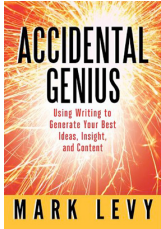


Interview with author and marketing strategist Mark Levy on how to uncover your best book idea



This is a transcript of a Q & A interview with Mark Levy on how to use List Making and other tools to tease out what is original and provocative about your book idea. Originally recorded on Dec. 15, 2011.

Debbie: Hello everyone! This is Debbie Weil, and our topic today is *how to write* your short eBook. Let me introduce Mark Levy who is a friend, author, book strategist, marketing and branding expert. He has written a marvelous book *Accidental Genius – Using Writing To Generate Your Best Ideas, Insight, And Content* <http://www.amazon.com/Accidental-Genius-Writing-Generate-Insight/dp/1605095257/>

Mark, are you there?

Mark: I am, indeed!

Debbie: Wonderful! All of us welcome you on the call today. I've sent everyone to your website <http://www.levyinnovation.com> and you should be getting a lot of traffic.

Mark: Well, thank you and thank everyone!

Debbie: You have a number of book coaching clients and you and I worked together for a while – by the way, I called you my *book therapist* – not my book coach. Because writing a book can make you literally go crazy. What I want to ask you is... what is the biggest challenge for authors in choosing and shaping a topic for their book?

Mark: Sure. It's a big challenge. I coach lots of authors on writing their books. A very big challenge that people have, is that their big ideas or their sub ideas are undifferentiated, that they're commoditized, that they sound like other ideas



that other people have, and it sounds like processes that other people have. Some people are so upset by this that they don't proceed with their book.

Then other people who should be upset by this but aren't, go ahead and write a really commoditized book without thinking about how to make things sound different. You shouldn't let it stop you, but you shouldn't go ahead and write something that's undifferentiated, and not helpful for people.

Debbie: Interesting!

Mark: I don't know if that is inspiring, but it's the real deal, at least.

Debbie: So, how do you help people? How do you coach them to go beyond the obvious, in terms of pulling out the really meaningful ideas?

Mark: What I often have them do, they need to have some perspective on their subject or on their ideas that people haven't really heard much before – it doesn't have to be brand new in the entire history of the world, or that no one ever had a thought like it. But there has to be something new or surprising about it. Like a new take on it, a new perspective, new stories.

How to use List Making

What I will very often do is, if someone is having trouble coming up with what that is, I actually have them make a series of lists. As a matter of fact, if you go to my website, the very first thing on it is an exercise that I do with people called *List Making As A Tool Of Thought Leadership*. It gets them to look at their topic through ten, 15 or 20 different lenses so that they see their topic as if they were a stranger to their own topic. They come up with ideas that they couldn't have come up with before. The way that works is... Debbie, what's a topic that someone might be writing a book on? Just any topic.

Debbie: Okay, I'll give you a topic... I know that she's listening right now, the topic of being an expat wife – being a trailing spouse, that is almost always the wife, in another country and what that means, how you deal with it, and all the different problems you face.



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Mark: That's very much a differentiated idea to begin with. The listener who has that, it's already several steps ahead. We can work with that, but this methodology also works if, let's say you have a sales book or a marketing book, or a much broader topic where you haven't yet identified the differentiation. The first thing I would have someone do, even the lady who has done the expat book, which as I say is somewhat differentiated – I would first have her make a list.

That list would be a list of possible lists. I would say, "What are all the possible lists that you could make, that could help you think differently, or see this topic in a fresh way, what are all the lists that might help you?" You're not going to have to make all these lists, but what lists might help you? If I may, let me go to a less differentiated topic. As I say, she's so far ahead of the game.

Start with a list of lists

Let's say someone wanted to write a book on sales. I would say to them, "Make a list of all the possible lists you could make." One list might be, "Who are the possible readers for this book? What are the reader's problems? What are the different sales systems that I know? What are the objections that people commonly hear? What are my sales stories? What are the best sales stories that I've ever heard? What's the best sales advice that I've ever heard? What's the best sales advice I've ever given people?"

