

Foolscap Anything

Steven Pressfield & Shawn Coyne

Steve: This is from two people, actually more than two wrote the same question. One is Jim Woods, and the other is Roberto Miarti, and the gist of it is about the Foolscap Method. How do you apply the Foolscap Method to non-fiction or to a business? In other words, it's something other than fiction. Can you give an example? It's a very good question because the Foolscap Method I think applies to anything. You could use it if your goal is *how do I get my daughter into Harvard*, my 2-year old daughter into Harvard or I'll give you an example since it's Halloween about carving a jack-o-lantern. Now the great thing about the Foolscap Method is that it's the concept is to see the project from start to finish in one glimpse. And then boil it down to its essentials; part 1, part 2, part 3 so that you don't get lost in the minutia of over-research, over-thinking, over-everything. So we were going to carve a pumpkin, which I was just doing the other night with a couple of kids, you would start with kind of 'what are we trying to do here? What's the oval?' This is the Foolscap Concept. And you would say something like, you would start with the finish. You would say 'the finish is we want to have a pumpkin hollowed out in the middle with a candle in the middle of it so we can put it on our front porch or our front stoop and it'll glow and it'll be great, it'll be wonderful and it'll be fun'. So that's where we're kind of aiming towards. Now that would be the equivalent of our finished PhD dissertation or our finished novel. So then you sort of would work backwards from that and say 'okay, well the first thing we have to do is we have to scoop out the middle, get all of the pulp out of the middle of the pumpkin. Then we have to carve little eyes and a little nose and a little mouth, and then we put a little candle in the middle and there we have it'. So now we can sort of track backwards and grasp the entire concept in one nutshell which is again to create a little work of art that glows in the dark and is fun to look at outside our door. So again, I don't know if I'm being too clear about this, but it's just trying to boil something down to its absolute constituent element so that we can grasp the whole thing at once. Like let's say we have a 2 year old daughter and our goal is to get her into Harvard. Now I'm not saying that that's an admirable goal, but let's say it is. We could start, we would break it down, and Shawn's laughing because he's from Harvard. We could break it down into act 1, act 2, act 3 and we know the finish; it's our daughter gets into Harvard. So act 3 would be the actual submissions at the final end of high school. That would be high school. Act 2 would be through middle school and junior high school, and act 1 would be starting at kindergarten and taking it through there. And so we would try to start when we go back to the beginning. We say "Okay, we've got to get her into the best kindergarten. Either the kindergarten that all the kids go on to Stamford and Ivy League schools". So now we know we start with that. We find out where they are. We start kissing up to the people in it. We save our money. We get her in. and then we kind of brainwash her act 2 through the middle of her youth to join every extracurricular activity she can, be it cheerleader, be it the soccer team; whatever it is it takes. And then act 3, she gets good grades in high school, all the way through the end of applying, etc., etc. so there is kind of a way of grasping the overall concept from 30,000 foot view from A to Z and boiling it down to its major constituent elements, and from there you just kind of fill in

the blanks. So I hope I've made that clear. I don't know if I have, but the Foolscap Method can be used to anything; to building a bridge, to painting a picture, to starting your own business; anything. Okay, that's my first question and first answer.

Shawn: Let me just add to that quickly and let me speak to narrative non-fiction which is 04:57 driven non-fiction which something like *In the Heart of the Sea* would be narrative non-fiction or *The Perfect Storm* or *Lone Survivor*. Those kinds of stories where...

Steve: *Black Hawk Down*.

Shawn: *Black Hawk Down*, exactly. And Foolscap Method, I was talking to Robert McKee a couple of weeks ago and he had this great phrase for the three elements of Foolscap, and he said it's the beginning hook, the middle build and the ending payoff.

Steve: Oh, I like that.

Shawn: And I think if you look at the Foolscap Method in those very specific terms, you know you have to start your story with a hook, you know you have to build that hook to a point where it climaxes in a very large payoff. So the hook and the payoff are intricately connected. So when you begin your story, you are making a promise to the reader that you are going to settle the initial insightful incident if you will, which is the thing that throws everything off balance, and the way you do that is in the ending payoff. So in narrative non-fiction what I've found with some clients who are journalists is they are incredible journalists. They get stuck thinking of how to take all of these pages and all of these interviews that they have and convert that into a story. 3 parts; the beginning hook, the middle build and the ending payoff. The way you do that is to look globally at everything that you have and say "If I had to boil this down to one thing, what would that be?"