

Steele The Show

When we think of writers, we normally assume someone who sits in the corner of coffee shops, wears Ray-Ban clubmaster glasses, intently staring into a screen as they write the 100,000th word of their manuscript. While this archetype may resonate with some writers, it barely scratches the surface of the multifaceted world of writing. The essence of writing extends far beyond this cliché, embracing a spectrum of creative expressions inherent in each of us. However, amidst this diverse landscape of writers, one individual epitomizes the true essence of this craft: my former high school teacher, Michael Steele. Beyond his formidable role as an AP Calculus teacher, Steele's prowess as a writer transcends conventional boundaries. His repertoire spans various writing forms, from authoring and publishing his book to curating newsletters and crafting countless recommendation letters. As a calculus teacher, he uses his writing skills to develop word problems for problem sets and exams. Overall, Steele possesses a very unique writing process that utilizes multiple methods of composition to effectively communicate his work to his audience. True to being a writer, Steele sees his writing as a passion and an art that invites readers to step into his world.

Like any art, writing requires time, space, and an environment to brainstorm ideas. I find Steele's writing environment very unique, especially his early writing window. In his interview, Steele mentions that he does the vast majority of his writing almost exclusively from 2:00 am to 6:30 am. In addition, he keeps his phone on sleep to maintain focus. By allocating time in the early morning hours, Steele is able to minimize disruptions, allowing him to complete his writing more quickly and effectively. He states that he is able to "focus even more when it's only me up in the world and before my job has had the chance to inundate me with things that I am professionally obligated to do" (Steele). Moreover, his unconventional writing method on an iPhone while walking, typing with a single thumb, stems from a necessity born out of back surgery, revealing the adaptive nature of his writing process that is intricately intertwined with his environmental and health considerations. For Steele, writing transcends mere words on a page. It's an art that he meticulously prepares for by clearing out external distractions and obligations, allowing him to focus on his writing process and produce great ideas.

As every writer can attest, great ideas are crucial to making one's writing come alive and be impactful. However, sometimes our bursts of creativity come when we least expect them. Knowing how to organize and effectively communicate ideas is a crucial component of writing.

Steele's approach to organizing these creative sparks rests on tailoring their placement according to their intended genre or form. If an idea strikes him as being a potential work of fiction, he will jot down the story and characters in a folder titled "Fiction & Poetry." By giving each idea a unique place, he enables them to potentially grow into something larger. As Steele puts it, "I imagine them as individual pots for individual seeds" (Steele). If a project grows and shows potential, he then goes on to write the full work, which is then placed in a separate folder. In his interview, Steele talks about two such works titled "Scheduled Post" and "Secondhand Kicks." There is no fine line that determines when an idea will be completed. Instead, it's something more subjective and depends on how satisfying and coherent the work feels. Sometimes Steele's ideas are more personal and center more on his life rather than a constructed situation. In such instances, he jots down as much detail as he can in a specific "Newsletter Topics" note in his Newsletter folder. This folder features hundreds of ideas, some of which are fleshed out well with a stream of consciousness writing, whereas others are just phrases like "Proof" and "Minneapolis Miracle." Steele approaches his ideas differently depending on their context and significance, but in general he makes a note of his ideas, and either works on them immediately or periodically. This gives him more time and room to expand on each of them accordingly. Steele's organization demonstrates an essence of writing that allows him to tap into an internal creative force that is eager to be unleashed.

However, sometimes that creative force isn't always present. Even though writers are often flooded with new ideas, almost every writer succumbs to writer's block at some point. In his interview, Steele mentions that this is something he experiences regularly. Sometimes these writing blocks are more conceptual, such as trying to make a book scene just right, while other times it's simply due to a lack of inspiration. Regardless, Steele always tries to maintain a habit of always continuing to write, even when his ideas feel less inspired or emotionally-charged than normal. He uses his moments of writer's block as an opportunity to practice writing when it does not flow directly from brain to thumb. Doing so trains him to "avoid feeling blocked" and gives him the confidence to write through his writer's block. Leaning into uncertainty fuels his creativity, challenging him to write stories even when he doesn't have the end in sight.

