An MFA For Your MBA

Professional-Level *Writing Advice* for Mastering Communication and *Creativity in Business* and in Your Career

Phillip Scott Mandel

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What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who has only eyes if he is a painter, ears if he's a musician, or a lyre in every chamber of his heart if he's a poet, or even, if he's a boxer, only some muscles? Quite the contrary, he is at the same time a political being constantly alert to the horrifying, the passionate or pleasing events of the world, shaping himself completely in their image ... No, painting is not made to decorate apartments. It's an offensive and defensive weapon against the enemy.

— Pablo Picasso[1]

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3: ARTWORK AND COMMERCE

Art is important because art is part of that nebulous, unquantifiable dimension of reality we sometimes call "the poetic." Religion, magic, and even love, beauty, and other forms of non-rational understanding also fall into this category. The poetic transcends the practical imperatives of life—and yet it is a building-block of the identities we assign to ourselves. The poetic is also (importantly) a wellspring of joy, hope, pleasure, and wonder ... it is a source of comfort and consolation when our fellow human beings let us down, and when we feel that the universe doesn't care ...

— Leonard Koren, *What Artists Do* (2018)

What Makes Art "Artful"?

In this chapter, we're going to look at the interplay of art and business.

Not fine art as an investment, nor how art classes might raise your GPA and help you get into the Ivy League, nor how your infant might be smarter if you play Mozart at them while they're in the womb. We'll also put to the side the question of making money selling one's paintings.

And celebrating the "poetic" merits of art—those unquantifiable blobs that make one's life worth living, as Leonard Koren does in the quote above—we'll pause on that as well. Such appreciation is all well and good when you aren't working two

jobs to feed your family, or when you actually have time to kick back and tour the museum on a lovely Sunday afternoon after a brunch of croque monsieurs and bottomless mimosas.

That's not why you picked up this book. We're here to learn how the lessons and application of art can make one's labor more enjoyable and worth more in the marketplace.

So what makes art "artful"?

This is a question that already fills libraries and museums, so here's a summary: Good art is about making something new—or making something *appear* new in some way. It's about creation. It's about "the sublime."

Yes, Sublime was a singularly great band from the 1990s that I listened to a lot when I was first learning how to smoke weed, but in an aesthetic sense, the term "sublime" describes something that transcends the everyday, quotidian world.

Good art is surprising; it puts you in an unfamiliar place, or makes the familiar feel unfamiliar. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), the philosopher Edmund Burke extolls the virtues of the sublime in that it invokes mortal terror, pain, and danger in people (in a good way):

> Another source of the sublime is infinity … Infinity has the tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime … After a long succession of noises, as the fall of waters, or the beating of forge hammers, the hammers beat and the water roars in the imagination long after the first sounds have ceased to affect it; and they die away at last by gradations which are scarcely perceptible.

Later we'll look at Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style* (1947), which tells the story of one mundane event in fifty different ways, from standard narration to an interrogation to a haiku. While the book doesn't strike the same deep "de-

lightful horror" in one's soul as contemplating the size of the universe, it delights and surprises by presenting something familiar in a new way. It's not the event itself that is delightful, but rather its unexpected and novel presentation, and this experience of storytelling. In most books, readers are presented with one, or sometimes several, limited point of view, in one style (realism). This book entirely upends that pattern.

This is the essence of good art, to me: the overwhelming feeling one's understanding of the world is altered irrevocably after seeing, reading, or hearing a work for the first time. It hits like a Will Smith-style open-handed slap to the face.

Just as important, it should be something you can revisit often and experience such magic each time. Great art has layers.

Judging the aesthetic value of art and other cultural objects is complicated. I enjoy Surrealist paintings (Magritte, Ernst, Dali), but have a hard time understanding Modern artists such as Piet Mondrian (see Figure 7). Or Robert Rauschenberg: it's a blank canvas...or it's a white canvas painted with white house paint. The only thing you see on it is your own shadow. Maybe
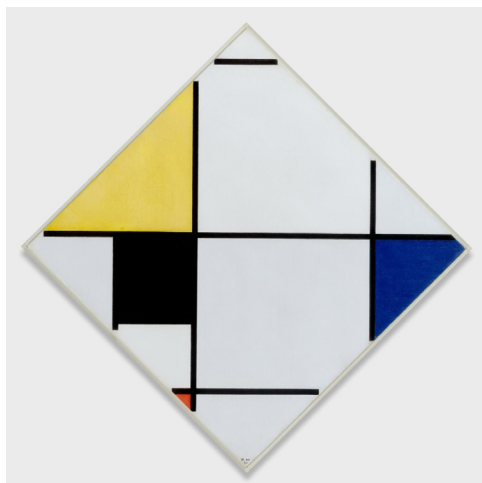

Figure 7. Piet Mondrian. *Lozenge Composition with Yellow, Black, Blue, Red, and Gray* (1921), Art Institute Chicago. This speaks to me. Unfortunately, I'm not entirely sure what it's saying.

dust? (For a great meditation on this, check out the 1994 play *Art* by Yasmina Reza.)

Some art takes your breath away with its beauty, some art makes you want to cry, and some art challenges the definition, usefulness, and meaning of art altogether. However it does it, good art does not let you remain passive.

Instead, it invites the viewer to participate in the art-making through emotion and feeling as well as interpretation. For example, Jackson Pollock's paintings are not representative of things in real life, while many paintings are. You, as viewer, decide what a Pollock painting means to you, but—here's the rub—you *also* decide what the items and people represent in a realist painting, too. The Dutch Modern artist Theo van Doesburg said, "Once the means of expression are liberated from all characteristics they are on their way toward the real goal of art: to create a universal language," and, while I'm not entirely sure I know what he means, I think I agree.

In a novel, a writer can describe a scene, dialogue, and the internal thoughts of a character, but the *reader* imagines them in their own mind.

Theater of the mind is more powerful and effective than sitcoms because the former requires the audience member to become an active participant in its creation. This is why spectacular, big-budget Marvel movies don't feel artistic (though they can be amusing); there is very little nuance, and even less room for interpretation.

So what does all this have to do with business?

Well, I'm not suggesting you create slide presentations full of surreal imagery and leave it up to your client to decide what you mean. But you *should* strive for your audience to actively participate in your work, even if that participation means listening, nodding along, asking questions, understanding. You can feel when you your audience is engaged and present. Business communication isn't a lecture.

