Seven Habits of Highly Effective Writers

Interface

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Stephen R. Covey, Seven Habits of
Highly Effective People:
Restoring the Character Ethic,

Index Terms—Collaboration, writing.

Since its publication nearly 10
years ago, Covey’s Seven Habits of
Highly Effective People has been
praised by everyone from CEO’s
to Senators, from motivational
psychologists to ministers. All have
admired Covey’s book for its si-
multaneous attention to prin-
cesses and practical insights, for
its ability to identify what many
call “fundamental truths” about
how to evolve from managing to
leading, how to integrate personal
and professional responsibilities,
and how to achieve not just greater
productivity but also greater in-
tegrity and self-fulfillment.

Having read Covey’s book several
times, I particularly admire the
range of experience from which
Covey draws his examples. Not
surprisingly, much of his discus-
sion centers on the problems of
business executives, since much
of Covey’s experience comes from
working with this audience. How-
ever, he also discusses problems
encountered by parents, spouses,
teachers, athletes—all sorts of
individuals in both private and
public roles. It occurred to me to
look once more at Covey’s seven
habits, to see if he might have
something to say to us in our role
as communicators. What follows
is my interpretation of how we
can apply Covey’s seven habits to
writing.

HABIT 1: BE PROACTIVE

Habit 1, “Be Proactive,” in Covey’s
view means more than merely
taking initiative or planning ahead:
“It means that as human beings,
we are responsible for our own
lives. . . . Reactive people are often
affected by their physical environ-
ment. If the weather is good, they
feel good. If it isn’t, it affects their
attitude and their performance.
Proactive people carry their own
weather with them” [1, pp. 71–72].

Reactive people tend to view them-
selves as externally controlled:
“There’s nothing I can do,” “They
won’t allow that,” “I have to do
that” [1, p. 78]. They focus on
what Covey calls the Circle of
Concern—things that worry them
but over which they have little or
no control. In contrast, proactive
individuals focus on the Circle
of Influence—things they can do
something about. They do so by
seeking responsibility and making
commitments: “By making and
keeping promises to ourselves and
others, little by little, our honor
becomes greater than our moods”
[1, p. 92].

It’s easy to observe the difference
between reactive and proactive
communicators in both the aca-
demic and business realms. Any
teacher of technical or business
writing will recognize the reactive
student’s plaintive question, “What
should I write about?” Faced with
a major writing assignment, the
reactive writer will often avoid the
responsibility of choosing a topic,
instead begging the teacher to
assign one—a ploy that, ironically,
tends to backfire. If the teacher
does assign a topic, the odds are
that it will be too far afield from
the student’s genuine interests for
the student to invest the requisite
energy and interest needed to
successfully complete the project.
The project becomes, inevitably,
another empty exercise that the
student “has to do.”

Proactive student writers, on the
other hand, are eager to make
connections between their existing
interests and the opportunity represented by an upcoming writing project. For example, faced with the task of identifying a problem and preparing a report that addresses it, proactive writers may seize the opportunity to write about an actual situation in a part-time job or campus organization with which they are currently involved. While still a required assignment—something they “have to do”—the report now takes on a relevancy created by the student’s willingness to expand his or her circle of influence.

Writers in professional settings might protest that they do not usually have the luxury of choosing their own topic. This is true. Still, professional writers can exercise proactivity by initiating meetings during the document planning stage with potential document users or with more experienced writers within their organization. For example, Katz suggests that newcomers in an organization set up such a meeting even before they begin drafting a technical document [2, p. 110]. They can have a hand in shaping the task that they will eventually have to write about.

Business meetings are yet another setting in which the difference between reactive and proactive communicators can be dramatic. A mentor of mine used to say, “The person with the handout controls the meeting,” and I have found this to be true again and again. What he meant was that the person who goes to the trouble of setting down an agenda item has a very good chance of setting the tone for how that agenda item is viewed. Even a simple one-page outline of ideas often has an authenticity that outweighs spontaneous, undirected oral communication. Simply put, planned communication usually trumps the unplanned.

