

Robert: Hi. This is Robert Middleton of Action Plan Marketing. You're listening to an expert interview for the Action Plan Marketing Club. Today, I'm interviewing Daphne Gray-Grant.

Daphne grew up in the newspaper business. Her family owned a weekly newspaper in Vancouver, BC, Canada. She worked there from the age of 16, writing stories, editing, dealing with newspaper carriers, and even selling the odd advertisement.

After leaving the family business, she became books editor at the daily *Vancouver Sun* newspaper. Then she moved up to the role of features editor, a job she held for six years, running a large department and being responsible mainly for the daily pages.

From there, she was recruited to the corporate side, becoming the first-ever director of communications for the paper's parent company. On the birth of her triplet children, Daphne briefly left paid employment, but returned a year later in 1995 to launch her own business as a communications consultant.

In addition to helping companies write and produce newsletters, brochures and websites, and manage both internal and external communications, she also coaches corporate writers and copywriters in how to write faster and better.

Daphne is the author of the book *8 1/2 Steps to Writing Faster, Better*. She's also the publisher of the popular email newsletter Power Writing that goes out every

Tuesday, just like mine, to subscribers around the world. We'll be speaking about both the newsletter and the book later in the interview.

Welcome to the interview, Daphne. I'm really excited to have you on this call.

Daphne: Hi, Robert. I'm happy to be here.

Robert: We know that writing is an issue for a lot of independent professionals. How important do you think it is for people who are self-employed, the self-employed professionals or "independent professionals," as I often call them, to be able to write?

Daphne: It's one of *the* most important things you need to be able to do. Think about yourself as a shopper. When you walk into a store, you form an immediate impression of what that store is like and whether or not you want to buy there.

What are the decorations in the store? What are they actually selling? How quickly are you helped? What's the lighting like? There is a long list that you rapidly calculate through, and often without thought, to decide whether or not you are willing to shop in the store.

Robert: Some of that is unconscious. For me, as a marketing guy, it's a little more conscious. I'm always looking at that stuff.

Daphne: For someone who is trying to connect with people via the Internet, not a physical store, writing takes the place of

that. What you send out in your writing has to grab people on a bunch of different levels.

The beginning of the article or newsletter has to be interesting enough for people to commit to reading the entire thing. As they get drawn through the article, they need to be educated, interested and intrigued. To accomplish those things, you need solid writing skills in your arsenal.

Robert: That goes for web copy as well, right? That's the place people go first. People say they're proud to have a website, but often the copy is poorly written and not structured very well. It just turns people off.

Daphne: Absolutely. The interesting thing is how few people really understand much about writing these days. There's been a fairly dramatic change in the last 10 years. I look at my own kids, who are 14 now. I work with them quite a bit on their writing.

One of the things I'm very aware of is how low the school expectations are surrounding writing. When I compare it to what I experienced when I went through school, the expectations related to math and science are much higher than they used to be. However, in terms of writing, it really is pretty low. That's really sad.

When people start their own businesses and try to launch a newsletter or website, they really don't have the skill and training to write in the way that's necessary.

Robert: I hear this all the time. People say, “I don’t know what to write about. I don’t know where to start. I don’t think my writing is very good.” They don’t have a lot of confidence about it.

Daphne: It’s just not well-taught in school, and I don’t understand why that’s the case. There’s a big gap out there right now.

Robert: You’re quite different. I’m somewhat different, as well. I taught myself to write. I had a pretty good education in writing, but I know it is difficult.

Tell me how you learned to write. How did you get to be a good writer? It sounds like you started early, in the newspaper business. A lot of people say, “I didn’t have *that* background.” Tell me about your background in it.

Daphne: I learned the slow way. I survived my family’s newspaper business without really learning to write. I survived the *Vancouver Sun* without learning to write, as well.

Robert: Are you telling me that journalists don’t know how to write, in many cases?

Daphne: How can I answer that question diplomatically? There are some people who don’t know how to write and still manage to survive in the newspaper business.

One of the issues with daily newspapers is that you have an expectation left on you that you have to produce in a certain way. If you are able to do whatever it takes to meet those production requirements, then no one is going to talk to you about *how* you write.

Robert: It's more quantity than quality.

Daphne: Yes. I worked with some very skilled writers, but I also worked with a number of people who didn't know much about writing and weren't particularly good at it.

Once I got through the daily newspaper, took some time off to have my children and then decided to go back to work as someone who was self-employed, I became determined to learn how to write and how to write *quickly*.

If you work in a newspaper, you're paid no matter what you produce. If you're working as a freelance writer, you're only paid *when* you produce. There's a pretty strong motivation to learn to write quickly and more easily.

Robert: Not only are we going to learn some of the tips, tricks and strategies of writing, but we're going to learn how to write *better* and *faster*.

Daphne: Absolutely. It's not just one or the other. It has to be both.

Robert: You realized that you had to learn how to do this. What did you do? How did you teach yourself? What are the things you did?

Daphne: The first thing I did was go to the library and, over the course of several years, check out every single book about writing that I could find. I scanned through all these books, made notes, looked at every trick I could develop

and fairly quickly saw that the time involved in writing was greatly reduced just by harnessing these tricks and using them in my own writing.

Robert: I did a lot of that as well. I read several books on writing. One of my favorites was the one by Stephen King. I've never been a Stephen King fan, but I really enjoyed his book on writing. I also studied *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White so I knew where to put my commas, semicolons and all of those things.

Daphne: You mustn't forget s-apostrophe-s!

Robert: I also am a very fast writer. Sometimes I can write longhand without stopping for 20 or 30 minutes and pow, I have it.

I produce a weekly newsletter, and so do you. That's a good example of writing you do on a regular basis. What's the purpose of that?

Daphne: The purpose is to reach out to people and create a mechanism that gives me a way of connecting with people every week. I belong to a number of different Internet groups. There aren't very many people, who produce a newsletter each week. You and I might be the only ones I know.