Writers also face uncertainty when it comes to identifying the meaning of their ideas in major works. One of Steele's most notable works *Sweet Appeal* began as an idea for a parody musical to be made by his AP Calculus BC student cohort. He and his student would discuss

their vision toward a story about student experiences with college applications. Unlike his other work, Steele uses a third-person limited point of view in which the narrator knows only the main character's thoughts and feelings. The only first-person perspective comes in narrated thoughts. By using a predominantly third-person perspective, Steele is able to evoke the sense of being closely watched by skeptical eyes as the characters progress through the story. When it came to dialogue, Steele mentioned how important it was for the conversations to sound authentic. Not wanting his dialogue to be overly wordy or complex, he deferred to younger people's insight about any lines that struck them as odd. In addition Steele also emulated the tones of real-life conversations into his novel by drawing inspiration from movies like *Call me By Your Name*. Having such dialogue is important, since Steele's main goal in writing this book is to comfort students who feel a sense of dread regarding their futures. The characters in the novel all lose someone or let go of a future dream, but in the end everyone comes out of it okay. Steele's novel demonstrates the ethos of true writing, because he communicates his truths and wisdom, and is willing to revise and make changes to ensure his audience is touched by his work. Much like his book, Steele's weekly newsletter also aims to be authentic and original to his readers. He does not focus on a particular sequence or rhythm, but instead lets his stories create their own paths. For example, his newsletter titled "Heart(h)" starts off about a friend he lost touch with, but then begins a discussion of HVAC systems. While it might seem odd and disjunct, this style of writing allows Steele's work to feel more casual and conversational, allowing readers to understand him and his work on a deeper level. To generate that sort of empathy and understanding, Steele must choose topics that are revealing but not too sensitive to readers. Doing so allows him to write in a way such that his pieces are always accessible and eye-opening, but not uncomfortable to readers. By maintaining this balance, Steele offers his readers a unique personal insight and authentic humanity that helps them find comfort with themselves and their emotions. He embodies the writer's spirit of using writing as an act of communicating and discovering what he truly believes for himself and his readers.

One last area of writing where Steele demonstrates this unique writing spirit is in his recommendation letters. There are many challenges and considerations that need to be made when writing letters, since his goal is to always distinguish students from other candidates. As a result, he does not use a stock letter or template, and instead chooses to type every letter from scratch. For Steele, it is important that each letter is authentic and original, because he

understands that he is not only writing this for the decisions committee, but also for the student. By writing his own personalized letters, Steele is able to give his letters meaning and share sufficient insight, so that the people reviewing the application learn something positive about the student. This exemplifies his writer's spirit of developing personalized and meaningful works that go beyond just words on a paper, and ultimately play a vital role in shaping a student's future. Instead of writing for the sake of writing, Steele sees his writing as a way to help students achieve their academic and career goals.

Overall, Steele's writing process is very unique and diverse, encompassing the many techniques, skills, and attributes of a true writer. Writing books, newsletters, recommendation letters, etc has allowed him to diversify his writing to many different applications. Even as an AP Calculus teacher, his writing influences the way he creates word problems, department award speeches, trivia cards for Mathlete students, exam revision sheets, event invitations, etc. True to the writer's spirit, Steele believes in the value of revision and cherishes the opportunity to make his writing better. He always looks forward to sharing a new project with his friends, hearing their insights and amplifying his writing to its maximum potential. Doing so allows him to create works that influence and shape the lives of the many people in his life. For Steele, writing is not a task. It's a conduit for enriching lives, a cornerstone of something bigger than one's self, and a catalyst for positive change.

