

# The Writing Guru: Case Studies

*These days, everyone wants to be a writer. And why not? Writing a book “scratches the itch” that we all share to make sense of the world. Books also offer a great platform for our careers and businesses. With books, we can and engage audiences, near and far, with ideas that matter.*

*Here’s how Charlie Euchner has helped authors take the big step from inspiration to drafts to published books.*



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## Nancy Soderberg

After completing her term as U.S. representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Nancy Soderberg began work on a memoir of her work for the Clinton Administration. Before going to the U.S., Soderberg had served as the staff director for the National Security Agency. Previously she served as foreign policy advisor to Senator Edward Kennedy and advisor to presidential candidates Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis.

Soderberg had written for years—policy papers, memos, speeches, op-eds—but had never written a book. So she had to learn a whole new set of skills. Charlie Euchner helped.

Charles Euchner is the rare talent who can both write and teach. As I struggled to write my first book, he pulled me back to reality and explained the tricks of the trade.

Soderberg shared an outline and a sample chapter of her manuscript. Euchner offered

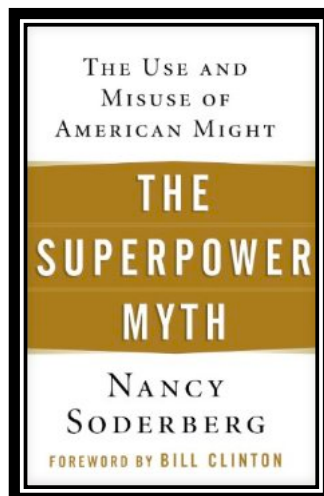
three responses. First, he asked a series of questions about the book’s purpose. Then he rewrite a chapter and annotated his changes with explanations. Finally, he offered a written critique and summaries of key writing issues.

With brilliant simplicity, he explained all the big — and little — things that lead to a successful book. *Remember what you are trying to say. Open each story with a strong lead. Use stories to explain your analysis and concepts. Help the reader see, feel, and smell the situation.*

The two shared thoughts in phone conversations and email.

Within a month, I had learned what I needed to write a book.

Soderberg published her book, *The Superpower Myth*, in 2004. After the book’s publication, Soderberg broadened her reach as a foreign-policy expert. She served as a regular foreign policy expert on MSNBC. She now teaches public poli-



cy at University of North Florida.

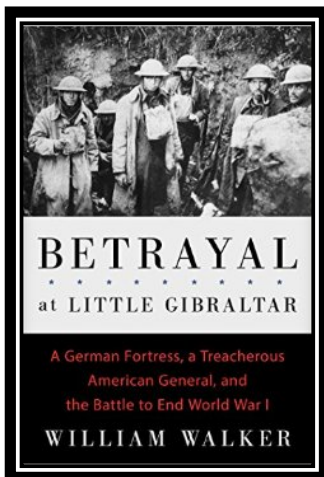
Euchner has now codified his wisdom, with all the skills you need to become a strong writer. One day with Charlie Euchner will save you months of frustration and make writing anything — books, articles, reports — much easier. Trust me, it works.

## William Walker

Bill Walker came to Charlie Euchner at the recommendation of an acquisitions editor at a major university press. Walker has developed an outline and sample chapters of a book about a scandal at the end of World War I. The editor was interested but wanted changes in the manuscript.

After retiring as vice president at the College of William and Mary, Bill Walker discovered documents that told the shocking and tragic story of a general's defiance that extended the gore of World War I by months.

As the U. S. 79th Division planned to attack the heavily fortified German butte of Montfaucon, General George Pershing decided to first take out a German observation post. But another general disobeyed Pershing's order—halting the American



offensive, ended the hope of concluding the war quickly, and causing the needless deaths of thousands of doughboys.

But how should Walker tell the story? He was pulled in two directions. On one side, the academic press asked for a detailed academic treatment—long on detailed documentation of the event, short on narrative drama. But Walker could feel the drama as he pored over the documents.

Charlie Euchner advised Walker to embrace the story. Forget the academic

press, he said. Go for the story that evokes the horrible consequences of the general's defiance. Show, moment by moment, how the bloody war was extended by the defiance of Pershing—and then how the scandal was covered up for generations.

Call him “coach,” for that's what Charlie Euchner is. He's an extraordinary mentor who can help convert a competent writer into a compelling writer.

Together, in a series of phone calls and email exchanges, Walker and Euchner developed a plan to honor the story.

Like every great coach, Charlie practices his trade with equal portions of instruction, humor, encouragement and, yes, more than a little inspiration. Give him a try, and he'll help you transform your game.

By studying the structure of great stories—from Homer's *The Odyssey* to Andre Agassi's *Open*—Euchner was able to point Walker to specific techniques that would provide both the rigor of an academic work and the excitement of a dramatic narrative.

The great thing is that you have so brilliantly reverse-engineered the techniques of narrative writing ... so composing is both rewarding and fun. Well, enough of the fulsome praise; you are the man!

At times, Walker expressed doubts about going “all in” with the narrative approach. But with Euchner's encouragement, he transformed his manuscript.

Good news. I just secured a publisher for my book on World War I. The Scribner's imprint of Simon and Schuster will publish the book here and abroad. ... Charlie, I owe much of this to you. How about a big dinner in New York?