Unfortunately, with written communication you don't have

the benefit of immediate feedback. You can't change your tack mid-email if the reader begins showing signs of boredom. They might be reading your email at their desk, or, just as likely, on their phone while sitting on the toilet. This is why business writing needs to be exact, specific, and concise.

THE AUDIENCE

In literary theory circles, much ink has been spilled on the notion of "implied reader" vs. "actual reader," as well as the "ideal reader." Think of it this way: every year, Warren Buffett writes a "Letter to Shareholders of Berkshire Hathaway" to provide a summary of the company's financial performance. The *implied* readers are those who own stock in Berkshire Hathaway, as well as their close associates: attorneys, brokers, financial managers. The *actual* readership of these Letters, however, is much wider, far beyond people who own Berkshire Hathaway shares. Many people in financial markets around the world look to these Letters for guidance and information to use to their advantage in their own portfolios.

Keep this in mind the next time you're writing an email to your subordinates.

An *ideal* reader is different. This is a persona, a made-up fiction—the *kind of* person who would be ideal for whatever you wrote. For a new psychological horror novelist, it might be someone who loves Stephen King and Carl Jung. For a sales director, it might be someone who already has a working knowledge of their product and industry or is dissastified with their current vendor.

Unfortunately for you, and for novelists and poets around the world, the ideal reader doesn't exist. This means your prospect may not know all that industry jargon you're throwing around, or doesn't enjoy reading ten-paragraph emails.

So no matter who is actually reading your material, you

should intend for them to be engaged. Unfortunately, the over-whelming majority of business communication is not engaging at all. The content of most meetings, status calls, pitch decks, emails, online content, and memos is derivative junk, timewast-ers, clichés, and jargon. Then, in the middle of all this crap, a few original, actionable items are communicated. All the work in the world is built on those few turds of wisdom, and the rest is just noise.

But I'm not trying to make business-speak into modern art. I'm just looking for incremental change. Here's a reasonable goal: if you can manage to take the percentage from 95 per-cent crap / 5 percent gold to just 70 percent crap / 30 percent gold, then you'll get ten gold stars, a promotion, and a bucket of cash. The best part? You only have to *not* write crap 30 percent of the time, which I think is pretty doable.

Lucky for you, the rest of this book will help you get there.

Genre Fiction

In Q1 2021, the fastest-growing adult fiction book sales in the US were in the genres of Manga, Contemporary Women's Fic-tion, Romance, and Fantasy.[7] In the past thirty years, the best-seller lists include Fantasy, Mystery, and Thriller books such as the *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007), *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), *The Girl on the Train* (2015), and *Gone Girl* (2012). But for some reason, I learned in my MFA program that when it came to genre fiction, there was no room in the inn. I'm sure a dozen MFA-types will protest and say they welcome all types of writing, but we all know that isn't the case.

What is "genre fiction" anyway, and why does it matter?

It's probably easier to understand by defining what it's not. Broadly speaking, so-called "literary fiction" focuses on artis-tic style, realism, character, language, and theme, over more "base" considerations, such as plot, setting, and world-building. (And

yes, this is a gross, *gross* simplification.) Genre fiction includes Romance, Fantasy, Science Fiction, Mystery, Spy Thrillers, Westerns, Historical Fiction, Crime novels, and anything you might pick up at an airport or read on the beach. Young Adult and Middle Grade are genres, too.

Historically, MFA programs haven't been interested in this kind of writing because it doesn't seem "artistic" enough.

One reason might be that there are conventions of each genre to which many of the books conform. Romance novels tend to follow this formula (excuse the genders, for the moment): *Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl.* In a Murder Mystery, a dead body almost always appears in the first chapter.

Formulaic writing is less surprising, less "sublime," and therefore less artful.

There are exceptions: sometimes, a "literary" novel *does* focus on setting, such as Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980) or Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011). In these special cases, setting is considered a "character." Lucky them. The pages and pages and pages and pages of descriptive setting in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, well, that's just Fantasy.

And to be fair to the MFA program-slash-literary world, there is room for fantastical work, but it must fall into a predetermined artistic category such as "magical realism," "surrealism," or "fabulism." These are all words for "good" (artful) writing that isn't *quite* straight realism (which, as you'll recall, hearkens back to "*The New Yorker* stories" of Chapter 1). In movies, "magical realism" is *Being John Malkovich* (1999) and *The Shape of Water* (2017), while "realism" is *Marriage Story* (2019) and *Boyhood* (2014).

Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Haruki Murakami, and Salman Rushdie are all classic authors whose work has been tagged as both literary and fabulist, though there are tons of others, such as Karen Russell, Kelly Link, Amelia Grey, and Alissa Nutting who are doing some tremendous—and tremendously weird—writing these days.

Oddly, the speculative science fiction of Kurt Vonnegut, Margaret Atwood, or Italo Calvino are considered "literary," but the masterful *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984) by Samuel Delany (one of the best titles of a book ever), is just Science Fiction. (Again, I can hear screaming protests, but let's be real.)

And the extra-buttery popcorn, such as *The Wheel of Time* (Robert Jordan, 1990s) or *The Vampire Chronicles* (Anne Rice, 1970s–2020s)? File it under junk food, I guess. And forget about books like Ian Fleming's *James Bond* series, or *Game of Thrones*, or anything by Nora Roberts.

If this sounds stuffy, unfair, snobbish, and somewhat wrong, that's because it is. I, personally, find reading to be great entertainment, and if I'm entertained by *The Wheel of Time*, I don't see how that's any less worthwhile than someone else enjoying Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947), a very long novel that's been on my nightstand for nigh on eight years now and which, I can safely assume, will go unread in my lifetime.

So why are we talking about genre fiction at all?

It matters because the difference between so-called "entertainment" and "art" can be the difference between getting a job and landing a client, or never getting a call back in the first place.

Maybe George R. R. Martin never set out to change the world when he wrote *Game of Thrones*; he just wanted to tell a fun story that he himself would enjoy reading. Maybe Peter Handke, the 2019 Nobel Prize laureate and author of the "anti-play" *Offending the Audience* (1965) and ennui-inducing novella *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* (1972), did set out to change the world. One of them became a beloved storyteller, and the other has been relegated to "smart" conversations in graduate programs.