There are a lot of people who do it every two weeks and a bunch of people who do it once a month. There aren't very many people who are prepared to make the commitment to do it weekly.

Robert: How long does it take you to write it?

Daphne: It really varies. Sometimes, the idea pops into my head and when I sit down and write, I can do it in half an hour. Other times, it will take me closer to an hour. Some years ago, if I was doing something of this length, it would have taken me three or four hours to do.

Robert: It takes me about 45 minutes to write and a little bit of time to edit. Then I have to go through the steps of posting it on the Internet, etc. I can usually do the whole process in less than two hours, so then I think, “Well, anybody could write a newsletter or ezine. After all, it only takes a couple of hours.”

However, people think, “It takes me two days to write an ezine!” so they just get discouraged. If it takes a long time to write an email newsletter, good copy for their website, articles and other things, they just shy away from it. It can really undermine their business.

I hear stories about how people finally got their sites written and were doing their ezine, and their business increased, often dramatically. They were out there expressing themselves and saying what they could offer. All of a sudden, stuff started to happen. Writing and information is key.

Why is it difficult for people to write? Why does it take so long? Where do people get stuck? I have some views on that, but I’ll bet you have even more. Why do people have difficulty in writing?

- Daphne:** There's a long laundry list of reasons. One of the big reasons is that few people have been *taught* to write. If you don't have the tools or mechanisms to be able to produce the writing, then you're just sitting there staring at your computer, not knowing what you're doing.
- Robert:** Don't people go through college and write papers all the time? Isn't that a big thing? I suppose they agonize about that as well, right?
- Daphne:** I'm a living example of that. I did an honor's degree and graduated with high marks, but I did not find writing easy or enjoyable, and it took me a very long time. You can, under certain systems, produce a certain amount of copy. That doesn't mean you do it easily or find it fun to do.
- Robert:** It's not necessarily good training for business writing, even though you've done a certain amount of it.
- Daphne:** That's right. In fact, writing for academic reasons is often a problem. The type of writing style they're looking for in academia is very different from the writing style the typical average reader is looking for.
- Robert:** It often doesn't move very fast. It can be very dull and have too many things trying to prove too many facts.
- Daphne:** It usually has a lot of passive voice. It's just filled with problems. What's worse is that these things aren't *seen* as problems. You might get excellent marks for writing that way and have no idea that what you're producing is actually a failure in some senses.

I once read about a woman describing this whole system of writing for universities. She said that if you're writing something for someone who needs to be *paid* to read, then you have a problem.

Robert: The longer, the better for them, right? I've had Ph.D.s and college professors who were hopeless when it came to writing marketing copy. It was as dull as dry toast.

Let's get back to this other question. What are some of the other reasons people have difficulty, other than being stuck in the academic or school model?

Daphne: Another big problem is that people put too many expectations on themselves. They either want to sell something or they want to make certain acquaintanceships or meetings with people. They have so many expectations about what they are going to get out of this piece of writing that it ties them up. They can't write because they're too concerned about the objectives they want to reach.

Robert: It's similar to the way people think of their marketing messages. When people say, "What do you do?" you want to answer in such a way that gets their attention and interest. However, people have the expectation that others will jump up and down and say, "Wow. That's fantastic. Tell me more." That's a silly expectation. Mild interest is fine.

You're saying the same thing for writing. You can get some interest. You can start a communication. However, people aren't necessarily going to respond to your

newsletters and articles by saying, “Well, I have half a million dollars. Can you come over?”

Daphne: That’s right. That gets people tied up in knots. They become so concerned about what it is they’re trying to achieve that they turn a magnifying glass on themselves. They become very concerned about what it is they want to do. As a result, they can’t come up with the right words.

Robert: Nothing is perfect. I tell people, “A perfect marketing communication gets 100% of the people that hear it to respond. You’re doing great if you get 2% or 3%.” That is even with *good* writing. It’s just that not everyone is interested at that moment for a million reasons.

There is no such thing as perfect writing, yet people try to be perfectionists.

Daphne: At the beginning of this call, I gave the image of a store that you walk into and do a quick evaluation of. You commented that people might not be conscious of that behavior. The same thing happens with writing.

People sit down to write. At the back of their minds are all these thoughts of inadequacy, of not being able to accomplish something. However, they’re not conscious of it. It’s just running along in the background. They sit there and think, “I can’t write. I don’t know what to say.”

Robert: If they look at their feelings, they might notice they feel discouraged, frustrated and confused. It doesn’t at all feel like a fun thing to do. It’s all caught up in this

perfectionism and doing it right. Also, they're afraid of being judged.

That's a big thing in marketing, the fear of being judged and rejected. They then think it's better to not say anything. Obviously, that doesn't work. They're caught in a bind. They know they have to communicate, but don't know how to communicate. You're going to solve this for all of us, right, Daphne?

Daphne: Absolutely!

Robert: There are all these problems, issues and concerns. One thing that's useful for everyone to realize at this point is that they're not alone. Almost everybody goes through this.

Daphne: Everybody does. Even very successful professional writers go through this. I'm very conscious of all the challenges out there. I produce this newsletter once a week. I do a lot of writing for clients. Every once in a while, I still run right up against this brick wall that says I'm not good enough, I can't do this and this is no good.

The difference I have is that I now recognize it quickly and know how to deal with it.

Robert: You realize that it's not really true. Why hold onto it if it's not really true? I know exactly what you're talking about.

Where do you start, and what do you do? You have this thing you do called "mind mapping." Is that often where you start with a writing project?

Daphne: Yes it is. Mind mapping is a very interesting technique. I didn't discover this until after I had done most of my own research on writing. When I heard about it, I thought it sounded too phony to be true, and I dismissed it.

Then, in this online forum I belong to, I saw more and more mention of it. I thought, "This is really crazy. I guess I'd better give it a try." I posted a note and said, "Can someone tell me some more about mind mapping?" A bunch of people wrote back and said, "There's really not much to tell." That made my heart sink because I thought it sounded too easy, too simple.