You just make all these different lists about topics, sub topics, objections, benefits, stories, and all this kind of stuff. Then you decide which lists to make. You might make five, seven, ten, or twelve different lists. You would write each list down on its own page, and you would take a few minutes and fill out each list. Like, "What are the best sales stories that I know?" And you would fill out this list. Then you would go to another list, and fill that out.

Then you would spread them out on a table in front of you, you'd start moving them around and start looking from list to list and item from item, and human beings are natural meaning making machines. We cannot help but make meaning from the things we see in front of us. When we start looking from list to list and item to item, we start seeing patterns among items.



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We start seeing gaps in our thinking. We start seeing connections that we haven't seen before. We start coming up with new ideas, and new stories that hadn't occurred to us before. It's like what Edward Tufte from Yale said, "The act of arranging information becomes an act of insight." So without even trying, just by getting the information out of your head in a rough way and then moving the stuff around, you start seeing new patterns and coming up with new ideas.

You can also start asking yourself as you are looking at these lists, you want to have a pen with you to write down all these thoughts that are coming to you – you would say to yourself things like, "Among these lists I'm seeing now, what do I see that's new? Let me write down all the new things that come to me. What connections do I see here?" You might just start writing down what you see as connections among ideas. What's working here, and what's not working here.

You get all this information out of your head, you move it around, and you start asking yourself questions about what you see and ideas start coming up from that. The biggest problem I see is that people have undifferentiated ideas about what it is they are going to write about, so this is a way of just pouring all of the most interesting stuff out of your head on to paper and getting it to react with each other in a way that people don't normally see.

Debbie: Wow. First of all, just to be clear for everyone listening – you're still not talking about writing the book, per se. This is still pre-work that is getting out what's interesting, and getting out the real meaning and juice of whatever your ideas are. I love the rearranging and putting them down on a table, or you could use a whiteboard with sticky notes for moving things around. That's brilliant.

Mark: Thank you. It's because you need to come to insight, and you need to come to perspectives that haven't been seen in a wide way before. As I said, not everything you write needs to be absolutely square one. It doesn't mean the world doesn't need to have seen it before, but you need to bring some perspective or some story to it, something that is helpful and surprising.

If you have nothing surprising, why would anyone want to read what it is you're writing? Perhaps you explain something to someone in a way, that information that they had already known suddenly became useful because of the perspective that you took on. That's surprising! It's like, "Wow, I knew this stuff, but they put



it together maybe through humor or a way or a different perspective that now I could actually use it!”

Then other times, you're going to have stories and ideas or so that people have absolutely have not heard before. That's actually an aesthetic that I try to have my writing students use all the time and that I try to use in my own writing. I try not to write something unless there is surprise involved somewhere in it. A surprising fact or story, something revealed that people hadn't generally known before.

Getting the information out of your head in these lists and looking around at them, and saying, “What's new here? What's surprising? What's working? What patterns do I see?” You are surprising yourself by looking at the information in new ways. If you get surprised, you are naturally going to be able to supply surprising and useful information to your readers.

A quote from Robert Frost

Robert Frost the poet wrote a quote that has really guided my life as a writer. Frost said, “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.” If the writer is not surprised in the writing in coming up with stuff, then the reader for sure is not going to be surprised. You need to find ways to escape your normal ways of thinking and looking at things, so that you come up with stories, facts, and ideas that you have not really seen before or at least that your reading audience has not seen before.

Another way to do that, to lose sight of the way that you normally see things in the hope that you come up with surprising, new information that may be interesting to you and to others is through – I wrote the book as you kindly talked about, called *Accidental Genius – Using Writing To Generate Your Best Ideas, Insight, And Content*. That book is a 180-page book entirely on the concept of freewriting, and probably everyone listening knows what freewriting is, but in case they don't, I'll talk about it briefly.