When it comes to business, be realistic about what will make your audience—the implied reader, the ideal reader, and the *actual* reader—sit up in their seat and take notice of your words, ask follow-up questions, and stay engaged until after the last word.

Mastering the Fundamentals

How do you get someone to "sit up in their seat and take notice" of your work? If it were that easy, everyone would be a professional novelist. The reality is that it's difficult work requiring time, practice, patience, and dedication to mastering the fundamentals.

This means you must focus on language (Chapter 5) and style (Chapter 6), and eliminate cliché (Chapter 7). Use figurative language appropriately (Chapter 8), be concise (Chapter 9), write in the active voice (Chapter 10), and offer a believable point of view (Chapter 11). Have empathy for your characters and make them realistic and relatable (Chapter 12). Keep the tension high so your reader can't wait to find out what happens, but ensure you complete a satisfying story arc (Chapter 13). Start with a great first line (Chapter 14) and keep the writing fresh until the end, ensuring thematic resonance provides lasting meaning to the reader after they've finished (Chapter 15). Use humor and irony judiciously (Chapter 16). And perhaps most importantly, never disrupt the reader's "flow" (Chapter 17).

These are the fundamentals for writing anything well, including both genre and literary fiction. We call this mastering one's "craft." I happen to believe the fundamentals also apply to writing emails and sales presentations.

Incidentally, this might explain why many MFA programs don't focus on the publishing part of the business too much, because one need not query agents or learn how to negotiate an advance until one has a manuscript good enough to garner a book deal.

This book is dedicated to helping you master the fundamental techniques of the writing craft and apply them to your business writing.

Writing to Market

Making good art takes time. You can't rush it. If you do, you'll most likely end up with work that is uninspired, unoriginal, boring, and meaningless. Similarly, doing well in business takes time; if you rush it, your product or service won't sell (and if it does sell, by sheer luck, you won't get repeat customers).

There is a difference, however, between *rushing* and doing things *quickly*. Rushing means you are going faster than you should, skipping important steps, cutting corners. Doing things quickly means you're able to do what needs to be done in a short amount of time. For example, I can write an article of one thousand words in about an hour, because I'm so well-practiced at it. But if I *rush* to get it done in thirty minutes, I will no doubt produce a putrid and unusable one thousand words.

And just as you can't rush the process of creation, you can't rush the process of training. Being good at your job, developing your career, becoming a good boss, peer, and colleague—these all take time.

But what about *after*?

Time to cash in, right? Make that bread. Bake that cake. Stack that paper. Bring home a bucket of sizzling, salty bacon.

As the resident spoiler, I'd like to offer a common aphorism that goes around writing craft circles, which is, "Don't write to market." This means don't write what you think will sell.

Like all one-liners, this is not 100 percent true all the time. But generally speaking, it's good advice.

Creating art should, at first, be for the artist. Write the novel *you'd* like to read, not one you think will sell because "cozy mysteries with dinosaurs are hot right now."

It's not because that book will be artless and derivative. You might write the *Finnegans Wake* of dinosaur thrillers (I would read this, by the way). But by the time the book is finished, edited, and ready for publication, "cozy dinosaur mysteries" may no longer be trendy.

So don't write to market...until you have to.

See, whenever you make something, there will eventually come a point when you show it to someone—your spouse, your friends, your peers. Or your agent, your editor, your publisher, gallery viewers, the general internet, people at a bar, fans in a rock club, your boss, your client, your colleagues. Nothing exists in a vacuum forever, unless you never show it to anyone, and unfortunately you won't have that luxury in your professional life.

At some point you have to please the stakeholders in your life—those constituents who will throw your book into the furnace if they don't like it, or turn their back on you while you're on stage and start talking to their friends (loudly) over that sweet love song you wrote about your darling, or walk out of your art show and into the bar next door to the gallery. The moral purity of art is not completely useless, but it can be counterproductive. For every genius who went unrecognized and underappreciated in their lifetime, there are thousands—millions—of unrecognized and underappreciated mediocres. Going unrecognized and underappreciated in your life is not a virtue.

And in business, going unrecognized and underappreciated doesn't pay the rent. So yes, art is great and the sublime is great, but keep it in perspective.

If your job is to hit a quota each month, your boss won't keep you on staff when you tell them your clients simply don't appreciate your unique, artistic sales pitch, which consists of five minutes of Catskills schtick and an interpretive dance to Enya's "Orinoco Flow." Or if you're an accountant, you can't explain to your coworkers that they aren't getting reimbursed for their expenses because "math is just an illusion."

It's true, in a way, that an artist need not please anyone if they don't wish to. If my prospective publisher won't publish my book—my *art*work—unless I revise the plot to include

werewolves, I have the right to shop around for a new publisher. Or I can publish it myself, or leave it in the drawer unread until I die.

However, if my publisher suggests a better title and I *still* resist, then it's just my pride getting in the way. F. Scott Fitzgerald had many different titles for *The Great Gatsby*, including *Under the Red, White, and Blue* and *Trimalchio in West Egg*. One of my favorite books, *1984*, was originally called *The Last Man in Europe*. In Sweden, Stieg Larsson's 2005 thriller is called *Män som hatar kvinnor*, which roughly translates as *Men Who Hate Women*. In English, however, the publishers gave it a new name: *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Not as risqué, but a wise decision.

Truthfully, most people don't have the luxury to shop around, or to tell their clients to take a hike. If I signed a contract to deliver a piece of material—even an *artistic* one, such as a novel or a screenplay, or even a *less* artistic one, like a script for a television commercial or a corporate white paper—I can't just tell my client to screw off. I'd be in breach of contract.

There's no shame in it. Every copywriter knows that when you give a few options to a client, nine times out of ten they pick the lamest (or safest) option. Work is work. A job is still a job.

The MFA program taught us that you shouldn't write to market. This is sound advice, at the outset. You can use this as permission to think more creatively and broadly when you start a project. But after the contract is signed and money is at stake, you must begin writing (or working) to market, or else your publisher/agent/music booker/boss/gallery owner/sales prospect/client will find someone else who will.

Let's use the rest of this book to make sure the product you make is as awesome as it can be.