**Habit 2: Begin With the End in Mind**

Covey’s second principle relates closely to the first. By telling us to “Begin with the end in mind,” Covey is suggesting that each of us should have a “personal mission statement,” a philosophy or creed that focuses on “what you want to be (character) and to do (contributions and achievements) and on the values and principles upon which being and doing are based” [1, p. 107]. Such a statement provides an unchanging perspective on everyday actions and decisions. It is the “forest” that we often can’t see because of the “trees.”

We are familiar with the idea of organizations having mission statements. But can a piece of writing have one too? I would suggest that the “mission statement” for a piece of writing is based most closely on principles related to audience and purpose. Asking ourselves “Who will be using this document, and why?” enables us to keep the “big picture” in mind while making decisions about content, organization, and design.

**Habit 3: Put First Things First**

Habit 3 brings us to Covey’s well-known “quadrant” system. According to Covey, the time management matrix contains four areas, depending on how urgent an item is (i.e., whether it requires immediate attention), and how important it is (i.e., whether it will yield results related to high-priority goals):

**QUADRANT I:** Urgent, Important (e.g., crises; deadline-driven projects)

**QUADRANT II:** Not Urgent, Important (e.g., long-range planning; building relationships)

**QUADRANT III:** Urgent, Not Important (e.g., interruptions; some mail; some meetings)

**QUADRANT IV:** Not Urgent, Not Important (e.g., trivia; busy work; some mail)

Covey’s advice is to focus as much as possible on Quadrant II. Unfortunately, most of us instead are crisis-driven (overwhelmed by Quadrant I problems); or, even worse, we keep ourselves busy (absorbed in Quadrant III and IV activities) without really accomplishing anything lasting. In order to give Quadrant II priority, Covey suggests, we need to schedule goals on a longer term basis (e.g., weekly, rather than daily) and to delegate Quadrant I and III matters to others, ideally in a way that gives them responsibility and allows them to develop their own talents.

It is easy to see how the quadrant system applies to various writing situations. For example, academics are all too familiar with the “All But Dissertation” (ABD) syndrome: a doctoral student is able to complete Quadrant I and Quadrant III activities (e.g., attending classes; writing papers for courses when someone else—the professor—has imposed a deadline; holding office hours for students, etc.). However, the doctoral student who ends up terminally ABD is unable to complete a long-range, important project—writing the dissertation—often because he or she is unable to self-impose a deadline. Similar problems arise for many untenured faculty members, who often become absorbed in Quadrant I and III activities (e.g., committee work) to the detriment of the Quadrant II activity of writing and publishing research.

The quadrant concept can also be applied to different parts of the writing process. For example, many writers (myself included!) tend to focus on word- and sentence-level editing too early in the writing process. When I am working on a long-term project such as an article or book, it’s easy to fall into the trap of wasting my “peak” energy hours (for me, the mornings)
on word-processing and editing what I’ve already written, rather than using them to draft new material. I have to make a conscious effort to spend my “peak” time on thinking and writing, and to shift more mechanical tasks like word-processing to my “off-peak” hours.

Writers who are attuned to the importance of Quadrant II might also think of ways to manage parts of the writing process differently so that they can be handled more effectively on a long-term basis. For example, a Quadrant II approach might involve setting aside some time to examine common features in memos, proposals, or other work documents over the past year, and designing a template for future similar documents. Likewise, Quadrant II writers are able to resist the temptation to do everything themselves, instead investing the time to show a subordinate how to gather, organize, and analyze data so that it can be incorporated easily into future documents.

Habit 4: Think Win/Win

While Covey’s first three habits help individuals establish greater independence, his last four habits have to do with establishing more effective interdependence. Habit 4, Think Win/Win, is fairly self-explanatory. Covey’s examples deal primarily with the manager–employee relationship: ways to “empower” employees so that they increase productivity (thereby helping management “win”) while increasing their own opportunities and responsibilities (thereby helping themselves “win”).

