



THE FASCINATION FACTOR

*(and how you can use it
to write books)*



MARK LEVY

When writing a book, trying hard to please the market doesn't work.

One of the hats I wear is that of writing coach. I guide businesspeople in writing books. During a typical first session, my client isn't sure what their book will be about, but they take guesses.

They tell me about what they think the marketplace wants, what they believe they can sell, and what might elevate them to guru status. They start tossing around premises. I stop them.

Books indeed need readers, so thinking about audience is important. Books also help writers achieve career goals, so thinking strategically about how a book can advance one's business makes sense.

But looking at those things too early leads to a bland book. Why?

The writer starts misplacing their attention. Instead of focusing on the best things they've learned and on telling readers what they need to hear, the writer tries reading minds so they can give the market exactly what it expects and approves of. They, in effect, become the market's puppet.

In an effort to please everyone, the writer comes up with tame, uninspiring premises. Me-too premises. Ones easily dismissed.

The situation reminds me of a scene from the American version of *The Office*. When Andy is transferred, he tries to curry favor with his new boss, Michael, by subtly imitating Michael's word choices and speaking cadence.

At first Michael likes him, because he and Andy seem oddly similar. After a while, though, Andy's parroting becomes a nuisance, because he won't make a decision on his own and is always waiting to follow Michael's lead.

On *The Office*, this yes-man dynamic is funny. In real life, it's sad.

If you want to write a book that's at all original, that's at all valuable to the market, that's at all like you at you at your best, you need to adopt a leadership position.

If you want to write a book that's at all original, that's at all valuable to the market, that's at all like you at you at your best, you need to adopt a leadership position.

Meaning is where your power resides.

As Eric Maisel says, writing a book creates meaning. You're bringing something into the world that doesn't yet exist. You get to decide what fits and what doesn't.

Think of yourself as a filter. As you've moved through life, you've sifted through countless experiences, stories, and ideas. Some you've forgotten. Others stick with you. You can't shake them. There's a reason for that.

It's from that storehouse of unshakeable organic meaning inside your head where your book should begin. By starting from meaning, you'll have a book that has your stamp on it and is unlike any other. Meaning is where your power resides.

To begin, temporarily put aside the considerations of others and of worldly success, and make a list. What kind of list?

It's an inventory of everything that fascinates or has fascinated you at any point in your life. I'm talking about a list consisting of things like:

- anecdotes
- case studies
- URLs
- myths
- experiences
- analogies
- blogs
- trips
- facts
- processes
- scenes
- conversations
- figures
- methods
- dreams
- art
- hypothesis
- risks
- nightmares
- plays
- insights
- surprises
- screwy notions
- books
- pet philosophies
- memories
- poems
- movies
- prejudices
- business models
- jokes
- TV shows
- controversies
- role models
- riddles

The list needn't be in any particular order. Anything that you think should make the list, makes the list. Good or bad. Big or small. Important or trivial. Ordinary or weird.

Don't wonder why a particular item fascinates you. Don't worry if an item is "book-worthy" or has anything to do with your core business. Your task is to list things that, for whatever reason, have energy for you. Items that radiate.

You're bringing something into the world that doesn't yet exist. You get to decide what fits and what doesn't.

What you're doing is playing a game: You're treating anything that appears in your mind as potentially valuable book material.

Compose your list through any methods you please. I advise my clients to use a combination of freewriting sessions and plain old daydreaming spread over the course of days. (See "Additional Thoughts.")

While composing your list, it can be helpful to think about life in conceptual sections. You might, for instance, devote a thinking session to all the best advice you've ever received. You might then do a session on worst advice you've ever received. After that, you could conduct a session on your brightest achievements.

By examining your life in sections—even if they’re sections you’re arbitrarily making up on the fly—you’re apt to recall things that would have eluded you if you had considered life as a whole.

Once you’ve made your list, only then should you start thinking about would-be readers and business goals.

- Who might the audience be?
- How are they different from the rest of the population?
- What kinds of things does that audience need to hear?
- What’s the single most important thing they need to hear?
- What are you qualified to tell them?
- What kind of book stands the best chance of getting everyone exactly what they want?
- What book demands to be written?

Once you’ve thought about audience and goals, then you can spread out the pages of the fascination list on a table, so you can study them, move items around, add to them, group them, and look for themes. And, believe me, you’ll find themes.

Don’t wonder why a particular item fascinates you.
Don’t worry if an item is “book-worthy”
or has anything to do with your core business.

Finding themes.

Human beings are natural meaning-makers. We spot patterns, notice gaps, formulate questions, and hatch ideas without trying. It's like what Edward Tufte meant when he wrote "the act of arranging information becomes an act of insight."

Our minds race by recombining what's in front of us. Seeing what's interested us in life laid out in front of us acts as fuel.

From these places of energy, you can craft the book's premise and much of its supporting material. This material comes from an honest place within you. It comes from a spot in your brain where you keep the things you can't forget.

Using this "fascination method," everyone gets a fair hearing, including you as meaning maker and you as business person, as well as your potential reading audience.

Now the full book-writing can begin. The resulting book will stand a better chance of being something readers can use, and that's uniquely yours.

This spirited production method isn't only for book-writing. Any storyteller can use it no matter the medium.

You might even consider using fascinations as a means of thinking up new businesses, products, or services you might want to offer to your clients.

More Fascination Factor tips to keep in mind.

→ **Using this technique should be energizing and fun.** If you feel pressured, you're probably trying too hard to come up with fascinations of importance.