Writing Exercise: Things I Love

Part I: Spend some time making a few lists:

- My favorite books

- My favorite movies

- My favorite songs

- My favorite television shows

- My favorite (you decide)

Now pick one item from each list and think about why you love these things. Write one paragraph on why you love each thing, describing what you love about it and what it makes you feel. You can talk about the artistry of the item, the aesthetics, the idea, whatever you like. Here's my example:

> I love the movie *Terminator 2* because of the action and suspense of the main characters being chased by a seemingly impervious creature the entire movie. It seems impossible that John Connor can escape. Every time something seems to go well, it goes wrong. I am also fascinated with the ideas, concepts, and philosophy of the movie. I constantly wonder and daydream about artificial intelligence and what will happen when/if humanity reaches the "singularity," when AI designs intelligences greater than our own. Are we doomed to become slaves to their power? I love thinking about the future, both its prospects and dangers. Also, the aesthetics and special effects of the movie are amazing (for 1991, when I was eleven), perfect for capturing my imagination. Finally, I feel nostalgic when I watch the movie because I saw it for my friend's birthday—and I didn't have many friends back then—and in a movie theater, no less. Going to the movies was a rare and very special experience for me during childhood, and I can remember almost all of

the movies I saw in the theater: *Jurassic Park*, *Jumanji*, *Robin Hood*, *He-Man*, and of course, *Terminator 2*.

Part II: Now comes the hard part. Examine a recent project you've worked on—something where you had to spend considerable time and energy on its creation.

- How much care did you put into the work, and how much did you rush to get it done? Does it matter?

- Who was the intended audience, the ideal audience, and the actual audience? Was there a difference? How was the project received?

- Was there anything you could've done differently?

If I were a merciless taskmaster, I'd say you should revise the project and do it again with more intention. But you probably have better things to do. So instead, let's just agree that for the *next* big project, you're going to think of these questions *before* you start, and again take them into consideration while you're working on the project, and then a third time in revision.

7: CLICHÉ AND JARGON

All writing is a campaign against cliché. Not just clichés of the pen but clichés of the mind and clichés of the heart. When I dispraise, I am usually quoting clichés. When I praise, I am usually quoting the opposed qualities of freshness, energy, and reverberation of voice.

— Martin Amis, *The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews 1971–2000* (2001)

Avoid Cliché

If there was only one piece of advice I could give to anyone, whether it be about making any kind of art or conducting any kind of business, it would be to avoid cliché. The rest of this book is commentary (see Hillel and the Golden Rule).

Cliché and jargon seem to spontaneously generate in business writing like maggots in spoiled meat. (In the olden days, people did actually think this was what happened. Idiots.) Cliché is so prevalent in our work life that it appears constantly and we don't even notice. Go read some recent email or whatever website you're on right now—guaranteed you'll spot clichés once you start looking.

The funny thing is, we humans are naturally more drawn to things that are original, fresh, and *not* full of cliché—even if we've never thought about it—because they are surprising and pleasing. Great comedy doesn't utilize cliché, because if it did, you'd be able to predict the punchline and it wouldn't be

funny. Live sports are exciting because anything can happen and, by definition, it's never happened before. Online memes, too—when they first arrive—are not cliché (though they may use cliché to satirize something else in popular culture).

However, clichés are hard to escape when you're writing. These bad, bad, bad bad bad bad words appear in the shitty first drafts of many works-in-progress—but what distinguishes great writing is that great writers edit these phrases out in subsequent drafts.

As discussed in Chapter 3, compelling and "artful" material is surprising and makes the familiar feel unfamiliar (the "sublime," if you recall). Clichés are anathema to this because they are overused, played out, and meaningless. When encountered in email or other business writing, clichés invoke the movement of a reader's eye across the words without really reading them.

Here are some examples:

- A mile in someone else's moccasins

- A peek under the kimono, inside the tent, or behind the curtain

- Low-hanging fruit

- Think outside the box

- Rock star / ninja / killer / Jedi master

- Run it up the flagpole and see which way the wind is blowing

- Avoid something like the plague (this includes the unfunny, self-referential writing advice "Avoid cliché like the plague," which is also a cliché)

If I'm not making myself clear enough, clichés are the Adolf Hitlers and Stalins and Pol Pots of the written word.

So why are they so prevalent? Probably because they *seem* useful and easy, and they play to our inner laziness. They seem

to be a shorthand way of communicating more complex ideas. But they don't.

Clichés are ineffective. They do not do what you want them to do. They make your writing weak, and they weaken your argument.

Yes, it is easier to write a cliché than to think of a better, more original way of phrasing something. It takes less energy and less time. But if you intend your work to convey anything of importance, using a cliché is not worth it.

"Low-hanging fruit" is both a cliché and a euphemism. As a cliché it is over-used, and as a euphemism it stands for the concept of "doing the easiest task first" (thus, as a cliché it is autological, or an example of itself—like the word "sesquipedalian," or "pentasyballic"). But in most professional settings, you can't actually admit to your boss or client you'll be doing the easiest thing first for fear of seeming like the kind of person who is lazy and prefers doing the easiest thing possible first. You can't justify your salary (or fee) that way, right? So instead of coming up with a clever and interesting way of communicating this idea, you can just use the easy and lazy pablum, "low-hanging fruit."

Sometimes this is okay. If it's midnight and you need to go home and you can wrap up a meeting by using the term "low-hanging fruit," I say go for it.

But if you're writing anything significant, know this phrase is almost meaningless. The audience will see the words, but they won't read them. You'll be more effective and memorable by being original and interesting—perhaps even coining a new phrase, if possible (think like a neologist!)—and by being specific and explicit with what you mean. Though not exactly deathless prose, it is still more effective to say:

We can generate $4 million in new sales by targeting

consumers that have already demonstrated a preference to our product.

Versus

Let's just go after the low-hanging fruit.

The cliché "think outside the box" is even more disturbing because it is anti-autological, or an autoantonym. It is a demonstration of the opposite of itself, similar to the new meaning of the word "literally," which can, sometimes, *literally* mean "figuratively."

At least "low-hanging fruit" is a low-hanging fruit way of communicating. Using the phrase "think outside of the box" is *literally not thinking outside of the box* when trying to communicate the idea of thinking original and creative thoughts that challenge status quo ideas and practices. It is a regurgitated, semi-degraded, half-digested bolus. It is word-puke. Cud.

