

The Ultimate Guide to Developmental Writing

A Resource from Josh Bowen, founder of [3x5 Leadership](#)



As of this writing, 3x5 Leadership is two months over 4-years old. While I'm humbled by the opportunity to have achieved hundreds-of-thousands of visits to the website and tens-of-thousands of subscribers over that journey, I still believe that I am simply an amateur hobby writer. But it has been a life-changing experience in writing my personal leadership reflections and building this digital resource for others. This side-project and hobby has enabled me to pursue my curiosity and my passion for leader development. I hope it has equipped and inspired you to better build other leaders, as well.

One of the many benefits of this pursuit has been creating, evolving, and clarifying my writing process. I'm surprised (and extremely humbled) by the growing number of readers who reach out to me asking about my idea-generation and writing process. At first, I dismissed these early questions thinking people were asking the absolute wrong person; there are countless writers better than me in every single field we can think of. But as more questions continue to come in over time, I'm discovering the art and process of creating new, meaningful, and creative content is hard! I think I have taken that for granted recently.

So, for those that have reached out and asked, for those that have requested writing mentorship over the recent years, and for anyone else out there who wants some ideas for starting their own developmental writing journey, I offer my writing process and framework. This is intended for everyone who recognizes the value and importance of developmental writing and wishes to begin the activity or improve their habit. This can be for just personal reflection or to write with the intention of publishing on some platform.

This is *not* provided as *the* way, but merely one approach to consider. I hope it can inform and inspire you to create, refine, and clarify *your own* writing approach to best enable you to create impactful work as well.

As always, I am extremely grateful for your continued support and allowing me to do something I am passionate about – making people and organizations better through leader development. Feel free to reach out to me anytime at josh@3x5leadership.com. Take care and lead (& write!) well.

FIRST, WHY ARE YOU WRITING?

When I decided to start 3x5 Leadership, I was honestly not clear on the purpose for creating it. As I began to build the website, if you asked me why I was doing it, my response would have focused on how there were other leaders doing it and I think I could contribute too. But with some time and practice, I improved my purpose for the site, claiming that I had a lot of ideas and lessons from my experiences that I think others could learn from (my experiences are singular, but the lessons from them are often universal). Ok, seems like a better reason! Then, after two more years of building the site, I finally came to realize the real reason for doing so – [this is my authentic way to reflect, clarify my thoughts, and remain accountable to my ideas](#) (by publishing them). I eventually learned that while I'm so humbled and happy that it helps others, it actually is [my platform for reflection and leader accountability](#).

I share this story to show that I was not clear on purpose when I first built this resource. It took me years to clarify my *why*; I spent that time putting the cart in front of the horse, focusing on creating a website and routine content before being super clear on why I was doing it.

We must define why we choose to write in order to give inspiration to our creativity, clarity to our thoughts, and to reinforce the purpose for committing to this often challenging and frustrating activity.

When it comes to developmental writing, I tend to categorize why I write into three major themes:

- **Writing for Personal Reflection to Complete Your Thoughts.** I find one of the greatest values in writing is that it is the best way to give abstract thoughts and incomplete ideas structure to better clarify them. In order to write a logical argument, we have to organize our ideas and complete them to articulate what these ideas are and why they are important. Even if we never intend for someone else to read our words, the act of capturing them on paper in a logical and organized way helps us to make clearer sense of the idea, which better enables us to think on them and live them out in our life.
- **To Introduce a New Idea.** Our writing can also present new ideas or ways of thinking to better shape how we and others see the world. This is argumentative writing, which focuses on introducing an idea, defining what it is or what it means, and arguing why it matters (and why others should care about it too).
- **To Provide Practical Application.** This tends to be much of the writing I try to create, especially for 3x5 Leadership. I believe there is not enough content available, especially in the realm of leadership and working with others, to help people understand how to take abstract ideas and materialize them into actual behaviors. While the above points focus on the *what* and *why* of ideas, this one emphasizes *how*. Our writing can be a way for us to make ideas more concrete by sharing actionable methods others can apply and practice.

Thinking through our purpose for developmental writing before putting words to paper can improve the quality of our evolving ideas, keep us inspired and committed throughout the process, and ultimately maximize the value of the content we create.

