

don't write *that* book!

Episode 5:

Understanding Your Ideal Reader

Mike Michalowicz ([00:01](#)):

Welcome back to the Don't Write That book podcast where you can learn how to write your bestseller and own your authorship. Follow along with us as we give you an insider's view of the book industry. Now, here are your hosts. Myself, **Mike Michalowicz** and **AJ Harper**.

What color do you like least?

AJ Harper ([00:18](#)):

No, don't start that again. What?

Mike Michalowicz ([00:20](#)):

Yeah. We, we have to come in with a conversation. What color do you like? Least

AJ Harper ([00:25](#)):

Brown. Poor brown. Okay. We grew up at the same, we're we're about the same age. One year older. Yeah, about a year older. Yeah. Yeah. How about that? Horrible green from the seventies, that green shag.

Mike Michalowicz ([00:39](#)):

Oh, oh, I had that in my, it's like a...olive. Yes. Yeah. But it has a little bit of brightness to it.

AJ Harper ([00:43](#)):

And then there would usually be some sort of orange furniture.

Mike Michalowicz ([00:47](#)):

Yep. Rust orange.

AJ Harper ([00:48](#)):

Rust orange. Yeah. How about those colors? Yeah, you can keep 'em.

Mike Michalowicz ([00:52](#)):

<laugh>. I think the color I used to love, and now I hate it, is fluorescent. Anything like

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AJ Harper ([00:59](#)):

You loved fluorescent?

Mike Michalowicz ([01:01](#)):

I did. I—

AJ Harper ([01:01](#)):

So were you, you know, at the roller rink? In the, with eighties with like the globe bands. And the, you know, Glo, um, uh, sh Shocking, neon, all that stuff. Like warmers.

Mike Michalowicz ([01:12](#)):

Yeah. The neon fluorescent stuff.

AJ Harper ([01:14](#)):

The band. Remember the sweat band across the head?

Mike Michalowicz ([01:16](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Uh, and my half shirt and—

AJ Harper ([01:20](#)):

And playing DnD?

Mike Michalowicz ([01:22](#)):

Playing DnD. Okay. Yeah.

AJ Harper ([01:23](#)):

I'm getting a picture. <laugh>

Mike Michalowicz ([01:26](#)):

I was so into fluorescent that when Krista and I got married... Now, this is, you know, this is the Nineties now. Um, we were taking Tyler, our son to kindergarten class, and I found, I guess a button-down shirt that's fluorescent. This is the Nineties. It was my one throwback attempt. It was, it wasn't fitted. It was like this plummy fluorescent button-down shirt, plummy? Plummy. And there was a picture of me wearing this, and you see like all these parents and like, just kind of side eyeing me, like, what is this guy doing in this plummy fluorescent? And that was, that was like

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the, the star collapsing, you know, when a, when a great star explodes and, and implodes on itself.

AJ Harper ([02:06](#)):

Wait, what did Kris, I have to know, what did Krista say?

Mike Michalowicz ([02:09](#)):

She... I don't know.

AJ Harper ([02:09](#)):

She accepted you.

Mike Michalowicz ([02:10](#)):

She accepted me. She's like, this is who he is. And I never wore it again. And that was the day I was like, okay, I'm done with fluorescent. So, I like it for safety purposes. I just don't <laugh> like it for clothing <laugh>. So, uh, in today's episode, we are going to, we are going to talk about the ideal reader. And I want to start off with a little bit of a story of how I started with my ideal reader selection. But in our preamble, you started like shaking your head and said, no, no, no. And that's a mistake that many people make. So, let me start off with what I now realize it was a mistake was when I was writing *The Toilet Paper Entrepreneur*, this was prior to writing it, I started to consider, well, who am I writing this for? So, at least I was on the path, and I looked at my younger self, I said, "Okay, I was a male college student."

Mike Michalowicz ([02:58](#)):

Um, I graduated college, and I started my business just a few years later. So clearly, it's going to be graduating college students, particularly male college students. And so, I wrote the book for my younger self. Now it's important to note, I was already fifteen years out of college at this point. I was about 35 when I wrote my first... when I wrote *The Toilet Paper Entrepreneur*. So, um, I, it was pretty far in the rear-view mirror, and it was a little bit cloudy, but I was sure that was the community that I knew the best, and that's what I wrote for. And as I was telling you this, and you're like, no, that's the mistake people make. So, I was just curious, what are common avatar or ideal reader mistakes that people make?