While we're at it, I also hate "ninja," "rock star," and "killer." These are insulting to both the complimented and the represented. A competent realtor is in no way a "ninja," in that a "ninja" (or "shinobi") was a trained mercenary assassin in feudal Japan.

Maybe I'm nitpicking.

But when you call your new assistant junior intern Blake a "rock star" because they brought the right coffee this time, *they know this does not make them a rock star*. Mick Jagger is a rock star. David Bowie was a rock star. Hell, even Chad Kroeger from Nickelback is, in a way, a rock star (and by the way, making fun of Nickelback is *also* a cliché). But Blake is just a lowly intern. A worm. And they know it. That's why Blake is *in* your stupid internship program in the first place, to gain experience and move up in their career (so that, eventually, they'll have their *own* dirtbag intern fetching coffee). If you think calling Blake a "rock star" makes them feel good, you're

being both lazy and ignorant. You're deluding yourself. All you are doing is reminding Blake that they are definitely *not* a rock star, but instead a peon not even worth the effort it would take to say "thank you" and come up with something original, like "The Blakester," or "Sir Blakes-A-Lot," or "Blake-Me-A-Cake."

Don't call Blake a "rock star," because you don't mean it. Just say "Thank you," "nice job," and pay them a living fucking wage.

And while we're at it, if being good at creating sales presentations makes me a "killer," then lock me up and throw away the key. Also, "lock me up and throw away the key" is a cliché.

They're everywhere!

Jargon

> Simplification is useful and can be a great aid to those business persons and academicians who tend to inflate their sentences with excess verbiage and pompous jargon.
>
> —Sol Stein, *Stein on Writing* (1995)

Jargon is a cousin to cliché, and not the cool cousin from the Bronx who introduces you to rap music and SimCity and drives an IROC-Z (shout out to my cousin Noah). Like cliché, jargon is antithetical to good writing. It is the enemy of truth, using the familiar to obfuscate the unfamiliar. It does the *opposite* of what we want. Jargon is poison.

Nevertheless, it will no doubt appear in first drafts as you think through your topic because jargon represents or alludes to valid ideas. In later drafts, you must revise your jargon into plain English that is more original and precise.

Outside of work, we don't use all that much jargon, and when we do, it's grotesque. Imagine a parent tucking in their child at night and saying, "I'd like your buy-in to circle back with you tomorrow about that tantrum you had during dinner." Or two lovers in bed, trying to "align their goals," if you get my drift, and at the moment of climax, one says, "This is

really moving the needle for me." Or someone sitting at their beloved grandmother's deathbed, weeping but willful and resigned, determined and courageous, as they ask the doctor, "What's the ROI on pulling the plug?"

So why *do* people use jargon in the first place if it's so horrible?

Well, from a practical standpoint, some jargon is useful and, frankly, accurate. The much-lambasted word "synergy" does have a specific meaning: it's when the process of mixing two things creates something better than the sum of their parts alone. For example, a clownfish and a sea anemone create a shield when they're together that protects them both from harm, but not when they're apart. This is synergy.

When a great salesperson teams up with a great account manager, their partnership will bring in new deals and upsell current clients. This is a fine use of the word "synergy."

But when you fire half of Accounts Payable because a new AI made their jobs redundant, that's not synergy.

Jargon often appears when someone is unsure of what they are talking about, they want to appear more knowledgeable than they are, or they want to create a power dynamic in which they are the expert in some subject and the other person is not. That last one is also known as trying to talk over someone's head—and nobody likes it.

I've seen this often from poor sales professionals, or even great salespeople laden with a bad product. It's a defense mechanism. A good seller with a good product is confident and wants to sincerely and generously educate their prospective customer. They will answer questions in a forthcoming and clear manner and not obfuscate the details with vagueness or jargon.

I experienced a lot of jargon-talk and obfuscation when I was buying internet advertising in the mid-2000s. I'd ask a sales rep how exactly their ad tech worked or what was *in* their supposedly "premium" online network, and they'd go on and on about "scaling efficiencies" and "CTR optimization." I hap-

pened to know what CTR optimization was because I was a digital media planner, but there were a lot of senior-level media directors whose careers had been built on cable TV GRPs ("Gross Rating Points," another media jargon word, and a way of measuring the audience of a given show) and "spots and dots" (more jargon, meaning commercials). They were unfamiliar with new digital media terminology, and many millions of client dollars were wasted because of it.

Jargon abounds in job listings. Perhaps they think it's a way of weeding out bad candidates; that is, those who don't already know industry terms won't apply.

To be fair, jargon is an effective way of communicating much information in a small space. "KPI" uses fewer characters than "email newsletter signups," after all. But a job listing full of jargon also communicates to the potential employee a level of bureaucratic ennui that already exists in your organization such that the hiring manager can't be bothered to write anything interesting or original in the post. It doesn't distinguish the company or the position, and many highly-qualified and interesting people won't bother.

So don't use jargon. Think harder. Slow down. Choose your words carefully.

As with mansplaining, the hardest part is to recognize when you're doing it. You must slowly reread your work—aloud, if possible—and isolate the jargon.

There isn't really a trick to it—simply follow George Orwell's advice from his essay, *Politics and English Language* (1946): "Never use a ... scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent."

For Orwell, the use of jargon was not simply a matter of business. He insisted there were political ramifications to such "pretentious diction." Dire ones. He warned that people would use words such as "epic" and "historic" to "dignify the sordid process of international politics" and "glorify war," which could lead to terrible people getting into positions of power. From

there, disaster would be inevitable: fascism, torture, mass death, starvation.

He was correct.

But our concerns are not so grand. I don't think over-using the term "KPI" is going to cause thermonuclear war. But I'll still argue for militating against its usage, just in case.

So what's wrong with "KPI?" Well, nothing, if it's used in the proper context.

But I have, in many business conversations, heard the term "KPI" bandied about worse than a lithe young meth-addicted lot lizard in a West Texas truck stop. And, like life for that poor tweaker, the term "KPI" loses its meaning after enough turns 'round the circle.

What people *mean* with "KPI" is "what we need to measure because it impacts our business the most." But until that metric has been defined, it is only a placeholder. Better to spend a minute defining your KPI than confusing everyone by talking around it.

SLANG

By now, I'm sure you can guess that I'm going to advise against using slang in professional communication. Slang is the jargon of any specific community, and while it is certainly appropriate to use in casual conversation, it is informal and doesn't translate well onto the page (or in email). Self-evident examples are words such as "ain't," "brb," or "lol."