Our content is not restricted to these three ideas; these just tend to be the major themes I find in my developmental writing. Further, our content is not restricted to one of the three. We can cover two, or sometimes all three, themes within a single piece. We can introduce an idea in order to clarify it ourselves, while spending a good portion of the piece outlining how we can and do live it out in our leadership. There are myriad ways we can approach it but I encourage you to think on this prior to engaging your writing process.

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT FIRST

After defining our purpose for developmental writing, we need to then think through what we plan to do with the content after we've written it. Do we plan to publish it? If so, where (on what platform)? Why that one? If not to publish, what do you plan to do with it once it's written? Hopefully it doesn't merely sit on a Word document or journal to never be touched again.

Answering these questions help us understand the style of and approach to creating our content. Do we intend to publish to a particular platform? If so, we need to research common or preferred styles of writing for the platform and if there are any particular guidelines required to be considered.

For example, I tend to focus on writing to give concrete application ideas to abstract ideas. With that, I prefer a more concise and "scientific" writing approach that leverages sub-headings to organize ideas and bulleted lists to simplify the piece and make it easier to read. There are many outlets that this writing style would not be appropriate for. So, if you wish to publish to one of those places, you'll need to adjust your writing style to match their brand preferences.

Understanding the context for what we intend to do with our content and where we want to achieve that will define the boundaries for our style and writing. This is important to consider as we begin to cultivate our idea and map an outline.

CULTIVATING AN IDEA

Where do you source your ideas to write about? How do you decide on what to write about?

This tends to be the most popular question others ask about my writing – where do you get all of these ideas to write about?

I view all experiences and reflections through the lens of, "Is this something I can write about?" This is not so I merely create more content; I always prefer quality over quantity. Instead, I ask this question of any idea in my head as a means to seek clarity on it further. By thinking on it

more and shaping some writing around it, I improve the clarity, relevance, and thus effectiveness of it to my life and leadership.

When an idea comes to me, I usually write it down on a 3x5 index card (hence the name of the brand). On that card, I capture all of my initial thoughts, though they are not in any sort of logical structure or even remotely related. Then, I let those ideas sit on the card for some time, which can be days or weeks; this lets it marinate. I've found by taking time after capturing the idea to revisit it for reconsideration, I bring a more enduring perspective to the idea. This makes it more universally relevant to me and potentially to others if or when I decide to write about it.

So, think through ways that you can best cultivate and initially capture the ideas that you will eventually write about.

MIND-MAPPING

Once we do re-visit the initial idea, it is time to “mind-map” it. This is our activity to capture all of our thinking on the topic and provide initial structure to it. This can occur on a big whiteboard or some other space you prefer to draft ideas (tablet, scratch paper, etc.). I recommend you create five sections on the board to organize the idea:

- **Idea or Theme:** What is the broad topic we are addressing with this idea? Within the themes of leadership, these can be topics like mentoring, self-development, management, or many more. This helps us be clear on what we're targeting within the vast realm of leadership.
- **Thesis:** Define your thesis statement to organize my argument and overall intent for the piece around. This is the precise, single-sentence that articulates your argument.
- **What:** Clearly defining what we are writing about. This is more specific than the idea/theme bullet above. For example, a recent piece I published (as of this writing) was “[Leaders Communicate Perspective](#).” The idea or theme was “leader communication and organizational clarity.” The *what* for it was that, “leaders must communicate perspective to provide clarity and purpose to their people.” The *what* section also defines what the term ‘perspective’ means.
- **Why:** Reasons why this idea matters and why it is worth reading about. No one, will (or should) care about this idea if we cannot communicate why it matters.
- **How:** Addressing application – ways that you do, and others can, live out this idea in our own life and leadership.

While the idea/theme and thesis sections are short statements, the *what*, *why*, and *how* sections constitute the meat of our content. These are the major buckets that we categorize our existing thoughts under to bring organization to the overall idea and to identify where our gaps are. From there, we may do some more research on the topic to help inspire my thinking on how to best fill those gaps. This research can be other existing content or notes from [your](#)

[previous reading](#) and writing. Remember to give credit in your piece for referenced content as needed.