AJ Harper ([03:39](#)):

Well, first of all, it's not an avatar.

Mike Michalowicz ([03:41](#)):

Oh, hey, what's the difference of an avatar and ideal reader?

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AJ Harper ([03:44](#)):

So, an avatar is when you're creating this persona, right? "I'm writing for Dick, who is a senior at BYU and really wants to be an entrepreneur and goes to a frat party every Saturday and comes from a, um, you know, has stay at home mom, two-parent household, probably has a girlfriend, Jane. Jane." Yeah, of course. Dick and Jane. You know, rides a motorcycle. Secretly a badass, badass at BYU <laugh>, and, you know, that kind of thing. You start creating this character.

That's not it. It's, you think that, well, they're telling me to narrow my focus, that's narrowing it. No, because what that does is it actually excludes people and it gets you off track with the main thing that matters, which is hearts and minds. So, I do think you were right in saying, "let me write to an earlier version of myself," but when? So when you were experiencing the same desire and common perceived problem, meaning you wanted something and had an idea of what was in the way. So, when in your life were you experiencing what the reader is experiencing now?

Mike Michalowicz ([05:04](#)):

Gotcha. So it's really an emotional or mental state.

AJ Harper ([05:08](#)):

So it would've been when you wanted to start your own business. So, when you were frustrated at your job.

Mike Michalowicz ([05:14](#)):

Yeah.

AJ Harper ([05:14](#)):

And cursing your boss out at happy hour. That's the earlier version of you, not the college you.

Mike Michalowicz ([05:22](#)):

So that could represent an ideal reader, people who are frustrated at their job, cursing out their boss, and thinking they may want to go it alone.

AJ Harper ([05:30](#)):

Right. But the way you would describe it is what they perceive as the you. It's not just the desire. The key component with identifying ideal reader is desire plus what they perceive stands in the way of getting it. So, in other words, problem.

Mike Michalowicz ([05:47](#)):

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Yeah. So, the person who says, I'm frustrated with the boss, I *want to* go this alone, but I don't have the education or the knowledge or the experience. Or, or most businesses fail. Right. All the reasons, all the impedances that they see in.

AJ Harper ([06:01](#)):

Yeah. So, I think where you went, where you went wrong, if I can be on... and at the time, yeah, that was the beginning of our working relationship, and you just hired me to make that book better, but you were dead set. You were like, this is my reader. This is the tone, this is what I'm doing. And I think it affected tone, most of all... So you ended up with, because it was this supersized dude, bro. Avatar. Tons of bathroom humor, overly clever. Chapter titles. The tone was you dude, bro, you. Or maybe how you fantasized now that I'm learning about Neon <laugh>, Dungeons and Dragons. Yeah. I might, it might just be the fantasy of yourself in college.

Mike Michalowicz ([06:47](#)):

Yeah.

AJ Harper ([06:48](#)):

Because I remember you also told me, and, and we wrote this in one of the books, about the time that you threw the worst frat party ever. Was that didn't *Get Different*.

Mike Michalowicz ([06:56](#)):

I can't recall.

AJ Harper ([06:56](#)):

But I think so. So, I'm, I think you're painting a picture.

Mike Michalowicz ([07:01](#)):

Maybe, maybe.

AJ Harper ([07:01](#)):

It was just a fantasy.

Mike Michalowicz ([07:02](#)):

It was a fantasy.

AJ Harper ([07:03](#)):

At any rate. That's funny. At the time I thought it was you, I just kept thinking, okay, I am, this is a book for frat boys. This is a book for frat boys. . But I wanted to correct a bunch of stuff. Yeah.

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Because I knew it was going to exclude people. What you did right, though, I don't think you were conscious of at the time, but it shows you have good instincts. As an author, you knew that the problem was people who wanted to start a business and didn't think they were educated enough. . Had, had enough planning, knew or had enough money or experience Where they thought they had to get an MBA first and you blew everything out of the water. Remember the big controversial thing of that book where people gave you, do you remember what people gave you the most shit about?

Mike Michalowicz ([07:52](#)):

Was it not needing a business plan? Yes.

AJ Harper ([07:54](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. So, if you had combined, so you had taken out that dude bro aspect And thought instead about people who want to start a business, but their perception is they're not something enough.

Mike Michalowicz ([08:08](#)):

Yeah.

