

## The Elements of Writing with Charles Euchner



Interested in starting your own entrepreneurial journey but unsure what to expect? Then read our interview with Charles Euchner, principal of The Elements of Writing.

### **What's your business, and who are your customers?**

I show people how they can upgrade their writing, from “meh” to good or from good to great. The Elements of Writing is the only brain-based system for mastering writing in all fields. I have identified 79 discrete techniques and hacks that are “brain-friendly” — that is, they fit with what the brain “wants.” When we align our goals and tasks with how the brain works, we can master any subject faster and better. And it's more fun.

My customers range from business professionals to teachers, writing groups, and individual authors. I teach seminars and college classes. I coach writers and managers. I offer consulting to businesses and other organizations that want to create a powerful “practice” of writing.

Here's how I figure it: Over the years, I have made just about every mistake a writer can make. I want to save my clients that trouble. I can show you all the traps and blind spots, and dead ends. I can show you simple processes to overcome these problems with no extra effort.

### **Tell us about yourself**

I have been writing my whole life. I went to Vanderbilt on a journalism scholarship and then wrote for a major education newspaper. After getting a Ph.D. in political science at Johns Hopkins, I focused on academic writing while teaching. My career took a big shift when I left Holy Cross to become the coordinator of Boston's long-term planning process. That led me, eventually, to start a think tank at Harvard.

But around 2002, I decided I wanted to write narrative works for a general audience. So I left Harvard to write books on baseball, civil rights, diplomacy, and other topics. For the first time in years, I was thinking like a writer every day. It was challenging but also liberating. I found my zone.

Along the way, I started teaching writing at Yale and Columbia. I could not find a writing guide that fit student needs. So I decided to write one. I did two things: (1) I explored the literature on learning and the brain, and (2) I reversed-engineered the best writers to figure out their techniques and hacks. The result was my book *The Elements of Writing*.

### **What's your biggest accomplishment as a business owner?**

I have developed a powerful system for an important problem. Let's face it. Everyone is a writer these days. When my father was an engineer, from the 1950s to the 1990s, he never wrote anything. His secretary wrote all the memos and reports based on what he told her. But today, professionals in all fields need to write every day. All of us need to explore and explain ideas in emails, memos, reports, proposals, RFPs, web copy, presentations, and more.

I also love working with professional writers. With the rise of blogs and ebooks, more and more people want to “air out” their ideas. I have worked with everyone from first-time authors to best-selling authors. Most people can learn all of the essential tricks in 10 hours. If they follow a clear process, they can do amazing things. But to avoid common mistakes, they need a guide. I'm that guide.

### **What's one of the hardest things that come with being a business owner?**

For me, it's finding the right fit with clients. Part of me thinks or wishes —that my services are for everyone. After all, in one way or another, almost everyone is a writer these days. But let's face it. Not everyone wants to be a writer, and even fewer people want help. Most people would rather muddle through. Hey, that's their choice.

My challenge has been to find people who understand the big impact of writing mastery. Over the years, I have learned that when people are truly curious and open themselves up to new techniques, they can learn twice as fast with an amazing ROI.

But you can't persuade someone that your service matters. The minute you try to persuade someone, that's when people get resistant. And resistance is the enemy of learning and growing. So I have had to learn to avoid explaining too much, too soon. That's hard because I am truly passionate about what I have to offer.

### **What are the top tips you'd give to anyone looking to start, run, and grow a business today?**

First, do something you're passionate about. Steve Jobs put it best: "The only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle. As with all matters of the heart, you'll know when you find it."

If you're great at what you do, you and your products will be a North Star for others who are passionate but also for those who are less passionate. Your job is to hook 'em with a good or service that they need—and then share all kinds of new possibilities once they have come on board.

Second, when you are looking for customers, don't just go to the obvious prospects. They tend to be "taken." Worse, they're usually set in their ways. Somehow, you need to find people who are curious and hungry for improvement.

So where do you find them? In conversations. Go to conferences and conventions. Go to

networking events. Answer questions on social media. Reach out on LinkedIn.

Finally, iterate, iterate, iterate. When I first wrote *The Elements of Writing*, it was better than most of my competitors. But I have revised it so many times. I think it's gone from B-plus to A-plus. I am always learning new tricks and developing sharper ways to explain ideas. Why not share these new insights? That's the challenge — not just to be good, but to get better all the time. The same goes for a lot of products. Get the product done and out the door, but also find ways to improve it.

### **Is there anything else you'd like to share?**

To succeed at anything, you need to understand conventional wisdom—the ways that people think without thinking. Then you need to find the kernel or truth and give it a twist.

Let me give you an example. Today, we live in a world of screens. People are addicted to their screens—videos, social media, texting, streaming, and so on. So the conventional wisdom says that we are "post-literate." People don't want to read a great newspaper or dig into a challenging book. Furthermore, our attention spans are shorter than ever. And there's some truth to this way of thinking.

But flip that insight over. Sure, maybe people are less involved with traditional ways of reading and writing. But at the same time, they are going all-in on other formats. To have influence in the world, people need to express themselves in words. Surprisingly, as Stanford's Angela Lunsford has pointed out, we are experiencing the greatest boom in writing since Gutenberg.

The challenge is not to cling to the old ways but to understand how eternal needs find expression in new formats. You can take that to the bank.

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