Robert: Sometimes, the best things are really simple.

Daphne: Exactly. Mind mapping was invented during either ancient Greek or ancient Roman times. Basically, you take a piece of paper and turn it sideways, so it's sitting in front of you, landscape fashion. You take the subject you want to write about, write it in the middle of the page and draw a circle around it.

Robert: That's the title of your article, in some cases.

Daphne: It may be, but I don't want people to feel that it has to be. You just pick something that is enough to get your brain going on this particular subject. It may or may not be the title.

After you've written it in the middle of the page and drawn a circle around it, then whatever else pops into your mind, you write elsewhere on the page, draw a circle

around it and draw a line from it to the central phrase. If your next idea comes from a secondary circle, then you can draw a line to that, write another phrase and draw a circle around it.

I don't spend too much time fussing about which idea is a parent of which child because I don't think that's so important. The idea is to just get whatever is in your head onto the paper.

Robert: Say I'm thinking of writing an article about web marketing. In the middle, I'd write "web marketing." The first idea is that we need to have good design. Then we need content, so I'd write another circle there.

Then I think, "How do you get found on the web?" That's another one. Another is building a list. This is something I obviously know about.

From design, I can talk about some of the rules of design. I can talk about colors. All of a sudden, I have the middle topic and four main things, and then other things start to pop up all over the place. Before long, I have the main content of the article, but it's not organized in any linear way at this point.

Daphne: That's the purpose of mind mapping. It's not meant to be organized.

Robert: Its purpose is to get those ideas out of your head.

Daphne: I sometimes describe it as "vomiting onto the page!"

Robert: That's a good image!

Daphne: Some months ago, I was contacted by someone who works with copywriters. He had heard me talk about mind mapping the same week he was approached by a book publisher and invited to write a book.

He desperately wanted to do it, but the deadline was about six months. That is a very short amount of time for a book. He was also trying to run his business at this time.

He really didn't know if he could do it, but he had heard my little blurb about mind mapping and thought, "I'm going to give that a try." He started his mind map. Because it was for a book, it was very big. I sometimes recommend to people doing mind maps for a book that they get a piece of butcher paper, not just 8.5-by-11, and pull it over the dining room or boardroom table, someplace very big.

He did this mind map. All of a sudden, the word "pancakes" popped into his head. He wrote down the word "pancakes" because I had emphasized how important it was not to let these words get away, even if they seemed irrelevant.

Within about five minutes, he had decided that pancakes were going to be a central metaphor in his book. They were, and it worked well. He got the book done within the timeframe. He was thrilled with how mind mapping worked for him.

Robert: It's a fast way. When you're doing this, you don't have to worry about sentence structure, syntax, order or anything. It's just bare naked ideas thrown out on the paper.

Some people are a little more computer savvy. There is some good mind-mapping software available. I have Mindjet, although I don't use it a lot. Another one is called Inspiration and another called Novamind. They're similar.

You do a circle, type into it, do another circle, and it automatically makes a line to it. It's great for doing plans and other stuff, but we're really focusing on writing.

Daphne: People should be aware that all of the mind-mapping software available on the internet is downloadable for a free trial, somewhere between 12 and 30 days. If people are interested in trying some mind-mapping software, I strongly recommend that they try it for free first and decide if they like it.

Robert: Most of these aren't very expensive. I think Mindjet was around \$49.

Daphne: Last time I checked, Mindjet was in the \$200 range. Inspiration was in the \$50 to \$80 range.

Robert: There might be junior and more advanced versions. I'm sure I didn't pay that amount.

Daphne: Don't rule out the possibility of *not needing* the software.

Robert: I just did this little thing on the paper in less than a minute. It's not that you have to keep this, archive it and

come back to it. The software would be good for a long-term plan of some sort, but this is just for an article, so you can toss it out afterward.

Daphne: You may also not need to “finish” the mind map. One of the things mind mapping does is it creates a framework for you to write. I frequently find, particularly with anything fewer than 1,000 words, that I will start the mind map and finally say, “Oh, now I know how I want to tackle this article!” and just throw the mind map away. Then I can write.

Robert: You don’t need every single idea in the article.

Daphne: It’s just meant to inspire you. Additionally, as you write on your mind map, if you get stuck, don’t hesitate to doodle or draw. You want to keep your hand moving. That’s a really important part of it.

Robert: Let the pen think! If you just move it, all of a sudden something comes out of the end of the pen. It’s amazing.

You’re tapping into your subconscious, instead of saying, “What’s the perfect thing? Where should I put the circle?” That will just stymie you. It doesn’t have to be perfect. It’s just scribbles and notes.

I’d like to ask you something that’s attached to this. If I want to write an article, an ezine on a regular basis, marketing copy or even a book, where do I start with ideas and topics in the first place?

I often hear, “I don’t know what to write about. I don’t know what my clients would be interested in. I don’t know where to start.” Many of these people are consultants and coaches. They’re very knowledgeable, yet they don’t seem to realize the wealth of information and knowledge they have. They get stuck with this. How do you come up with topics and ideas?

Daphne: That’s a very interesting question. The first thing anyone who’s developed enough of an expertise has to understand is that they know more than most people do in that area. Don’t be afraid to acknowledge that.

Robert: People often think, “Doesn’t everybody know that?” I say, “Why do you think they hire you? It’s because they don’t know that!” What you write about is the same thing on a different scale. Realize that you do know more than your clients.

Daphne: When you’re planning to write something, you really need to do an in-depth analysis about what it is you’re trying to achieve. Providing enough information for a website might be one job. Providing enough information for an article that’s between 500 and 1,000 words might be another job.

Robert: In workshops, people say, “I have no ideas,” and in five minutes, we come up with 20 ideas. The way I do it is to ask, “What are five, 10 or 20 *problems* your clients have?” For me, that’s always the starting point.

What don’t they know that you’ve helped them with in the past? “They don’t know how to do this. They don’t know

how to do that.” Those are your topics. That’s one place to start.