AJ Harper ([08:10](#)):

Then I, even though that book was, you know, a cult classic. As quoted by Inc. Right? Inc. Or Entrepreneur.

Mike Michalowicz ([08:17](#)):

Uh, one of those. One of those. Yeah.

AJ Harper ([08:20](#)):

I still think it, I think it actually could have sold even more. Because then you wouldn't have excluded folks. And I think it's still connected because of that other component. It's that other component that's actually still your reader today, which is, I don't, "I'm worried that I can't do this thing."

Mike Michalowicz ([08:40](#)):

You know, one thing, I don't know if I ever shared the story with you. I got a call from someone who said, oh, I found your book, *The Toilet Paper Entrepreneur*, because I was in a taxicab, this is before Uber and Lyft. I was in a taxicab, and the taxicab driver was listening to it and told the passenger, dude, this is the best book of all time. So, it built some fandom. The interesting thing is, the other fans that presented themselves, and I shared this, or will share in an episode, depends on when we record it, when we broadcast it. But, um, some students were bringing

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that book home to their parents, and the moms were reading the book. So male college guy brings book home, doesn't read it, leaves it there, and then the mom sees this bizarre title and reads it.

Mike Michalowicz ([09:27](#)):

So, I started getting calls from moms, and I asked them, "I said, why are you reading this book?" And the feedback was interesting. They were entering the business space for the first time, because now their kids were, they were empty nesters, and some of them were starting their first business. But they shared that the impedance was that their spouse or significant other was a verbal supporter, but emotional detractor. You've got this, but it's not going to work. And they felt impedance, they felt afraid. And it started to evolve. When we start writing, when we start working on our books, our listeners start working on their books. How do you start getting a sense for who the ideal reader is? Is it kind of just observing the community around you?

AJ Harper ([10:11](#)):

Well, this is my first question. I always ask authors: Who do you want to hang out with for the next few years? Just start with that question.

Mike Michalowicz (10:23)

That's cool.

AJ Harper (10:25):

Who do you want to hang with? I tell a story in my own book about <laugh>, about this. I used to get these calls. It was super stealth about ghost writing. People would call me, they got my number from somebody. Really true. And they would ask, they would want to hire me to be a ghost, and I would be on the phone with them for 45 minutes, and then they would find out how much I charged, or I would say, it's going to be this, take this much time. And then they would argue with me, well, so-and-so did their book in 60 days. And so-and-so, right. And I would always say, that's not, I don't do that.

AJ Harper ([10:53](#)):

Like, that's, that's, I don't, you can do that, but you can't do it with me. And then one morning I was, had so frustrated because I was, my son had put crayon all over the kitchen floor. And the phone rang one of these calls, and the guy starts in, and I just had this, I was so irritated that my Minnesota Nice just completely disappeared. And I said, um, I can't remember the exact words, but, you know, "Who do you want to hang out?" It was something like, to the effect, effect of, "What are you going to, who do you want to hang out with for the next two years? Are you prepared for this to be a couple years?" That, and that ended the call really quickly. And I was excited because, oh, I just got 45 minutes back.

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Mike Michalowicz ([11:34](#)):

Yeah.

AJ Harper ([11:35](#)):

But it started with, that started the process for me of, of asking folks are who are you prepared to cater to? Who are you excited to help? Who are you excited to serve? Let's just start with what jazzes you up. Not-not who you think would be a good market, because if you aren't passionate about serving them, number one, you, that's not going to get you anywhere it comes across. Plus you won't stay it out. Stick it out.

Mike Michalowicz ([12:01](#)):

Interesting.

AJ Harper ([12:02](#)):

So that's the start of it. Yeah.

AJ Harper ([12:04](#)):

Most of the time it's who you're already either serving, working with people you really care about. You know, depending on the type of book you're writing. So, you usually can answer that one pretty quickly. Where people trip themselves up is when they're thinking about the, well, what's the best one? What's the one that's going to get me the most sales or the most advantageous? I think it has to start from passion. You're writing for entrepreneurs that you genuinely care about. Who do you need to write for that fits your mission? You are on a mission to eradicate entrepreneurial poverty. Right?

Mike Michalowicz ([12:39](#)):

Yep.

AJ Harper ([12:40](#)):

Those are your people.

Mike Michalowicz ([12:41](#)):

Those are my people. That's when it became so clear.