Yes, a fascination can be life-changing (e.g., a financial strategy that turned your business around), but it can also be mundane (e.g., your family trip to Lake George when you were six, and it rained).

→ **Try listing as many fascinations as you can.** After all, you need an inventory of thoughts to draw from. You've got to start from somewhere.

If you don't put things down, if you're slow putting them down, if you try judging their worth too soon, you won't have anything to create with.

Treat each thought as if it's as good as the next. Each might be an answer, or it might be a link to an answer. As William Stafford wrote, good or bad, "one thought will help the next one come."

→ **One of the ways you can compose your list is through freewriting.** What is freewriting? It's a way of using writing, not just to record thought, but to generate it.

Open a blank document in your computer (or grab pen and paper), set a timer for ten minutes, and start writing about what's fascinated you in life.

As you hit the keys, don't worry if what you're writing is grammatically or syntactically correct. Don't worry if the prose itself is interesting or stays on point. Also, don't stop for any reason until the timer sounds.

If you run out of things to say, just start talking about your day or a trip you plan on taking. In short, keep typing. As you do, start guiding yourself back to fascinations.

What you're doing is using the screen to watch yourself think.

When the first ten-minute session concludes, try for more. Conduct sessions during spare moments throughout the day.

After a few days, review your writing, cull out the important points, and consolidate them into a list (or lists).

→ **Some people record their fascinations on a portable voice recorder.** Others write theirs on index cards or sticky notes, so they can spread them out on a table and move them around. Use what works for you.

→ **Human beings are endlessly creative.** We can make any two ideas relate, no matter how distant they seem from one another. Making random ideas relate is, in fact, a common writer's exercise. For example: Write an essay that includes the words cheddar, bumpkin, demarcation, and NASA.

Do you doubt your ability to complete the exercise? Of course not. It might take some thought, but it wouldn't be difficult writing a piece that uses those four words in a way that's elegant and logical.

The same principles apply as you look through your fascinations for patterns. Finding patterns and interesting ideas will be easy. Some will pop out at you. Others will require study and force-fitting.

Understand, you're not trying to turn every item on your list into book material. You're using them as starting points. You're playing with each item to see if it can be used as is, or as a kindling to get you to something better.

→ **In studying your fascinations, you can't be sure what you'll come up with.** Will it be an idea for your book's core concept, or for its supporting material? There's no predicting the outcome. You're basing your decisions on the power of the material. Let the material lead you.

→ **For further reading about meaning**, be sure to check out the work of Eric Maisel and Rollo May, among others. For more on freewriting, read anything written by Peter Elbow or Ken Macrorie.

→ **Just to keep you inspired**, take a look at some creators who've looked to themselves before looking to the market:

“We do no market research . . . We figure out what we want.”

—STEVE JOBS

“We made them [cartoons] for ourselves, which was probably the most sensible way to do it anyway.”

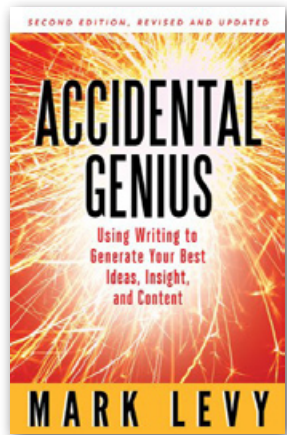
—CHUCK JONES, DIRECTOR OF BUGS BUNNY AND OTHER LOONEY TUNES CARTOONS

“If you just design for yourself, someone will identify with it. The world is big enough, and you'll find a group of people who want to dress like you.”

—AMY SMILOVIC, FOUNDER OF THE FASHION LINE, TIBI

“An artist gives you something you don't know you want. Something you might know you want the next time, but never knew you wanted before.”

—DAVID CRONENBERG, DIRECTOR OF THE FLY AND NAKED LUNCH



BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of Mark Levy's [Accidental Genius](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Levy is the founder of Levy Innovation, a marketing strategy firm. David Meerman Scott has called him “a positioning guru extraordinaire,” and Debbie Weil referred to him as “a horse whisperer for writers and business thinkers.” He has written for *The New York Times*, and has written or co-created five books. His latest is a revised, expanded, and re-subtitled edition of his bestseller, *Accidental Genius: Using Writing to Generate Your Best Ideas, Insight, and Content*. Mark also creates magic tricks and shows. His work has been performed Off-Broadway, in Las Vegas, and on all the major television networks. Visit him and read his blog at levyinnovation.com.

SEND THIS

[Pass along a copy](#) of this manifesto to others.

SUBSCRIBE

[Sign up for our free e-newsletter](#) to learn about our latest manifestos as soon as they are available.

BORN ON DATE

This document was created on July 7, 2010 and is based on the best information available at that time.

ABOUT CHANGETHIS

[ChangeThis](#) is a vehicle, not a publisher. We make it easy for big ideas to spread. While the authors we work with are responsible for their own work, they don't necessarily agree with everything available in ChangeThis format. But you knew that already.

ChangeThis is supported by the love and tender care of 800-CEO-READ. Visit us at 800-CEO-READ or at our daily [blog](#).

COPYRIGHT INFO

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit Creative Commons or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

Cover image from [Stauber Design Studio](#).

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You are given the unlimited right to print this manifesto and to distribute it electronically (via email, your website, or any other means). You can print out pages and put them in your favorite coffee shop's windows or your doctor's waiting room. You can transcribe the author's words onto the sidewalk, or you can hand out copies to everyone you meet. You may not alter this manifesto in any way, though, and you may not charge for it.