How to use freewriting

There is no perfect definition of what freewriting is, but in general I like to say that freewriting means freedom from the normal rules of writing. The normal rules of writing say that you have to spell everything correctly. In freewriting, you don't. They say in the normal rules of writing, your grammar must be right, your punctuation must be right – in freewriting, that makes no difference whatsoever.

They say in the normal way of writing for other people that what you write has to be coherent, interesting, it has to make sense, and it has to be all these things. In freewriting, it doesn't have to be any of those things. You can jump around, it can make no sense to other people, you can leave your subject matter in mid-sentence, you can just go all over the place and just say nonsensical things. You can play word games on it, it doesn't matter.

The idea around freewriting is – I like to explain it this way, inside each one of us there is an internal editor that does a very important job. It cleans up what we think, say, and write, as we think, say, and write it so that we always sound smart and confident and consistent to other people. So, the things that Debbie says – Debbie will say something, and sure enough, that sounds like something Debbie would say. It's like it's instantly recognized as a Debbie thought, and that's because of your internal editor.

Your internal editor has gotten you far in life. You went to Harvard. You did all these things, you don't want to get rid of your internal editor, it gets you to good thoughts. The only problem is, when you are trying to write something unlike anything that you have written before or you're trying to come up with an idea that's unlike any idea that you've come up with before, your internal editor is going to get in the way. It's going to give you the same thoughts over and over again.

You get into thinking cycles. You think of the same stories and the same ideas over and over again. That's because your internal editor has used those ideas before, and you've seen them work at times so your internal editor is basically keeping you stuck in the things that have previously worked for you. Now it's just



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keeping you there in that rut of what has worked, it assumes that it's going to keep on working for you whether it's working or not.

As long as you write slowly and deliberately, and you do a lot of thinking in between sentences and words and while you're writing, your internal editor will be polishing what it is you say and it will be giving you the same ideas that you have over and over again. In order to shake yourself free of your internal editor at least momentarily, you need to do this freewriting.

There's a lot of different forms of freewriting, but again this is something I would advise. Set a timer for 7 or 10 minutes hit go, open a Word document and you start writing as quickly as possible about the topic that you want to write about. You have to write a little faster than you normally do, because as Ray Bradbury says, "In quickness, there is truth."

When you labor in your writing, you go to the same thoughts over and over again. You need to type a little faster or hand write a little faster than you normally do, because otherwise your internal editor is going to engage.

You start writing from wherever it is you want to write, there is no perfect thought to begin, you just start writing. It might be something like, "Okay, I want to write a really short sales book about sales. Well, what do I know about sales? What are all the stories I've told myself about sales? I want to write a book about sales, but am I the best sales person out there? Maybe I shouldn't be writing this book about sales." You can talk about your deficits, your deficiencies, you can talk about your strengths and weaknesses.

You can digress. You can talk about TV shows that you had just watched, whatever it is you want. You just want to write a little faster than you normally do, and you want to write continually for that 7 or 10 minutes until your timer goes off, and again it's because you want to kick your internal editor out of the way so that you get to a more honest, raw, interesting part of your mind.

Debbie: Let me break in just for a second here, because this is so fascinating.



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Two questions: Which comes first? Should the list making come before the freewriting and then once you have a list of ideas that resonate or are surprising, you can freewrite within each idea?

And second part, how long should it take, realistically, to do the list making? Even though everyone is attempting to write a short book, maybe as short as 30 pages, how many hours should they expect to spend on the list making?

Mark: The real answer is, you can do this stuff in any order. As a matter of fact, it's probably best to go back and forth in between the stuff. It's whatever you can do to help you approach your idea, or approach your book with energy and to put your whole self into what it is you're doing.

If someone wanted just a recipe or prescription for doing it, I would say that you can do the list making first. The list making can take anywhere, depending on how many lists you make, it can take anywhere from an hour to four hours making your lists and filling out the lists and coming up with new ideas.

I have even have people make the lists, and then walk away from the lists for a few days, and then come back and make more lists and look at the ideas anew and come up with more ideas, and ask themselves more questions.