Daphne: It’s pretty hard to beat problems. When people come forward with a problem, they want answers. If you’re able to provide those answers, then you’re providing something that, by definition, is very interesting.

Robert: If you don’t know the problems of your client, are you really an expert? If you can’t come up with anything, you’re in trouble. Let’s assume you can. You have some topics and ideas.

You’ve written a book called *8 1/2 Steps to Writing Faster, Better*. You have a number of chapters, and all the tips and ideas are in these chapters. Shall we get into the first chapter, where to start and where to go?

The first chapter is about making a plan. Is that beyond the mind mapping, or does it include it?

Daphne: You can mind map at different phases of the process. This book is really divided into three overall groups of steps. That can be helpful for listeners to understand. The first series of steps are the planning steps. Then there is writing. At the end are the copyediting, fixing up, etc., kinds of steps. The categories are preparation, writing and fixing up. Mind mapping can play in any number of planning steps at the beginning.

The first step is called “Make a Plan.” That is where you really decide what it is you’re going to write about. The

very first thing you need to do is ask yourself who your reader is. People are often quite unclear about this.

It can be very helpful to have a *deep* understanding of who your reader is, including gender, age profile, education, things they're interested in and kind of business they're in. Anything you can do to help you create a strong visual image of *a reader*, not a whole group of readers, is going to be very helpful to you as a writer.

When you write to an individual, you tend to write in a more interesting, meaningful way.

Robert: It's more personable.

Daphne: It's very difficult, particularly if you are an engineer, to pick one individual reader. Engineers, in particular, don't like to be pulled in that direction. They say, "Some people want this. Some people need this. Different people want that." However, if you can focus your attention on one individual, it will help your writing become more interesting and meaningful.

Robert: It can also be a composite person, in a sense, right? I think I'm writing to an independent professional. They're self-employed, in an information-type business. They're consulting, coaching, training, and that amalgam of things.

They usually have a home office. They have a lot of things they're doing and don't have a lot of time. They think about how they're going to get their next clients.

Then, I think about problems people have asked me about or that I myself have had. I may think about a recent person I've been working with in one of my groups. I figure that if they have that problem, then this ideal client does as well. Kind of like that?

Daphne: That can be very helpful, but I would encourage you to go to the next step, Robert, which is to take it to *one individual person*. That makes the reader *real* to you. That tends to make a big difference.

Robert: I should put a face on them, and imagine a person and even a name. I often talk about people who are struggling to market, so I can imagine a person who has that kind of struggle. "You're struggling with this. Here's what I found."

That's good. I like that.

Daphne: Once you have your reader in mind, the next thing you need to know is how many words you have. This is a very important decision you need to make. Sometimes, the decision may be made for you. If you are making the decision yourself, you need to be very clear about it. Is it 500 words? Is it 1,500 words? Where are you in the word spectrum?

That will have a profound impact on what you can write about. The example I give in my book is if you want to write about World War II, you cannot actually write about it in 750 words. You would not believe the number of people who try!

Robert: I use this differentiation. There is what I call a “core issue article,” which is a broader, longer article about the essence of all the main things in your business. Then I think of an ezine article, which is one small aspect, and can be done in 750 words or so.

Daphne: The great thing, particularly for people who say they want to produce an ezine article once or twice a week, is that you can take a single idea and spin half a dozen articles off of it.

Robert: Recently, I did a series of 10 articles on 10 different aspects of persuasion. One article on persuasion in general is not really possible. Books have been written about it. I could have written 20 articles.

Daphne: This is a very valuable tool. I’ve helped many people with this one. They start to talk about what they want to write about, and I point out that the idea is actually way too big for the space they have. We start talking about it, and they realize it is half a dozen articles.

Robert: “This looks like a book to me!” You’re trying to say too much, and suddenly, it’s too long. It’s 1,500 or 2,000 words, and that, for an email newsletter, is just not going to work. People aren’t going to read that much.

Daphne: Once you’ve come to some sort of resolution about how many words you’ll have, the third and last thing you need to figure out is what you want your reader to do. Sometimes, you might not have anything specific you

want them to do. That is okay, but you need to be conscious of it up front about what you want them to do.

Sometimes you want them to buy something. Sometimes you just want them to understand something. Know what it is you're asking of your reader.

Robert: I sum it up at the bottom of my newsletter. It says something like, "If you're going to do this, and if this is very important to you, the first thing you need to do is start here and do this." That way people are clear about where to start with it and why it's so important. As you said, it might be a call to action for something. It might even be to buy something.

Daphne: Just to wrap up this first step in my writing process, what you need to do is write these things down and stick it up beside your computer, on your bulletin board or someplace you will see it as you are writing. That's really important because it's easy to forget this stuff.

Robert: Especially if you're starting with this and you've really had a lot of problems, you have to keep reminding yourself.

Daphne: Once you've done that, then you're ready to move onto the second step, "Research," which is still a part of the preparation step.

Robert: Everyone just loves research!

Daphne: There is a popular theory that too many people spend too much time on research and not enough time on writing. If you actually go through the planning steps first before you

do the research, then you're in a better frame of mind to do the research, and you're not as likely to lose much time.

Robert: You have a focus and direction. You know the number of words and what you're trying to accomplish. Then you just need to find a little more information and you're focused.

How do you research? Do you always have to?

Daphne: I don't always have to research. I'm usually writing about writing. I get some writing magazines. Sometimes, I get ideas from them.

I scan through the library regularly to see if there's a book I haven't read before. I'm actually reading about fiction writing right now because I seem to have read my way through most of the nonfiction-writing books. That's mainly how I do research.

The other thing that may be useful for people who are running a different kind of business is to interview their clients. That can be extremely useful for producing articles or material for websites.

Robert: You can even do surveys of clients, like "What are the biggest concerns you have that are stopping you in this area?" That will generate topics for you.

Daphne: I'll offer a couple of points about interviewing. People often are not trained to interview and don't regularly get

practice at it. There are a couple of key points to interviewing.