The Win/Win principle applies to writing in terms of the writer–reader relationship. Writers who fail to consider their audience are likely to find themselves in a Win/Lose, or even a Lose/Lose, relationship. A Win/Lose approach, according to Covey, is characterized by an authoritarian or adversarial attitude. For example, a writer who lacks what is traditionally known as “you-perspective” reflects a Win/Lose attitude, since the writer attempts to impose a proclamation on the reader without addressing the reader’s concerns. Similarly, a writer who attempts to impress readers, rather than trying to help them understand the subject matter, also fails to establish a Win/Win relationship.

Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood

Habit 5 can best be summed up in one word: Empathize. In Covey’s view, empathic listening is especially crucial, yet frequently overlooked: “You’ve spent years learning how to read and write, years learning how to speak. But what about listening?” [1, pp. 237-38]. According to Covey, many of us are skilled in selective listening, reflective listening, sympathetic listening, or active listening. In contrast, empathic listening involves getting “inside another person’s frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel” [1, p. 240]. In practical terms, it means that we “diagnose before we prescribe.”

How can the concept of empathic listening be applied to the writing process? One form it might take, as mentioned earlier, is a planning session with a manager or more experienced writer within one’s organization. For example, Katz describes such a meeting between Gene, a manager at a government auditing agency, and Darlene, a new staff auditor preparing to write her first audit report: “Gene described for Darlene the organization’s expectations about content and form, helped her understand the various audiences for such a report, and provided her with a model that she could follow as she began to draft her own report” [2, p. 110]. By giving Darlene the opportunity to consult about basic issues during the planning stage, Gene enhanced the probability that she would “get inside” the organization’s frame of reference.

Audience analysis is another way that writers can “listen” empathically to their potential readers. Especially exciting are usability testing studies such as those described in Chapter 5 of Schriver [3], in which users provide feedback as they try to interpret documents like instruction manuals. By literally listening to what such users have to say, for example, about their difficulty in following elements of the document’s design, writers can develop principles that can then be applied to future documents. (And, as Schriver points out, good document design creates a “Win/Win” situation: “The design of a document can influence a person’s perception of the design of products and services. Good document design plays a positive role in how people think and feel about products and services” [3, p. 358].)

While consultation and audience analysis are typically associated with the planning and drafting stages, I would suggest that skilled writers are able to perform the equivalent of empathic listening as they revise and edit documents. That is, truly skilled writers are able to read a draft as their potential readers would. To do so puts the writer’s ego and time at risk, since the process may reveal the need for extensive revision, additional research, or even a major overhaul of structure or content. For these reasons, I would venture that truly empathic reading is just as difficult—and rare—as truly empathic listening. Instead, we may ask a colleague to read our draft, hoping that they will provide a window into our potential readers’ reactions. (Yet how often do we then attempt to defend our draft against the very criticisms we have invited, rather than seeking to understand their basis?)
HABIT 6: SYNERGIZE

Habit 6 is built around the principle that the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. While Habits 4 and 5 lead us toward more productive interactions with others, Habit 6 invites us to reap the rewards of those relationships, to “apply the principles of creative cooperation” [1, p. 263], to use meetings with others “to create and synergize rather than to defend and protect” [1, p. 268]. Interestingly, Covey’s chapter on synergy is where he discusses communication most extensively.

It is easiest to see the possibilities for synergy in writing situations that require us to work with editors or coauthors. Covey describes several steps on the road to synergy. Where levels of trust and cooperation are low, the participants tend to operate in a defensive mode, with each attempting to protect his or her own position. An example of this might be the colleague (or teacher) who is less than tactful in critiquing someone else’s writing, thereby eliciting a defensive response from the writer.

Many of us find our way to the second level, the respectful mode, a middle position characterized by compromise and by polite (but not empathic) communication. In this mode, says Covey, the participants “might understand each other intellectually, but they really don’t look at the paradigms and assumptions underlying their own positions and become open to new possibilities. ... The communication isn’t defensive or protective or angry or manipulative; it is honest and genuine and respectful. But it isn’t creative or synergistic. It produces a low form of Win/Win” [1, p. 271].