It depends how far into it that they want to go. It could take an hour, or it could take days on the list making. Again, I would suggest that even if you're writing a short book, you need some original perspectives and thinking on it. If you had a time limit, then I would just do everything according to what your time limit is.

But it's not going to do you any good unless you are giving people some perspective or story that they haven't heard before. There's no way around it. You asked me two questions, how long did it take the list making, and what was the order?

Debbie: Yes, well I guess you answered it. You can go back and forth between freewriting and list making. I just wanted to clarify for my Beta Authors. It's not too late, given that some of our authors are making outlines that are sub topics of ideas.



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It's not too late at all to take those, take a separate piece of paper, and do the lists of lists and then do the lists to see what the connections are, and then maybe rearrange those pieces and get some new perspectives on our sub sections.

Mark: That's right. They could take their sub sections, and they could make lists of the different sub sections and ask themselves what they know about each sub section. That would be a list.

Or maybe that would look at what it is they are writing now, and maybe one of their lists would be, "What are all the questions I have in mind about my subject now?" Like, "Let me brainstorm every possible question and write all those questions, and maybe some of those questions would become freewriting topic questions."

Debbie: I hear you! This is great. Doris, are you there? Does anyone want to ask a question?

Doris: I'm here, yes! Thank you. I'm the expat lady!

Mark: With the differentiated idea, sure!

Doris: Thank you for that. I was just writing that down because the whole tag line for my expat site idea for the book that I want to write is, "First Time Expats Don't Know What They Don't Know!" So there are lots of lists that I can write about that. I also sometimes think, "Well, if I know it, that means everyone else could find it as well. Why would they hear it from me and not from anybody else?" But that's just something I have to get over, and I have also listened to *Word By Word* by Anne Lamott, because my library didn't have *Bird By Bird* so that was also very helpful.

<http://www.amazon.com/Bird-Some-Instructions-Writing-Life/dp/0385480016>

I did want to compliment you and say, wonderful job this morning! I've looked at your website a little bit and I actually downloaded your list making eBook. It is so pretty and so helpful as well. I was wondering, would you mind sharing how



many words is that? I see 27 pages. And how many edits do you usually go through? The most interesting learning that I'm having right now is not just writing, it's the going back and making it readable. What's your opinion, can you share some of your editing process?

Tips for editing your own writing

Mark: Oh, sure. My editing process... Thank you for those questions. I wrote the book a few months ago, so I don't remember how many words it is. But what my editing process is, I do a number of things. The key editing process for me, as my students will tell you – I torture them with this, and I'm staring at one of my students as I say this – I read my work, and I have them read their work out loud.

Read it aloud and also change the font size

There is nothing that will allow you to edit your work better than reading it aloud over and over again, because you cannot fool your voice. Your voice will read something, and if something is not clear you will start garbling it or you'll feel embarrassed or you'll bury your head in your hands.

Or, if you write something great, you'll be really excited as you're reading it. You cannot get past what your voice is. Your writing should be meant to be read aloud. That means doing things like not saying, "he/she," because you can't read that out loud. No one really knows how to read that out loud when they come up to it, they're not quite sure what to say.

You want to be able to read your stuff out loud, and your voice will tell you where you should edit. Another thing, you talk about my editing process – when you write, you can kind of get deadened to what it is that you've written because you've looked at it so many times over and over again, and it all looks the same. You start running over it, your eyes start combing over sentences that you really should edit but you're not looking at them fresh anymore. You just want to get through with it, like "Oh my God, I'm so tired of this!"

You read past things that you should be editing. So what I do, a trick I learned is that I take my documents and I change the font so it becomes a different font, unlike a font that I've ever used before. I also, very importantly, change the size



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dramatically. Now I look at my document, and normally I write in size 12, Veranda. That's just the way I write, it's how I'm normally used to reading things. So if I'm going to edit my document, I make it like size 16, New Times Roman. Something like that.