Slang really only works in certain creative writing styles, too, such as in dialogue, interior monologue, and voice-driven poetry. Work that evokes a community or era—be it street slang of a neighborhood in the 1990s, hippie slang of the 1960s, or internet slang on Reddit in the 2010s—can use nonstandard words (judiciously) to tell a story, but otherwise such language will detract from the piece and interrupt the reader's flow.

Slang also changes rapidly and, therefore, doesn't age well. If you're over the age of, say, twenty-seven, you may come across as ridiculous, desperate, or tragically hip trying to use words at work that you hear younger colleagues (or your kids) use.

More importantly, your audience may not know what the hell you're talking about—especially if they're not familiar with the community from which the slang words arise. And if the purpose of business communication is to actually communicate information, then slang might stop this from happening.

This makes me sound stodgy and conservative, but oh well. Don't use slang.

Deconstructing the Proctology Exam (*An MFA for Your MBA* in Practice)

Someone had to be the first person to ever say "Working hard or hardly working," and I assume it had the cubicle farm in stitches. Then every manager started saying it (because it was so funny and clever, you see), and it became an odious cliché. Memes, viral videos, and social media are accelerating the pace of cliché-making. *Tiger King* (2020) was passé in a matter of weeks—just as soon as I downloaded a virtual background of it for Zoom.

Everyone hears a cliché for the first time, of course. In elementary school I remember answering a question with apprehension, unsure if I was right. It went something like this:

> **Teacher: Who was the thirteenth president of the United States?**
>
> **Me: Um, Millard Fillmore?**
>
> **Teacher: Are you asking me or telling me***?*

Despite my humiliation, it was the most cunning retort I'd ever heard. *Did she just come up with that?* I wondered. *She might be funnier than "Weird Al" Yankovic!*

As time passed, I lived my life and went through puberty and lost my virginity and learned to drive and graduated college and bought my first house and started a business, and at some point I realized this dumb phrase is used by wiseacres all the time, and my fourth-grade teacher had not invented it. Was I let down? Yes, you could say I was let down.

In any case, you, too, may also be fooled into thinking some phrase is funny and/or interesting, or original and/or fresh, only to find out (upon using such a phrase yourself) that it's a worn-out cliché everyone has been using for years. For example, the other day my CEO friend was telling me his company was being acquired and he had to provide a "proctology exam" of the "company books" to the buyer.

I chuckled outwardly, because he was trying to be funny, but grimaced inwardly, for the idea of applying this metaphor to his company seemed wrong and slightly nauseating.

So let's deconstruct this: I believe my friend meant he was going to provide a thorough, in-depth analysis (no pun intended) of his company's liabilities and assets (no pun intended) for the constituents of the acquiring company, so they could see what they were buying. He would *administer* a proctology exam to his company and provide the *results* of said exam to the buyer.

That imprecision notwithstanding, does the metaphor stand? *Is* a "proctology exam" a thorough, in-depth analysis? A proctologist specializes in diseases and abnormalities of the colon, rectum, and anus. Besides the well-known colonoscopy, some of the bodily investigations they perform include:

- Defecating proctogram

- Pudendal nerve test

- "Transit time" test (guess what that means)

- Fecal Occult Blood Test, which I pray is the name of a death metal band in Florida

I'll assume my friend meant the well-known probe known as a Digital Rectal Exam (the word "digital" in this usage does not refer to computers, but rather to someone's finger, or "digit"). Contrary to my friend's metaphor, the DRE is a *specific* test that provides minimal information about a person's general health outside of one's colon, anus, and rectum.

It won't show your cholesterol, blood pressure, or resting heart rate. It won't identify plantar fasciitis, tennis elbow, or a crick in your neck. It's really only specific to the colon, anus, and rectum.

My friend, however, needed to show the "books" in *many* areas of his company, not a specific one. One measly P&L statement from last quarter from one division wouldn't suffice. The acquiring company wanted a *comprehensive*—rather than specific—look at the finances of the company—obviously. The word "books" is also a figure of speech. In this context, "books" is a metonymy for the company's finances (as well as a cliché) because my friend does not *actually* use a large book, or ledger, to keep track of his company's finances. He uses software and spreadsheets.

Well, okay...so maybe that wasn't why he called it a proctology exam. Maybe it has to do with the shame and embarrassment of having another person stick their digit somewhere uncomfortable?

But does my friend's *company* feel shame when he "exposes the books," so to speak, for all to see? Do they feel embarrassed for being "opened up" like this? No, of course not. It doesn't have a colon, anus, or rectum. A company is not a person; it is a concept, a fake thing, in name only, that represents a collective. It is a willing delusion. It is many things, but it does not feel shame or embarrassment.

A company comprises individuals, though. So maybe it's the *workers* who feel ashamed for being looked at, poked, and prodded in such an unusual and uncomfortable way.

Perhaps. But I'd venture that only people with something

to hide would feel uneasy about a financial inspection. Other people may actually be *proud* of what this so-called "proctologist" will see, and they will bend over and spread with aplomb.

So why did he call it a proctology exam?

Because it's a cliché. Because it's easy. Because it's shorthand.

The lesson? Don't use cliché because it makes you sound like an asshole (pun intended).

JUST FOR FUN: ART JARGON

Artists and writers are just as prone to their own set of clichés and jargon as anyone else. If you're not living in this world, these words may not seem like clichés because you're not hearing them every day, but trust me, they are—and they're just as awful and overused and eye-roll-inducing as "think outside the box."

See Figure 17 for a charcuterie board of art jargon. These terms might "sound smart" at first blush, but once you've heard them enough times, they lose meaning and become sort of groan-worthy. Here are some examples of randomized sentences from this list, all guaranteed to make you throw up in your mouth (an image that is, itself, a cliché):

- I'm interested in challenging the ontological functionality of hybridity.

- This postmodern work interrogates the vocabulary of performative myth.

- Where is the heat in this piece?