I have observed this type of interaction frequently in business- and technical-writing classrooms, among students serving as peer editors to classmates they are just getting to know. When reading and critiquing one another’s drafts of individual projects, the students make polite and sometimes helpful comments, but usually on relatively superficial features. They often fall short of examining the writer’s fundamental assumptions or strategies. This tentativeness is to be expected, for peer editing places student writers (especially those with less writing experience or skill) in a complex, unfamiliar, and therefore awkward role. Interestingly, students often move closer to a synergistic relationship as the term progresses and they are working on group projects; perhaps their greater investment in the project gives them more of a stake in editing meaningfully.

The third level, a truly synergistic mode, is characterized by high levels of trust and cooperation. The participants move beyond “group-think” to looking for new and better solutions. They value the different opinions and experiences that others bring to a writing situation. Methods such as brainstorming, which allow “what if” ideas to flow, may be useful during the planning stage. Or the writing team may want to include new members or invite a new type of reader to comment on a draft. I saw the benefit of this strategy recently when my department held a faculty meeting to fine-tune a proposal for a degree program in written communication. One of the questions we needed to address was whether to “pick up” some journalism courses that were being dropped by another department. The most informed and convincing argument for incorporating the courses into our proposal came not from any of the permanent faculty, but from an instructor on a temporary appointment, someone with recent, relevant, nonacademic experience in the market for which we want to prepare our students. Had the department meeting been restricted to permanent faculty, we would have missed this input.

HABIT 7: SHARPEN THE SAW

Habit 7 can be summed up in the word “renew”—physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. As Covey points out, self-renewal is a Quadrant II activity—one that’s of tremendous long-term importance but that often gets pushed aside in the face of more urgent or appealing demands. (How many of us bemoan the fact that we simply “don’t have the time” to exercise ... to perform a volunteer activity ... to read the journals that cross our desk?) What Covey urges us to recognize is that activity is not the same as productivity: paradoxically, productivity can be enhanced by taking time out from activity and using that time to reflect and renew.

How does this principle relate to the writing process? While looking through a recent issue of this journal, I was struck by the heading “Reflection” in an article on “The Dynamics of Collaborative Design.” The authors define reflection as “Consciously monitoring and making explicit our own cognitive orientations and processes in relation to the goals of the group” [4, p. 133]. This process might be enhanced by brainstorming sessions, other face-to-face meetings, and e-mail discussions. Reflective discussion of this type moves beyond an analysis of the details of the document itself to a level that we might call metadiscourse; that is, to a discussion of the assumptions held by those who are creating the document.

Reflection also has a place, of course, in individual writing projects as well as in collaborative efforts. Who has not had the experience of too hastily dashing off an e-mail, a memo, a report ... only to wish later on that we had let it “incubate” overnight? Every writer knows the value of setting aside a draft for a day or two while we work on other projects; invariably, when we return to the draft, we notice new ways to improve upon
it because we are taking a fresh look at it.

It is important for writers to provide themselves with the environment and time to allow reflection about their work. As I mentioned earlier my own peak energy writing time is early in the morning: I can write twice as much between 6 and 8 a.m. as between, say, 1 and 4 p.m. While I now have the luxury of a private office at my job, I can vividly recall years spent working in open offices and having to come to work early or take work home simply to have the freedom from interruptions that I needed in order to concentrate. Perhaps as employers become more receptive to flextime and telecommuting, it will become easier for writers to build reflection time into their schedules.

**Conclusion**

*Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* has become a classic precisely because Covey’s principles are applicable to both personal and professional responsibilities—from building a stronger relationship with one’s family to becoming a more effective leader within one’s business organization. I have tried to suggest some ways that Covey’s paradigm might help us rethink the way that we approach the writing process. I hope I’ve also piqued the curiosity of any of you who are unfamiliar with Covey’s work; I encourage you to take a closer look at it.

**References**


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