Depending how messy the first mind-mapping iteration goes, it may be worth recreating it a second time to better refine your thoughts and the organization of them. Don't be discouraged if it takes you two, three, or more iterations to create a mind-mapping product that you're confident in and can feel like you can write about.

NOW IT'S TIME TO BUILD IT

Once we have a complete mind-map that we feel confident about, we can begin to build an outline and create our piece. Personally, I create the outline and turn it into the actual written-out piece all in a single Word document. I have a pretty prescribed process I like to follow, which I offer below. However, this may likely not work for everyone. But as you read through the below steps, think through how you would like to best achieve each of those steps in a way that will work best for your style. They don't have to look like this or follow this order. But I hope by outlining my process, I can encourage you to think through what this can look like for you.

- **Create the Outline:** Start with a blank Word document and insert all of your planned sections with heading titles and text placeholders below them; this builds the organizational structure of the piece first. Then insert the working (draft) title at the top, bold our sub-headings, and insert the introduction and conclusion placeholders at the beginning and end.
- **Insert Your Thesis:** Insert your thesis statement after the introduction placeholder to ensure you build the introduction (below step) around it and it does not get lost. You can bold this statement to bring added emphasis to and clarity around it.
- **Fill Out the Sub-Sections:** Here is where we finally add the meat to our *why*, *what*, and *how* sections – and usually in that order. This will be the lion share of your writing effort as it is the majority of your piece's volume. These are the sections that you insert all of the content from your mind-map into.
- **Write the Conclusion:** Try to give some sort of small closure to the piece so the reader does feel abruptly dropped off after the final thoughts of *why*, *what*, and *how*. We can do this by some closing statement ('lead well, friends' for me), call to action, or by providing other resources to learn more.
- **Write the Introduction:** I find writing quality introductions challenging. But it's important to provide a compelling, creative hook while informing the reader on what they will read about to keep the reader inspired to keep reading. I save this for the last step to allow me to have a full understanding of everything that will follow it for the reader. That can enable us to make sure the introduction is appropriate, complete, compelling, and not disjointed from the rest of the piece.

REVISING & EDITING

Ok, now take a pause. Give a final 'save' click to the piece, then close it and walk away. We need to give some time to let it sit and let us decompress away from it. Let's consider giving it a day to sit before we come back to it.

When we do re-visit, do an initial re-read to catch any blatant grammar issues, to ensure it makes sense, and flows well. Then, give it one more re-read to identify any areas that can or should be shortened or better clarified. Here is where we can make any considerable updates to the document.

After a personal review, send the document to my trusted editor; for me, this is my wife (😊). Consider asking your designated editor to focus on three things: Is the piece valuable and worth considering/sharing, it is structured well and does it flow, and to also correct all grammar issues.

Once we get the revised document back and we make all edits, give it one more read through for a final quality check.

And there we have it – a well-thought out and clearly articulated idea communicated!

NOW WHAT?

I want to close by reiterating that this is my process. It is what works best for me. This process best enables me to maximize the reflection value from writing out my idea as well as share (hopefully) quality pieces to share with you and others.

Improving any skill or process requires both some education and repetitive practice (doing the work and getting constructive feedback). I hope this guide can provide a little education to better equip you to practice the activity of developmental writing.

Lastly, I want to encourage you as you begin or work to improve your developmental writing process. This is the art of producing creative work. It should not be time-bound with prescribed deadlines. The process is often frustrating and more complicated than we expect. It takes practice to cultivate and grow. But writing is an amazing mechanism for self-development and I'm excited for you to start or continue that journey. I hope this guide can help that journey just a little.

Thank you for your continued support and engagement.

Take care and lead (and write!) well. I'm excited to see what you can create and contribute to our community.

***Josh Bowen** is a US Army officer with over 10-years of experience of leading and serving others. He is passionate about making people and organizations better through leader development. A primary outlet for that passion was creating 3x5 Leadership, a digital leader development*

resource to help equip and inspire emerging & curious leaders in all industries. You can learn more about Josh, his education, and experiences on 3x5 Leadership's [About Us page](#). You can also connect with him at josh@3x5leadership.com and on Twitter at [@JoshuaBowen 100](#). Ideas shared in this guide do not reflect that of the US Army.

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