Now, it looks like someone else wrote it. The line breaks are different, I can't breeze over things because everything looks awkward to me. I read it like that, or I'll even read it aloud like that and it's a whole new document. I just can't read past something, I have to visit each word as if it's brand new, because it suddenly does look new! That's a very common way, and it's hard for me to tell you how many times I edit.

I tend to edit a lot, and I make passes at the document. I'll write something, then I'll walk away from it even briefly, and then I'll come back and edit like in a pass – I'm sitting there, I'll read it over for an hour, then I'll go away for a day or so and I make another pass at it. I don't tend to sit there and edit over and over again. I make several passes during the course of a day, or over the course of several days, as in leaving the documents and going off to do other things such as going to the gym, or working with a client. Then I go back and revisit it.

Again, I'm always trying to see it anew and see it fresh. If you stay too long in front of the document, you tend to start deadening to how it looks and you tend to lock in to whatever is on the page. You desperately want to keep it there, the way that it is.

Your thinking tends to become very stale at that point, and when you need to rewrite a sentence, you tend to not think of new ways of reading it. You're just so damn tired of sitting there and seeing it, so I like to approach things fresh all the time. Does that make sense?

Doris: If you could see me, you would see that I am nodding vigorously! Yes!

Debbie: Now you see why I got Mark to come on the call! Your crystal clear and specific ideas are just brain rattling. I love them! I have just thought of about ten more ways to make you guys work a lot harder on this. There's a person calling in from DC – did you want to ask a question?



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Susan: Can you hear me?

Debbie: Yes! Who is this?

Susan: It's Susan.

Debbie: Hello Susan!

Susan: It's so good to hear this talk, it's very inspiring and creative. I haven't had my talk with Debbie yet, so I've been rattling around topics and this will help me focus before our session, which I'm very grateful for!

Mark: Cool! Thank you for the kind words.

Make this doable

Debbie: Mark, we're almost at the top of the hour and so we have to let you go. Again, your website is <http://www.LevyInnovation.com> - cool website with lots of things to look at and download. Mark, I just can't thank you enough for your insights and your crystal clear thinking, and for your enthusiasm. It all boils down to what I told everyone at the beginning of the program, the whole purpose here is to make this doable.

Silence your inner editor

To make writing a short book doable. It can be fun, but the word I want to use is doable. Because Mark, as you and I know, no matter how many devices you employ, there is still some pain in getting it out and silencing that interior editor. The Lizard Brain, as Seth Godin calls it.

Silencing that editor, and sneaking around past him or her. It actually takes work. It takes energy to quiet that piece of your mind, and let the other more creative and interesting parts that are seeing the connections and perspectives, and get that part out. I hope you would agree with that.



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Mark: Yeah. That's beautifully said. Writing can be very difficult, but it can be very energizing. The thing I would suggest to your students, the people on the call, and the other people who will be listening later – I wouldn't be so worried about yourself, your own status, your own brilliance, your own big ideas, all of this stuff.

Don't worry about being brilliant

If you just look at the stories you have, and the facts about the gigs that you do, and the things that you've seen – there's a writing teacher who died a few years ago, his name is Ken Macrorie, he wrote a book called *Telling Writing*. <http://www.amazon.com/Telling-Writing-Ken-Macrorie/dp/0867091533/> and he said something along the lines of, "Instead of trying to get lucky with GREAT THOUGHTS – reach for a fact."

Instead of trying to write the world-changing book of all world-changing books, and to change everything for people – tell stories and look at the facts of what it is that you do. You can make a much bigger impact on people's lives if you just think in a much more factual way of what it is you are writing about, and don't worry if you're having the Block Buster idea of all Block Buster ideas. Make sense?

Debbie: It does. That is such a good, comforting thought and I think we should end right there. Mark, thank you again! Thank you everyone for listening in today. This is Debbie Weil, and you will be getting an updated PDF hand out with all sorts of juicy morsels in it. See you guys around on Facebook, talk to everyone soon. Thank you so much.

Doris: Thank you!

Mark: Bye!