I do in-person workshops on interviewing. My favorite technique is to call two people up from the room and have one interview the other. It's always fascinating to see the number of people who directly go into questions like "What was the most interesting/exciting/frustrating whatever that you experienced?"

That's when I call a halt to things. That kind of question is really *dangerous* with interviewing. It puts a lot of pressure on the person being interviewed to come up with a single answer.

When people are being interviewed, they need to accept that whatever they say is going to be all right. If they're asked a question that is structured in such a way that says "what is *the* most," they start to panic a bit. It often serves to shut down the interview.

I suggest that people take those kinds of questions and carefully re-craft them to ask something like, "What is one of the ways in which XYZ happened?" so that the person being interviewed has the pressure pulled off them.

That's one of the things to keep in mind when doing the interviewing. Another is to be sure to ask a lot of open-ended questions. Those are questions that are not answered with a yes or no, which is another deadly little path to go down. Then the person is just answering yes or no, and you're not hearing things in their own unique, interesting way.

Another thing to do while interviewing is to be sure to give the person a lot of feedback. Say things like, “Wow, that must have been interesting,” or “That must have been frustrating.” Constantly feed information back to the interview subject.

Robert: That’s going to pull more information out of them, right?

Daphne: Exactly. By and large, we’re not excellent communicators. If we ask someone something, they will answer based on their own idiosyncratic way of talking. We may misunderstand them.

I suggest people give their interview subjects feedback by paraphrasing what they’ve said. That way, if they have misunderstood the interview subject, they’ll dive right in there and immediately correct you. You will have a much better, more interesting and meaningful quote.

Robert: In what kinds of cases would you use interviewing as a research tool? It’s sort of hard to imagine doing that for your weekly ezine article, but I could see it for a book and some other things.

Daphne: It really depends on the nature of your ezine. My particular structure doesn’t really lend itself to interviewing other people very easily, although every once in a rare while I do.

A website can be a great place for interviews. My book has some interviews at the back. There are a lot of ways in which interviews can be useful. Interviewing is a lot more fun and a lot faster than reading a book or journal.

Robert: Are you saying that the interview itself, edited down in some cases, can actually be the article?

Daphne: Yes.

Robert: I had someone interview a number of my past clients for case studies. I didn't do the interviewing, but it was really interesting to read the answers. There were questions like "How did your business grow? How did you use Robert's materials?" They read very quickly and give a good idea of how my materials helped them. It was definitely easier than just writing it from scratch.

I use Google a lot for research. I'm sure everyone does. Sometimes, they come up with a word and I'll look it up in the dictionary or on Google. That creates associations for other things. I'm sure people do that kind of thing.

Daphne: That can be the point at which you do another mind map. Who knows where that could take you?

The amount of time you need to spend on your research will vary not only with the length of your article, but also with your own background and training and the purpose of what you're trying to do. I can't say that your research will take 10% of your time, for example. It will vary greatly.

Robert: What's the next step?

Daphne: The next step is "Thinking and Rethinking." This is very important. It's one of those jobs you need to apply now to the research you've done. Here is the point at which you

might want to do another mind map if you're not settled. You also might not need to do one.

As part of the whole thinking and rethinking step, I strongly suggest to people that they avoid outlines. There is a very important scientific reason for this.

Our brains are divided into separate functions. The part of the brain that is good at outlining is a linear, logical part. The part of the brain that's good at writing is a nonlinear, emotional part. You can't have those two separate parts of the brain in charge at the same time.

The metaphor I use is that it's like sharing driving with someone. You can't have two people drive a car at the same time. One person gets to be in charge. If it's the outlining person, then you have the linear, logical part that's in charge.

Robert: What happens if you try to outline all the major points in the article? Do you get stymied when it comes to the actual writing? Does it stop the flow?

Daphne: That's exactly what happens. As a matter of fact, I've had more people tell me that just that single piece of information has dramatically increased their writing speed, more than anything else I've told them. You need to get away from the whole outlining process.

Robert: How about the macro view of outlining? For instance, a book has 20 chapters. You have the names of those chapters, and there might be major sections within them. Is that okay?

Daphne: What I'm talking about is actually a small, uncontained piece of writing, up to about 5,000 words. A typical book is about 80,000 words, minimum. Once you get to that many words, you can't hold it all in your head. If you are writing a book, you have my official permission to do some outlining, but then you have to put it away.

Robert: You still probably don't want to outline at the micro level, just at the macro level.

Daphne: No, you don't. If you outline at the micro level, you're stuck in that outlining frame of mind. You'll have a hard time coming up with new ideas, new creative words and anything that would make the process interesting.

Thinking and rethinking will often involve a mind map. It should definitely not involve an outline. It should just get you ready to start writing.

Robert: The capacity of the human mind to hold all these ideas is amazing. Sometimes, I sit down to write my ezine, and I don't know what I'm going to write. I let my mind whiz over a few things, and then I think, "That's good." I think of the big picture and then just jump into it.

Not everyone can do it that fast. I've been doing it for 12 years every week, so it's second nature to me.

Daphne: I've been doing it for about three years every week. When I first started my newsletter, I was so naïve. I accumulated about 14 before I published the first one. I then spent the next 14 weeks publishing them and not writing a word.

Robert: If I write it too far ahead, when it comes to the day to write the ezine, the one I wrote a week ago is already old news. I always just write it within the couple of days before. I like it to be fresh.

Daphne: That's exactly what I do now as well.

Once you've finished thinking and rethinking, you're *almost* ready to start writing. I call this step "Finding Your Lede." This is a piece of terminology from the newspaper business. I spell it "lede," which is a peculiar spelling, because it has a very specific meaning. It means "the beginning of an article."

The part that is specific is that the length is not spelled out in it. The lede may be the first paragraph, or it may be the first 10 paragraphs. It really does depend on how you've produced that beginning. Generally speaking, with short articles, the lede is fairly short. With longer articles, it's longer.

Robert: What is included in the lede?

