

Why Everyone Should Write

Aug 9, 2017 by Morgan Housel

Everyone should write. You know why? Because everyone is full of ideas they're not aware of.

You don't talk about these ideas, even in your own head, because you've never put them into words. They're gut feelings. Intuitions. You use them a dozen times a day. But you'd shrug your shoulders if someone asked why. How you react to career risk. Why you invest the way you do. Why you like some people and question others. We're all brimming with opinions on these topics that we may never discuss, even with ourselves. Like phantom intelligence.

Intuition is strong enough to put these ideas into practice. But intuition isn't a tool; it's a safety net at best, and is more often the fuel of biased decisions. Turning gut feelings into tools means understanding their origin, limits, and how they interact with other ideas. Which requires turning them into words.

And writing is the best way to do that.

Writing crystallizes ideas in ways thinking on its own will never accomplish.

The reason is simple: It's hard to focus on a topic in your head for more than a few seconds without getting distracted by another thought, and distractions erase whatever you attempted to think about. But words on paper stick. They aren't washed away by the agitator in your head who won't shut up about the tone of an email someone just sent you. You might be able to hold focus just briefly in your head, but a sentence on paper has all the patience in the world, waiting for you to return whenever you're ready. It's hard to overemphasize how important this is. Putting ideas on paper is the best way to organize them in one place, and getting everything in one place is essential to understanding ideas as more than the gut reactions they often hide as.

[There] are vital questions that most of us, if asked on the spot, couldn't answer well. Not because we haven't thought about them; we certainly have. But the thoughts are probably vague, unsubstantiated, or pure emotions. Many people's response to the first question would be an uncomfortable pause, a ponder, and a lump in the throat. Which says a lot, just not in words. It's not until you put thoughts on paper that everything

from ignorance to denial to unfulfilled potential is viewed in the raw, ready to be analyzed.

Sometimes writing is encouraging. You realize you understand a topic better than you thought. The process flushes out all kinds of other ideas you never knew you had hiding upstairs. Now you can apply those insights elsewhere.

Other times it's painful. Forcing the logic of your thoughts into words can uncover the madness of your ideas. The holes. The flaws. The biases. Thinking "I want this job because it pays a lot of money" is bearable. Seeing the words on paper looks ridiculous. Things the mind tends to gloss over the pen tends to highlight.

Warren Buffett once said:

Some of the things I think I think, I find don't make any sense when I start trying to write them down. You ought to be able to explain why you're taking the job you're taking, why you're making the investment you're making, or whatever it may be. And if it can't stand applying pencil to paper, you'd better think it through some more.

A common question people ask professional writers is, "Where do you get your ideas?" A common answer is, "From writing." Writers don't know exactly what they'll write about until they start writing, because the process crystallizes the fuzzy ideas we all have floating around. This chicken-and-egg problem is probably why writing is intimidating for some people. They don't think they can write because – in their head, as this moment – they don't know what they'd write about. But hardly anyone does.

So, write.

A journal. A manifesto. A plan. You don't have to publish it. It's the process that matters. You'll uncover so much you never knew.