Interview Questions:

- 1) Describe your writing process. Do you outline, plot and plan, or is your writing more organic? Do you have any odd writing habits?**

I write almost exclusively in the window from 2:00 am to 6:30 am. I might do revision outside those hours on the weekend or a holiday, but the vast majority of my writing (including almost every newsletter and most of Sweet Appeal) happens in that window. This includes, by the way, letters of recommendation, math exams, Essential Skills Quizzes—basically everything happens in the earliest morning hours when disruptions are kept to a minimum. I keep my phone on Sleep mode for the entire day now to maintain focus, but I focus even more when it's only me up in the world and before my job has had the chance to inundate me with things that I am professionally obligated to do.

- 2) What do you do when a new idea jumps out at you while you're still working on a piece/book? Do you jump from one idea/project to another or do you finish your current idea/project first?**

I have unique folders for each of my major writing projects, but new ideas have their own file location dependent on their expected form. Each project idea gets a unique note to potentially grow from. I imagine them as individual pots for individual seeds. If a project grows from there into something I would consider writing in full, as two have—Scheduled Post and Secondhand Kicks—they get their own folders.

- 3) Have you ever experienced writer's block? How did you deal with it?**

The writer I most closely follow—Will Leitch—talks and writes a lot about the habit of writing and training the brain to write at writin' time. I try to practice that myself: when it's time to write, even if the ideas feel less inspired or emotionally-charged than normal, I still write. If someone told me to write 1,000 words about llamas (as someone did Will), I should be able to write 2,000 on demand.

- 4) How did you approach writing your own book? Which rhetorical and language techniques did you use to convey your book's message?**

Writing *Sweet Appeal* took a wholly different style than I write my newsletters with. For one: the novel used a third-person limited point of view in which the narrator knows only Leo's thoughts and feelings. There's no omniscience, and the only first-person perspective comes in narrated thoughts. With dialogue, I aimed to make the conversations sound authentic. This challenged me because I think in Aaron Sorkin dialogue. I'm super wordy, obsessed with being clever, utterly bored with basic communication. I rehearse conversations and lessons to ease anxiety, so what comes out is somewhere elevated above traditional talk. I didn't want that to be the case for Leo, Matty, Troy, Hannah, or Namer, so I worked on finding vocal cues that would establish their speech patterns.

5) What is your inspiration for writing weekly newsletters? How would you describe the writing process and thinking that goes into writing compelling newsletters?

Although I aim to make the newsletter compelling, I aim principally for it to be authentic. That's my number one goal. There's no rhythm to my topic selection. True, I do strive to not share consecutive posts about mental health—that's harder on me than them—but that's it. The thing on my mind each week will inevitably lead somewhere with some broad resonance, but the subject matter I explore to get there always varies.

6) How do you approach writing letters of recommendations for students? How does writing letters of recommendations differ from other writing you do?

Writing recommendation letters can be a joy or a miserable slog; it varies wildly from student to student. The toughest letters are those for students whom I don't know well beyond the gradebook. So many students know me so well that I think they often forget that the reciprocal isn't necessarily true. I try not to turn people away, although I have a few times because I lacked sufficient insight into their work to write an informative letter. For most letters, I do have an internal guide I loosely follow: introduce the candidate and my relationship with them, discuss my specific observations from class, highlight several of their non-mathematical achievements and pursuits, and then broaden the scope to them as people entering the world. I could not keep up with the sheer volume most years without that general structure, but again, every letter is wholly original.

7) What has been the toughest criticism you have received as a writer? What has been the best compliment? How do you respond to such compliments and criticisms?

With that said, my biggest criticism came from *Sweet Appeal* because I courted it. Nate and Bria tore it apart. Nate had markings all over everything with jokes and biting comments, while both had mountains of feedback. Their insights came from a loving

place. They believed in the book and story and wanted me to clarify and amplify it to its maximum potential.

As for praise, my greatest praise came from one of my now-current students. I didn't know her at the time, but she read *Sweet Appeal* and liked it enough to pass on to her grandmother and recommend she read it too. Her grandmother later invited me to speak at her book club. It was my first time where people treated me like an author rather than a cosplayer.