- Can you tease out or contextualize the epistemological and teleological—ugh, I can't even continue…

|		
A Priori	Heat	Performance
Abstract	Hedonic	Performative
Academia	Hegemonic	Perspective
Alienation	Heretofore	Phenomenology
Anticipatory	Hermeneutics	Piece
Arbitrariness	Heteronormative	Post- anything
Baroque	Homologous	Postcolonial
Bifurcate	Hybridity	Postmodern
Canon	Iconography	Post-postmodern
Capitalist	Immersive	Praxis
Challenge	Implementation	Predicated
Co-opt	Incorporate	Presuppose
Conceptual	Independent	Problematic
Concern	Informed by	Problematize
Constellation	Inspiration	Profound
Contemporary	Installation	Provisional
Contextualize	Interconnected	Questions
Controversy	Interdisciplinary	Rationale
Convergence	Interested	Readymade
Correlative	Interrogates	Realism
Cultural	Intersectional	Reductive
Curate	Kafkaesque	Reification
Dada	Legendary	Repurpose
Deconstruct	Legitimate	Robust
Dialectic	Liminal (space)	Rococo
Dialogic	Logos	Semantics
Dichotomy	Manifest	Semiotics
Discipline	Marginal	Sign / signified
Discourse	Marginalize	Simulacrum
Disenfranchise	Marxism	Structural
Disjunctive	Maximalist	Structuralist
Electricity	Meaning	Subjugate
Elements	Metaphysics	Sublimation
Elucidate	Minimalism	Subsume
Epistemological	Modality	Symbolism
Ergo	Multi-faceted	Syntax
Exegesis	Mythic	Tease out
Existential	Narrative	Teleological
Exploration	Necessitate	Temporal
Fabrication	Niche	The other
Fetishize	Object	Theory
Folklore	Objective correlative	Therefore
Foucault	Objectivism	Transcendental
Form	Ontological	Transgressive
Found	Orientalism	Triangulate
Framework	Palimpsest	Unmediated
Functionalality	Panopticon	Unpack
Gaze	Paradigm	Vocabulary
Gestalt	Pedagogy	Zeitgeist

Figure 17. Art jargon.
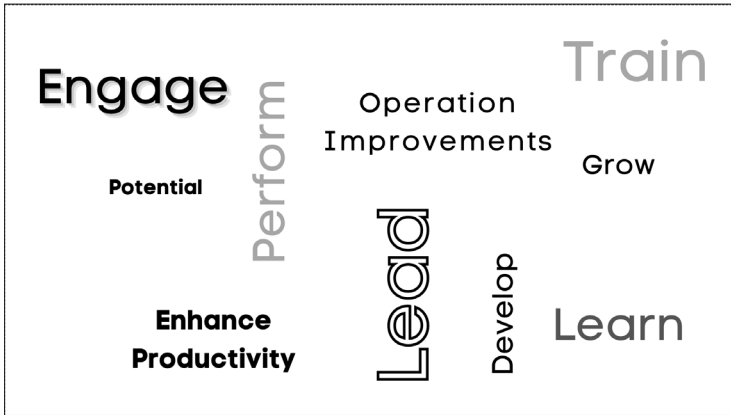
Figure 18. This slide makes me sick!

A CASE STUDY IN MEANING(LESS)

Figure 18 is a real slide I came across while researching online. It is an object lesson in visual form of how jargon and cliché can ruin communication. If you refer to the matrix of Style vs. Content in the previous chapter (Figure 13), you'll agree the slide belongs in the dreaded upper left quadrant.

View this slide and drink in how worthless and horrible it is. None of these words mean anything.

"Train?" Train what?

"Engage?" Engage whom?

"Perform?" How?

"Enhance productivity." This is at least a sentence, with an object and a predicate. (For all you grammar nerds, the subject in this imperative statement is "you," that lamentable soul who is receiving this godawful presentation, and it is implied.) But it lacks some important detail.

If I worked at the company for which this was produced, I would cut all the words from this slide, then drag the designer of this presentation into the break room and fire them twice.

How to Avoid Cliché

I've made my case *that* one should avoid cliché, jargon, and slang, but *how* does one go about doing it? Here are some strategies:

Delete. Expunge. Cut. Excise. Remove. Eliminate. Reject. Erase.

The simplest solution is to cut a cliché when you see it. That's right, just highlight the offending phrase and delete it. If your sentence still makes sense, then all the better, because it's now shorter.

For example, a cliché such as "in this day and age" can be cut, rather than re-worded, because it's implied. If you are referring to something other than the present—such as the Ancient Greeks, or the 1970s—you would no doubt specify that first.

And if the goal is to surprise your audience with your language because it will get them to engage with you, you can't simply re-word a cliché with another cliché. You must avoid them altogether:

- The intern brought the right coffee this morning. You're a rock star, Blake! ←NO

- The intern brought the right coffee this morning. You're a ninja, Blake! ←NO

- The intern brought the right coffee this morning. Thank you, Blake! ←YES

Envision and Describe

Unfortunately, the more difficult and more common solution for avoiding clichés is…well, *thinking harder*.

Are you sensing a theme? Writing well is difficult. I'm not going to pretend that there are simple tricks and easy shortcuts. No four-hour work week or seven-minute abs here.

You have to just sit and think about what you're working on, and continue to think about it until you can envision it

clearly in your mind's eye. Then describe it.

Often our first few thoughts about something are familiar, conventional, lazy, and boring, and thus we can throw them away.

It means not rushing through your work, but sitting with it, concentrating, and putting in the effort. At first it's uncomfortable and rather difficult, but I promise it does get easier with time. It's the reason I can whip up a long article in about forty-five minutes, while it might take someone else three hours.

For example, instead of saying "Our software solutions really take the cake," you might list out the different awards your company has won. Or you can specify that "Dr. Schmendrick has forty-five years of experience as a board-certified surgeon" instead of "Dr. Schmendrick is older than dirt." Note: "older

> This aside will take you no time to read. **Hyperbole** is a figure of speech in which you exaggerate wildly to make a point, but should not be taken literally. People use hyperbole constantly, which is a hyperbolic way of saying people use hyperbole frequently in everyday speech, not literally "constantly." Also, while this section is short and won't take long to read, even thirty seconds is longer than "no time." Hyperbole can be effective, but be aware that many common hyperbolic metaphors are clichés:
>   · Sleeping like a rock
>   · It's a jungle out there
>   · Drowning in paperwork
>   · Slow as molasses
>   · So hungry I could eat a horse
>   · I could hear you from a mile away
>   · This costs an arm and a leg
>   · Cry me a river
>   · When pigs fly
> You shouldn't need overblown and overused phrases like these to make your point. But like all clichés, they are readily at hand and easier than being original and creative. But originality will make your point better, and creativity will make your work memorable.