In the spring of 2016, Simon and Schuster released Bill Walker's *Betrayal at Little Gibraltar*. One reviewer called it “an engrossing murder mystery.” Another called it a “masterfully constructed narrative.”

## Wayne Coffey

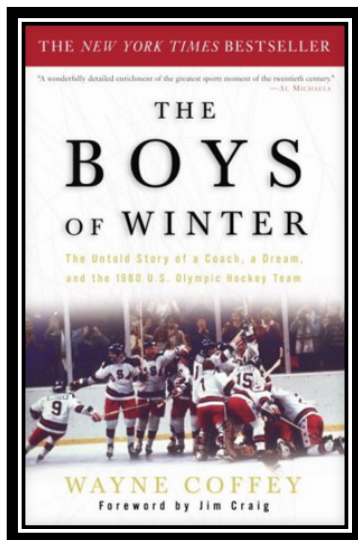
For years, Wayne Coffey tracked down the invisible stories about people in sports—both the stars and the amateurs—for the New York *Daily News*. Coffey wrote books for young people. But he had never hit the “big time” with his books.

Then he discovered the women’s basketball team at Gallaudet University, the nation’s premiere institution for deaf and learning impaired people. He won a contract to write about a season in the life of the Gallaudet women’s basketball team.

Every week he traveled from New York to Washington to follow the team—attending practices and games, staying in dorms, visiting players and coaches during the school week. The result was a bulging notebook of stories and observations.

Then came crunch time—time to write a manuscript. And Coffey got stuck. That’s when he consulted Charlie Euchner.

Charles Euchner is as passionate about the craft of writing as anyone I know. The texture and cadence of language, the architecture of story-telling and the simple magic of a well-constructed sentence — he loves all of them.



Later, Coffey won a contract to write a book about the U.S. hockey team that pulled off the greatest upset in Olympic history with its 1980 defeat of the Soviet

Union. Coffey did the essential reporting—interviewing old players and coaches, visiting Lake Placid site where the Games took place, and even flying to Russia to interview key players on the team.

When it came time to write, he got stuck. What’s the structure of the book? What goes where? How can the “Miracle on Ice” be captured for generations that never experienced the Cold War battle of U.S. and Soviet Union?

Euchner suggested a format for the book. Track the story in three parts, each associated with the periods of the hockey game. “Yo-yo” back and forth between the game’s critical moments and the background story. Show a play in the game, then talk about a player’s background. Show a play, then explore the political dynamics of the time. Show a play, then reveal long-hidden secrets of the game and the teams.

I was utterly lost as I grappled with a book about the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team and its miracle in Lake Placid. The success of *The Boys of Winter* resulted in large measure from Charlie Euchner’s coaching.

With the three-part structure—which created growing tension, even for a result that every reader knows ahead of time—*The Boys of Winter* offered a powerful experience of time-travel for sports fans. The book ended up on the extended bestseller list for *The New York Times*.

Years later, Coffey got a contract to co-author baseball player R.A. Dickey’s memoir. Dickey wanted to use this story to explore the need for resiliency and faith. As a boy he was repeatedly abused by a baby sitter. Later, he struggled to make it in the big leagues—until he taught himself the ins and outs of the knuckleball.

This time, the challenge was finding not only the right structure but also the right tone. Euchner offered a model: Andre Agassi’s memoir *Open*.

*Open* offered a searingly honest account of Agassi’s career in tennis—from his youth when his father pushed him hard to succeed, even though he hated the sport, to the highest levels of the game.

Whether I need an honest editorial take or an astute line-edit or help designing a piece, Charlie Euchner is the first person I turn to — not just because he's so terrific at what he does, but also because his enthusiasm and energy for the writing process are without peer.

Agassi offered a direct account of his life with a powerful technique. Writing in the present tense, without direct quotes, Agassi stripped away the usual literary artifices of the memoir. With this style, he was able to lay bare his pain and struggles.

Coffey decided to give it a try. It worked. The resulting book, *Wherever I Wind Up*, was a *New York Times* best seller.

## Tania von Allmen

For years, Tania von Allmen had been developing a fantasy novel. She gathered ideas and notes. She wrote a chapter here and there. But the pieces did not fit together.

That's when she started working with Charlie Euchner.

In long phone sessions, Euchner not only explained the essential elements of storytelling, but also a methodology of gathering and arranging pieces into a unified whole.

Working with Charlie Euchner gave me the high-leverage skills and strategies I needed to write my first book.

As he did with Ambassador Soderberg, Euchner asked for a sample chapter. He read it carefully and marked it up. Then he got on the phone and explained every concept in detail.

Working with a short sample of my work, Charlie identified a number of simple principles — and, more important, ways to apply those principles — as I organized my story and produced drafts.

At one point, Euchner challenged von Allmen to draw a picture of her whole story—one image that captured every episode in her sprawling story. She did. That image became the North Star for her project.

In their phone sessions, von Allmen quickly revised her scenes and assembled them into a coherent structure. Before long, she had all the tools she needed to realize her dream of writing a novel.

We worked together for about four hours to identify and fill the gaps in my repertoire. Overall, I have felt confident, equipped, and focused to write. I now know that I have the tools I need when I need to 'kick it up.'

And she did kick it up. After years of halting progress, von Allmen completed her novel in months.

