

FOOLSCAP VIDEO #1

Steven Pressfield

One of the questions that I get asked a lot is “How did you break through with your first published novel?” and the reason people ask me that is they know that it took me 30 years from the time I first started until the time I had a book published. It’s this one here, *The Legend of Bagger Vance* which came out in 1995. It sold about 250,000 copies and was made into a movie. Whether it was a good movie or not, I’ll leave that up to you, but it was a success.

So the questions that people ask, as they ask any writer that’s had that happen, “What was so bad at the beginning with the first stuff that you were writing? Why was it so bad or unpublishable? How did it change? What got better?”

I’ve been working on kind of a long form piece; it’s called *The Authentic Swing*. It is about the writing of *The Legend of Bagger Vance* and kind of how it all happened, agents, publishers, editors; the whole internal process of it.

What I want to talk to you about today is something that I call the Foolscap Method. It’s kind of a trick or a technique that changed my life as a writer and it costs nothing. If you look at the cover of this book (*The Authentic Swing*), behind the title, you can see what looks like kind of a page of notes. These are the notes that I used to write this book (*The Legend of Bagger Vance*) and this is the actual thing here. I call it the Foolscap Method and I learned it from my dear friend and mentor, Norm Stahl. Thank you Norm.

Many years ago, I was struggling, starving, living in a sublet place, writing, going nowhere; nowhere close to even thinking about having any success at all. Let me tell you a little bit about Norm. He’s a documentarian who has done at least 200, maybe 300

hour-long film documentaries for the History Channel and for other things. The kind of a guy who takes no bullshit, no creative writers' bullshit from himself or from anybody; a great kind of get-her-done kind of a guy. So Norm took me out to lunch and I was sniveling and whining and whimpering about how tough it was and how I couldn't get it together. Norm opened his briefcase, he took out a yellow legal pad, a Foolscap paper, and he said

“Steve, God made a single sheet of yellow Foolscap to be exactly the right length to hold the outline of an entire novel”. Now let me say that again because that changed my life.

“Steve, God made a single sheet of yellow Foolscap to be exactly the right length to hold the outline of an entire novel”.

Now what did Norm mean by that?

He meant ‘Don't be precious. Don't over-prepare’.

There are two ways that we as amateurs and as wannabe writers screw ourselves up. The first way is we plunge right in on a project. We're in love with something and we start off for Tahiti without a plan, without a map, without a chart and of course, we get lost somewhere east of Hawaii and we go down and are never heard from again. The other way that we screw ourselves up is we over-prepare. We think “Before I begin, I've got to research, I have to go to the library, I have to have 3x5 cards all over the wall, I have to outline everything, I have to have a 55-page treatment or a 300 word Bible that goes into the back stories of every character.”

You don't need any of that at all.

Norm's method, the Foolscap Method; outline it and block the whole thing in on one page. Do it quick and get it over with. This is, to me, the way professionals work.

I live in Los Angeles and I have a bunch of friends who are really top-level screenwriters and it is amazing to me how fast they solve a problem and how fast they will block out a story. They just go right for the gullet, right for the jugular and they kill. Now let me tell you some of the reasons, going back to the Foolscap Method, why this works so well. The first thing is, because it's only one page, it takes away every excuse that you have for not doing your work. I can whimper and moan and say “I can't handle 55 pages. I can't do it” but there's no way that I can say to myself “I can't do one page”. One page, you have to be able to do. That's number one.

Second thing is, when you outline a project on a single page, kind of like Abe Lincoln doing the Gettysburg Address on the back of a single envelope, it forces you to see the project as a whole, from beginning to end. Now this is another way that amateur writers or amateur entrepreneurs; anybody starting on a project screw up. The way they screw themselves up is they don't think all the way to the end. They don't see the finished product. Whereas the way a professional will work is they'll start at the end and then move backwards from there.

If we're building or designing a restaurant and we can visualize what it's going to look like, what we want the experience to be for the diner, what the décor is going to look like, we visualize the finished product, then it's easy to work backward and design the thing from there. Same thing with a book. If I've got *Moby Dick* and I know the climax is going to Ahab plunging his harpoon into Moby Dick while they go under, then I've got the book. I can work backwards from there. So the Foolscap Method, blocking it all out on a simple square like this forces you to answer the question "What's the beginning, what's the middle, what's the end?"

The third thing that the Foolscap Method does is it makes you get rid of all extraneous elements. It makes you boil down your project to the absolute essentials. Let's say we're going to build the Golden Gate Bridge and here's the span between the shores. We know that we have to have an anchoring post on this shore, an anchoring foundation on this shore, we want towers in the middle and we want a suspension and a roadway. There it is. We've got the bridge.

So again, the way we as amateurs screw ourselves up is we start building the bridge from one side. We start extending the roadway out there into dead air, thin air and then the damn thing crashes halfway across. So the Foolscap Method is a great way to see the project as a whole, boiled down to its essentials and lick this thing right away.

If I had a young writer come in to me right now and he was going to tell me a project, I can tell you exactly the way he would do; he would start telling me about the first scene, he'd tell me some amazing killer scene, he'd tell me how it spools out into an amazing first act and if I said to him "How does it end?" he wouldn't have the slightest idea. So what I would say to him, I'd put this in his hand and I'd say "Go into that back room and come back in 15 minutes with this whole thing solved" and he would.

The last aspect of this is, it fills you with tremendous confidence because you say to yourself “All I have to do is execute. All I have to do is fill in the blanks”.

I was in Florida a couple of years ago and driving up to North Carolina and the highway department was adding a lane to the highway for about 100 miles. As I drove along, I’d see huge stockpiles of drainage pipes sitting on the side of the road. Big piles of rebar, piles of reinforced concrete sitting there and this went for 100 miles. As I was passing this, I said to myself “This is exactly the way a book is written. This is exactly the way any major enterprise is worked out and how smart and how professional these guys were”. Back at the highway department, they planned it all out, some guy drove the length of the thing with surveyors and engineers and they said “At mile 201, we need 16 culvert pipes, we need a ton and a half of rebar, we need X, Y, Z here” and they had it all; they ordered it, they shipped it, they delivered it and there it was, sitting all along the highway so that when the workers came, ready to actually build the highway. When that’s you and me, as we’re going to sit down and write the book, we want everything waiting for us in place. Then all we have to do is move the stuff over and put it in the ground...on the page.

So that’s what this Foolscap method does for you, among other things. What we’re going to do here is, there’s going to be a second video that’s going to follow this and I’m going to send this to you by email as well in the next few days and in the second video, I’m going to take the actual Foolscap thing from *The Legend of Bagger Vance* and take you through it, line by line, to show you exactly what goes on this page and how it works and how it helps. I’ll show you in terms of this book, but also in terms of other movies and things that you may be more familiar with.

We’re also going to include an excerpt from this book (*The Authentic Swing*), which I think you’ll find interesting. And we’re going to send a transcript as well, of this talk about the Foolscap method. So thank you so much for sticking with me, this is something new.

I’m an amateur. I haven’t done this before. Like Seth Godin says: “This may not work”. But I hope it does and I hope this has been helpful for you. I’ll see you again in a few days with the second half of this video.