Daphne: The lede is a bunch of different types of beginnings. I'll go through them quickly, and then I can give you a few examples.

Robert: This is so important because if you can't get it started well, you're stuck. Once you get it started well, it's so much easier. This is a big piece.

Daphne: The first example of a type of lede is a true story or anecdote. The second is very similar and is an imaginary

story or anecdote. It's told like a story, but didn't really happen. The third is an analogy, metaphor or simile. The fourth is an interesting fact. The fifth is called "the gallery."

The gallery is a little hard to explain. It's a list of things or images. *Newsweek* will often use gallery-style ledes at the beginning of the story. Just to make this clear, let me give you an example from my book.

The story would begin, "The artwork of M.C. Escher shows strange and compelling worlds in which staircases appear to go nowhere, and people sit upside down or sideways. The plywood pillar at your local museum is painted a creamy, mottled white with deep gray veins and other flaws so it looks like real marble.

"When you put your dinner on a 12-inch plate instead of a 17-inch one, you eat less food and feel more satisfied by it. What do these three facts have in common? They are all optical illusions. Illusions are important in writing too. A piece that looks great will read better than one that is visually dull or confusing."

That is an assembly of three facts, and I almost always use three. Three is actually a magic number in writing. There are the three little pigs. There is the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. There are bunches of important 3s in our world. When you do a gallery-style lede, you want three things, generally.

Robert: Two doesn't seem enough. Three fleshes it out. Four is overkill.

Daphne: That's right.

Moving down the list, another one is an information-withheld lede. This sometimes is known as a tease. This is a lede that holds back a key piece of information.

An example is “Things looked serious at the Kamloops Cellulose Fibers Mill on September 15. Two employees appeared to have been exposed to chlorine dioxide, and they had to be treated and the mill evacuated. Fortunately, it wasn't a real emergency.”

If I remember correctly, it was a first-aid enactment. They were trying to train people in how to deal with serious first-aid situations.

Robert: It stimulated your curiosity because you wondered what really happened. If it wasn't a real emergency, then what was it all about? Was it a false alarm? It gets you interested.

Daphne: The next one is the word-play lead. This is often a joke. An example is “The Bean Education Awareness Network provides advice, recipes and cooking tips for anyone contemplating moving toward a more meatless lifestyle. You might call the humble legume the bean of their existence.”

Robert: The bean of their existence?

Daphne: That's just making a play with the word. It's enough to get you into a short story. I wouldn't use a lede like that for a

long story because it's just not compelling enough, but for a short story, it's fine.

Robert: You really have me thinking with all of these. I have to ask myself what kinds of ledes I'm using in my articles, and if I have one I fall back on too often. By doing this, you vary your writing and make it more interesting by having different types of ledes.

Daphne: The next one is a question lede. It can be problematic, so it's very important to be cautious with this one. It's a lot like a loaded gun in that it's as easy to shoot yourself in the foot as it is to hit the target. One of the problems with questions is that it's possible for you to read the question and then say, "Who cares?"

As a writer, you do not want to write a question that is going to cause your audience to say, "Who cares?" If they do, it means they're not going to read the next sentence.

Robert: It stops people sometimes. If the question is, "Do you find it hard to write?" people might think, "I don't know. Maybe" and not feel compelled to read further. On the other hand, if it says, "Here are 10 ways you can write more effectively," it draws the reader into it more.

Daphne: That one can be a challenge. The last one in the group is the quote. I want to take a second to describe something that's very important. When I say to use a quote at the beginning of an article, I do not mean just having a quote there. I mean doing some actual writing with it.

Here's an example I used in one of my newsletters. "The charming quote, 'I'm sorry to have written you such a long letter. I didn't have time to write a short one' has been variously attributed to a Chinese scholar, Oscar Wilde, Rudyard Kipling, George Bernard Shaw, Voltaire, John Steinbeck and Blaise Pascal."

Robert: I've also heard Lincoln and Mark Twain!

Daphne: The next sentence says, "Now, I'm not foolish enough to enter the argument about who said it first, but I will say this. It's utter nonsense." That is how to begin an article with a quote.

Robert: Yes, and it's a challenge, too.

Daphne: When you want a quote, I don't recommend just having it in italics sitting at the top of your article. Then it's just an extra fill-up. If you can actually work it into the text, then you can create something that's interesting and very enticing.

Robert: One thing a lot of people say is, "I've heard such-and-such," and then they give their take on it, which leads into the article. That's one way to do it. Another is, "I heard something recently on NPR radio that really got my attention. It was someone who said, '_____.' This got my attention because...." It's a good way to start because it's a real thing that someone said.

Daphne: We've just gone through the first four steps, which are all essentially planning steps. Now we are ready to launch into step 5 which is the writing step.

The first thing I want to emphasize is that the writing step should not be the longest step. It should actually be fairly short. The preparation steps should take about 40% of the writing time. The editing steps at the end should also take about 40% of the writing time. The writing itself should take about 20%.

Robert: Of course, mileage will differ depending on a lot of things, but that's very interesting.

Daphne: When you're writing, the most important and hardest thing to do is stay out of your own way. Here's my sincerest piece of advice about this, which usually causes people to gasp. I recommend you turn your monitor off. This does assume you are a touch typist. If you're not, don't turn your monitor off.

If you are a touch typist, you should give it a try. If you look at what you are writing all the time, you're responding to that. What you ought to be doing is just pressing ahead with the next point you want to make.

Robert: That's very interesting. Do you do that?

Daphne: I don't do it all the time, but if I find myself slowing down or editing, I do. I had a horrible time with editing. I didn't like writing when I started. I wanted to focus my time on editing and making my work better and more interesting. I found myself constantly getting sucked back into that system of fixing up the sentence I had just written before moving onto the next one.

Robert: That's the killer, isn't it? I often say, "Write fast. Edit slowly." You're saying that when you write a sentence, you shouldn't go back and make sure the comma is perfect, there are no typos and the structure is right. You can go back and fix that later. If you do it, you stop the flow of ideas, and it gets bogged down. I just write, write, write, and then go back and move stuff around.