Figure 19. Hyperbole.

than dirt" is an example of hyperbole, which is exaggeration for effect (see Figure 19).

Free Association

A great brainstorming technique, free association is when you enunciate or write the first thoughts, words, and images that come to mind without censoring yourself.

Practicing free association will help you become more creative with language and generate more ideas overall. Improv comedy works off free association. And while you may hate improv or think it's not funny, you have to admit it's original and creative.

In this example, a master improv comedian, Matt Besser, explains how he free associated on the word "pumpernickel," which was suggested by his audience:

> Pumpernickel. So, have I eaten pumpernickel bread? Maybe. Do I have a story on it? Definitely not. But if I need to start talking, I can't just sit there and say "Pumpernickel … pumpernickel." I can't force myself to have a memory about pumpernickel if it doesn't occur to me right away. So I have to free associate.
>
> The most simple way to go here is bread, but I should probably try to be more specific, like "What kind of bread?" How about fancy bread? Oh, that makes me think of the deli that my dad would take me to when I was a kid over in Little Rock, Arkansas. So now I'm starting to launch into the story. I could just say my dad took me to a deli, but it's more interesting to say that my dad took me to a deli in Little Rock, Arkansas, as opposed to New York. That's another thing to look out for—details. Details make the story better.
>
> So, my dad used to take us to the only deli in town, which also makes me think that we were basically the only Jews

in town. We used to go to this deli, and we would get lox. Lox, that's a very Jewish thing. I don't think many other people in Little Rock had lox, or if they did, they called it smoked salmon ...[12]

Don't Steal

Do the opposite of what Picasso (or Steve Jobs, depending on who you ask) said: *don't* borrow (or steal) someone else's work.

If you catch yourself using a figure of speech, expression, phrase, idiom (see Figure 20), or other word you've heard elsewhere, you're probably wandering into cliché territory.

An **idiom** is an expression or phrase common to a dialect, such as "under the weather," which means feeling sick or ill. "Once in a blue moon" is an idiom referring to something that happens infrequently, and "hit the sack" or "hit the hay" mean going to bed. In normal speech, idioms are easy and useful, but in writing they tend to stick out like any other cliché and should be avoided.

Figure 20. Defining "idiom."

I've called out many of the clichés that made it into the final draft of this book (avoiding 100 percent of all clichés is an impossible task), but trust me, the first draft had many more. They were all phrases that popped into my mind and were fine as placeholders until I could go back in revision and spend the time to think of something better.

Be Aware of Stereotypes

The word "cliché" comes from the French word *clichér*, which means "to stereotype." Since a cliché is an overused word or phrase, a stereotype is a type of cliché in that it is an overused descriptor of something or someone. It also often becomes somewhat denigrating or offensive, but even if it isn't, it is still weak writing.

For example, avoid using "Red-headed stepchild," as well as the phrase (and the idea) "damsel in distress."

Understand What You Want to Say

Clichéd *thinking* is also a trap, and one which we all fall into sometimes.

Consider this classic thought-cliché: "I learned more from them than they learned from me." What are you really trying to say? Did you really learn more from "them," whoever they are? How and why? What were the circumstances? *What*, precisely, did everyone learn in that experience? What did *they* learn? *Why* did you learn more?

Whatever your answers are to those questions—write and say that, instead. My hunch is that what you really mean is that the experience in question was unexpectedly rewarding, or rewarding in an unexpected way.

Similarly, if you want people to "think outside the box," then *you* should think harder about what you want. What hackneyed ideas have already been tried in your circumstance? What are some examples of this thinking? What kind of brain leaps, interesting options, or novel ideas are you looking for? Do you want something new but still reasonable, or do you want to throw out all the rules and hear anything rational or irrational, however outlandish?

And why? Is your business problem so intractable that nobody has encountered it before? Or is your company, brand, or product being buried in competition and you simply want to stand out a bit more?

In other words, do you want **2 + 2 = 5**, or **2 + 2 = Potato**?

Be Direct

Perhaps the most effective technique is to simply be authentic and direct. Don't try to write around what you're trying to say or obfuscate the meaning with a metaphor, idiom, hyperbole, or cliché. Be straightforward, honest, and simple.

Strangely, it sometimes takes longer to write simply and directly than to write with indirect, metaphorical language. This is because you are forced to concentrate and distill exactly what you mean, rather than to describe with "sort of this" and "kind of like that."

Clear and direct writing can spring only from clear and direct thinking—but this is a good thing. It leads to more effective communication and better overall productivity. It will translate into more sales, better products, shorter meetings, happier coworkers, and more effective employees.

Writing Exercise: Cliché

Part I: Look at some recent projects you've worked on and emails you've written. Identify all of the clichés. This may take a couple of passes, as you may not recognize clichés at first glance. But do not be generous to yourself. Mark *each* one, even the seemingly innocuous ones, like "in this day and age," and clichés of thought, like "that day I learned more from my intern Blake than Blake learned from me."

Be brutal with yourself. Anything you think *might* be a cliché, mark it. It's a word or phrase you've seen elsewhere. It's a shorthand, bullshit way of saying something. Circle them in bright red marker or highlight them on the computer.

Think about why you wrote each of them. Was it for expediency (that is, it was easier and took less time), or were you really unable to think of a better way to say what you meant?

And does it *matter*? If it's a toss-off, inconsequential email, then maybe it doesn't matter, and you can let yourself have that

cliché. But if it's an important project that has gravity, then it probably does.

Part II: Find a better, more original turn of phrase or description for each place you marked. It doesn't have to be Shakespeare or James Joyce, but you should write something original, direct, and authentic that communicates your message both in tone and meaning. And for the love of God, don't call it a proctology exam. Also, "for the love of God" is both an idiom and a cliché.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PHILLIP SCOTT MANDEL founded Mandel Marketing in 2019. He has an MFA in Fiction Writing from Texas State University and an MA in English Literature from NYU. His fiction, poetry, and nonfiction has appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies. He launched *Abandon Journal* in 2021 and currently serves as the Managing Editor. Originally from New York, he now lives in Austin, Texas, with his wife and daughter.