conversations I’ve been party to or overheard. Only if my natural mental flow fails me do I start searching for an external stone to trigger a new flow.

Then, when the number of ideas is “just right,” I organize them, trimming and polishing a bit in the process, until I have a finished product—or until I have to ask the Goldilocks Questions again. I may be stuck for a few moments, but I’m never “blocked.”

In this book, I’ll sketch all three parts of the Fieldstone Method—first the gathering, then the organizing, and last, the trimming and polishing. I’ll describe them in that order—not because I perform them in that order, but because this is a book and books are linear organizations of ideas.

Unlike what your schools may have taught you about writing, the Fieldstone Method is not dependent on any particular order of doing things. Instead, Fieldstoning is about always doing something that’s advancing your writing projects. As a Fieldstone author, you will have a variety of keep-moving activities—a handy list of tasks of all sizes, plus the knowledge to match each task to your mood, your start/stop time, your resources, and your total available time.

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About the Author

For more than 45 years, Jerry Weinberg has worked on transforming software organizations, particularly emphasizing the interaction of technical and human issues. After spending between 1956 and 1969 as software developer, researcher, teacher, and designer of software curricula at IBM, he and his anthropologist wife, Dani Weinberg, formed the consulting firm of Weinberg & Weinberg to help software engineering organizations manage the change process in a more fully human way. Jerry is author or co-author of several hundred articles and more than 30 books. He can be reached through his web site at www.GeraldMWeinberg.com.