Daphne: That's exactly right. You don't want to do that while you're trying to write.

Robert: For the adventuresome among you, try turning your monitor off. I think that's fascinating.

Daphne: Sometimes, people are scared to do that, so a less frightening alternative is to simply hang a dishtowel over your computer.

Robert: Technically, that would probably be better. I don't know if it's actually recording if the monitor is off, right? I'm going to try that. It'll be fun.

Daphne: It's scary, but fun. The main thing with writing is to press through and press on. Get as much done as you can. When you're done writing, you have to walk away from it for a while. That is the step 6, "Letting It Incubate." That simply means taking a break.

If you're very busy or you want to produce X hours of writing a day, I'm not saying you can't write. You just have to write about something else.

Let's say you want to spend every Friday writing for four hours, and you get your newsletter done after an hour. You can spend the next three hours writing about something else, like a chapter for your book, or something for your website or a client. It doesn't matter. You just have to wait before you move on to the next step with the current writing.

Robert: Sometimes it can be a very short break. I'll finish writing, get up and go to the bathroom or something, and come back. Inevitably, I'll get an idea when I'm away. It's often very quick for me. However, if I'm writing something bigger, longer or more substantial, I might even wait a day or so before I come back, reread it and edit it.

Daphne: The other thing you can do, which I highly recommend, is go for a walk. There is a lot of evidence that walking leads to better writing. There are a lot of other activities that tend to lead to better writing as well, such as certain kinds of low-level exercise. A slow jog would be okay, but once you get into something that's more demanding, your brain is too busy with that.

Anything that is "mindless," like washing dishes, knitting, grooming a dog or listening to music tends to be very good at sparking your imagination.

You can do what you want with incubating. The main thing is just not to be editing it or moving on to the next steps right away. Once you've gotten through your incubating step, you go to "Revising."

Slowly read through the story you've written. With each sentence you read, ask yourself, as a reader, what it is you want to know next. Make sure you answer the question you want to know the answer to relatively quickly. If you haven't answered the question quickly enough, you need to do some rewriting.

You also need to make sure you have enough transitional devices in the text. Transitional devices are individual words like "furthermore," "therefore," "similarly" and "however." Those kinds of words force you, as a reader, to go on. They're important in writing. Make sure you use those whenever you can.

In addition to those words, you can use actual transitional devices. You can pique your reader's curiosity by making intriguing statements that will raise a question in the reader's mind. You can use questions. It's perfectly okay to use real questions in what you write. They will predispose the reader to continue reading because they will want an answer to those questions.

If you're quoting someone in your text, you want to set up the quote. That paraphrases or introduces the quote so the reader gets some sense of who is going to be speaking next and what they're going to be talking about.

The fourth thing you can do in terms of transitional devices is just repeat some key words or ideas to help pull the readers along.

Robert: Can you give me an example of that?

Daphne: If you're writing about transitions, you might say something like, "Transitions needn't be complicated. In fact, the simplest is also one of the best. It's the word 'but.' I always picture the word 'but' as a big red stop-sign that says to the reader, 'Hey, heads up. We're changing directions here.'"

That repetition of the word "but" pulls you through the sentence and causes you to want to continue reading.

Once you're done with that, you move on to the eighth step, "Copyediting," which is probably the most time-consuming. There are a bunch of techniques that you use here to make sure your copy is clean, tidy and organized.

Robert: How is this different from revising?

Daphne: Revising is about the big ideas behind your story. It's about the factual information you want to convey to your reader. Copyediting is about the small mistakes and errors that will slow the reader down.

Robert: They're often grammatical, right?

Daphne: They are often grammatical. They also include spelling and punctuation. One of the things I like to do for copyediting is put the word processor to work. You can set up your word processor to do the copyediting job, and then pull out the specific errors you're looking for.

Robert: Word is going to find repetitions, misspellings and grammatical problems.

Daphne: That's right. One of my favorite ones is to call up the Find key, Ctrl+F, and type in "tion." Then you do a search through your document for "tion." Try to eliminate those words. The reason is very interesting.

"Tion" is a noun that has been produced from a verb. For example, observation comes from the verb observe. To make a sentence with the word observation, you have to add a different verb, usually the verb "to be." If you can get rid of that and go back to the verb "observe," you usually have a shorter, more interesting sentence.

Robert: Interesting. That's a new one on me. Watch for "tion" words. They slow things down.

Daphne: Once you've gone through the whole document for "tion," go through again for "ment." Again, they are a sign that you've taken a perfectly good verb and turned it into a noun. For instance, assignment should be turned back into the verb "assign." Atonement is atone. Development is develop. Engagement is engage.

This isn't an issue for some people who don't do this very much in their writing. If you go through your copy looking for these words and don't find them, you can probably eliminate that step from your task list.

Robert: You wouldn't eliminate these occurrences 100%, but if you find that you're doing it too much, you would definitely work on it, right?

Daphne: That's right. Another thing you can type into the Find box is "ize" to find words like maximize, monetize, optimize

and randomize. What I don't like about these words is that they're generally mushy words. You can usually just get rid of them. For instance, if someone says, "Are you monetizing your website?" a much more interesting way of saying that is, "Is your website making money?"

Robert: It's a little jargon-y when we use words like that. I sometimes like to use those, but I hear what you're saying.

Daphne: That's what copyediting is. It's basically going through a bunch of techniques.

Robert: In your book, you have all these samples, right?

Daphne: I do.

Robert: This is great. People have to get this book. **We'll put a link to Daphne's website where you can order the book.** There are definitely some great tips here.

How about the famous passive voice? Often, people don't really get that concept, versus the active voice. Can you give us some examples and explain why passive is not good in writing?

Daphne: Passive is not good in writing because you want your readers to create strong visual images in their mind. A passive sentence hides who is doing the action or performing the verb.

A passive sentence might be "The butter is kept in the fridge." Who keeps the butter in the fridge? We don't know.

Robert: Passive is when you have “is something,” like is kept, is done, was done, has been done. All of those are very passive.

Daphne: Another example is “The painting was stolen.” Who stole the painting? We don’t know. “The road is being repaired.” Who repaired that road? We don’t know.

You can set up your grammar checker so it identifies sentences that are passive. I don’t know that I will be able to explain that now, but it is in my book. If you’re not familiar with how to set up your grammar checker, you can go to the Help menu in your Word document or you can get my book. I have little pictures of screens with explanations.

Robert: Get the book! It’s much better than working with the Word Help menu.

We get into bad writing habits that are unconscious. We’re unaware of them and wouldn’t see them unless someone pointed them out to us. You’re giving us some great tips to add more vitality to our writing when we’re revising and copyediting.

Daphne: The very last step I explain in the book, which is separate from the writing, is what I call the 8 1/2 step, “Reading Widely.” I don’t mean reading what you’re writing, although you should certainly do that. My tip to read widely is to read what other people have written. This can be outside of your general area of expertise. In fact, I recommend reading outside your area of expertise.

It gets you into something different and gets you thinking about outside areas. It gives you the opportunity to look at the basic architecture of how other writers write.

Robert: All good writers read a lot. It's almost a rule of thumb. In Stephen King's book "On Writing," he gave a list of all the books he had read that year. It was extensive, including five "Harry Potter" books. If you're not reading, you're really not absorbing these ideas, getting ideas and looking at how they're putting it together.

I often do that and think, "I could never write like that." It's intimidating.

Daphne: None of us could ever write like someone else. We all can only write like ourselves. However, if you read well and widely, you are going to start to pick up certain aspects of how other people write. That will become merged with all the other writers you read. Over time, your writing will improve.

You want to read beyond John Grisham. I'm not going to tell you to read the same writers I read. Read stuff that interests you, but read a range of writers.

Robert: Often, this can be magazines. There are short stories and nonfiction pieces in all kinds of magazines.

Daphne: As a matter of fact, I heartily recommend *The New Yorker*. First of all, it contains excellent writing. Second, it covers a very wide range of topics. They do tend to get

their feet stuck in certain areas. The last issue I read was all about Obama. There was nothing else in the magazine.

Generally speaking, though, they have a wide range of subjects. The style of writing is quite different. You can dive in there, find something that interests you and read something that's actually quite long.

Robert:

The pieces are very long. Often, it's first-person reportage. "I've been following this person around for two weeks. This is everything I learned about him, what he did and what his background was." It's always fascinating. Those are the ones who I say I could never write like.

We've covered a lot of very valuable information. All the steps in your book are very powerful. I have to admit that I've skimmed it, but I'm going to get deeper into it. I see things that I really need to know more about that are going to make my writing better.

Some are not such an issue for me, like the initial planning and research. However, the mind mapping and planning are extremely good ideas for people. So is the realization that it doesn't have to be academic writing or what your teacher taught you. You've given us some good ways to do some research and get ideas, thinking and rethinking.

One of the things I found most fascinating is finding a good lede and all the different ideas around that. It can be a true or made-up story, an analogy, a fact, a gallery of different things, information withheld or a tease, wordplay, a question or a quote.

Daphne: For many people in your group, that particular technique would probably be the most useful for them.

Robert: It gets you started. If you can't get started, you can fuss around with your article for ages. Those techniques give you a way to get going quickly and make it more interesting. I'm definitely going to study that part in more detail.

Getting into writing, letting your pen think, covering your monitor, letting yourself flow and not worrying about it being perfect, is really important advice for everybody. People stop themselves. If you've been working on two sentences for an hour, you're in trouble. People do that. Go back, revise, move things around, rethink it a bit and play with it. I do copyediting, but I've never done it with a search function to find these different elements, like "tion," "ment," "ize" and passive voice. That's very powerful. It could be quite revealing.

Daphne: I love being able to do anything that puts the work on the shoulders of the computer rather than my shoulders. It's very powerful.

Robert: There's immediate spell-check in Word. It often just changes the word for you.

Daphne: The other thing that we didn't touch on is the fact that readability statistics are available, for free, in Word. I can't use it right now because I switched to a Macintosh a while ago and there's a bug with readability statistics in the newer versions of Mac Word.

Robert: It doesn't work?

Daphne: No, but I found a place on the Internet where I can get readability statistics for free.

Robert: Do you just copy your text and paste it in somewhere to get the statistics?

Daphne: Yes.

Robert: What are readability statistics?

Daphne: It's an interesting little feature that measures the length of words, the number of words in sentences and the number of sentences in paragraphs. It calculates those statistics and then gives you readability. You want a grade level ideally around a nine for most reading and a percentage level of about 70%.

There are different kinds of readability statistics. The numbers I just gave you are the ones associated with Word. If you do it online, there are different kinds of statistics where the numbers vary a little bit.

Robert: Can I just go to Google and put in "readability statistics" and find what I'm looking for?

Daphne: You should be able to. You can also go to www.Online-Utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp If you're working on a PC in Word, you can set it up so that it operates with every Word document you do.

I run readability statistics on everything I publish. It makes a difference. When I first started doing it, I found that 50% of the time my readability statistics were too high. Now, I'm rarely too high, but I still do it as a matter of discipline.

Robert: You want to use slightly shorter words, sentences and paragraphs so it's simpler to read.

Daphne, this has been a great interview. I've learned a lot, even as someone who doesn't find it too hard to write. For people who are struggling with writing, there are a ton of useful ideas to get them started. As we said, it's so important to write. It really is the heart of our marketing.

Writing is pumping iron for marketing. If you write, you build the marketing muscle. If you don't write, that muscle is not developed, and you're not very good at being persuasive, communicating or getting people to take action. The more you write and follow these rules, the more persuasive you are and the better your marketing is.

Thank you very much. I appreciate the time you took.

Daphne: Thank you, Robert.

Daphne's Web Site: <http://www.publicationcoach.com>