AJ Harper ([12:44](#)):

And you'll... You will research, test, write, edit, market the heck out of a book. That's sometimes a 10 year process if the research is taking that long because of that. So that's why I

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say that's number one. But then once you know that it's identifying hearts and minds. So it's not a marketing avatar. It's not, here's Dick, college student, girlfriend. Right. Jane.

Mike Michalowicz ([13:16](#)):

Right, right.

AJ Harper ([13:16](#)):

Motorcycle, you know, wants to move to Paris, whatever. It's not all this list of this character build. It's a person who could be from any demographic pretty much who wants something and has a perception of the problem standing in the way of getting it. If you can have that clarity, you instantly connect to your ideal reader. But if you don't have that clarity, you don't connect to your ideal reader as well as you could. And sometimes not at all.

Mike Michalowicz ([13:48](#)):

I love that so much. It is an emotional state where they're in their heads. To further the story, I went from college student to moms who felt they weren't being supported to another email I got a few years back that just stands out so strongly, so obviously it resonates with me, was from Canberra, Australia, which is a little bit more of the interior of Australia. It's not on the coastline like the other major cities. And it was a husband/wife team who sent the email together and said, uh, "Your book saved our marriage." And so that was the opening lines, like, what's going on here? And they had read *Profit First*. They had read *The Pumpkin Plan*. They had read, I think it was *Clockwork*. They owned a horse farm, or they raised horses for equestrian use. And they'd been living check by check.

Mike Michalowicz ([14:37](#)):

The business wasn't growing. And they said, as a result, their marriage was a consequence. They were constantly at each other's throats. And they decided that it was time to maybe wrap up the marriage. And then they deployed *Profit First* with the first system. They started to use strategies from *The Pumpkin Plan*. And they said the business started to blossom. And they were able then to focus on their marriage and repair that. And they said they have a stronger marriage than ever. I was like, wow. That's the transformation I want to see, is that these entrepreneurs felt isolated, both literally, but also, you know, physically. Uh, so not just, um, figuratively, but also literally, I should say. They didn't have any resources. And that I had an opportunity to transform someone that feels abandoned without knowledge, without practical tools, and giving up hope that it was hope a situation, and bring hope again, and strategy. And that brought a little more full circle to me who the ideal reader was.

AJ Harper ([15:32](#)):

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I think you're thinking about that also from a marketing standpoint and trying to... But I mean, ultimately, all your readers have the same thing, which is a secret belief. So the isolation doesn't have to be in, in the outback. I don't know if Canaberra is in the Outback or not, but it doesn't have to.

Mike Michalowicz ([15:51](#)):

It's Outback-ish.

AJ Harper ([15:51](#)):

Okay. So, it doesn't have to be physically isolating. It's that feeling of, I might be the only person who's not good at this or can't do this. And I still think it's important though. If you're writing multiple books, you have this, you know, compendium of knowledge for entrepreneurs to still look at specifically for each book, how would you describe the thing they want? And what is the perception of... What is their perceived obstacle? That then helps you to craft the content so that the reader feels seen and heard. And that you're, the reason you need to know them well in that respect is because you have to make sure they feel seen and heard. Not just on page one, but on every page.

Mike Michalowicz ([16:37](#)):

So how do you figure out what their common problem is so that they do feel seen and heard? Is it through interviewing? Is it just instinctual? Is it because you've been living this as an author yourself?

AJ Harper ([16:51](#)):

Um, I mean, so often, you know. Yeah. Right. And you can test that. Mm-Hmm.

Mike Michalowicz ([16:56](#)):

<affirmative> Mm hmm.

AJ Harper ([16:57](#)):

I think it's just go to the source. So ask, ask a very point black question. How do you, on this topic, right? So, you know, if, if you want this, what do you perceive as standing in your way? What do you think is your biggest obstacle to getting X, Y, Z? Just ask in places where your reader might be hanging out, if they're part of your community and network easy. LinkedIn, Facebook, other social, TikTok, wherever you're hanging, wherever your reader is. But you can also do it, um, do a focus group. You can create a survey. There's all sorts of ways of just trying to get the language that they use and then looking for similarities.

Mike Michalowicz ([17:37](#)):

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That's so simple. And if they don't all answer the exact same way, or where you can see direct similarities, what do I do? If there's multiple answers,

AJ Harper ([17:48](#)):

We'll find the one that's most pressing. Okay. Yeah. We have a tendency to identify an ideal reader with sort of a kitchen sink approach. They want this and this and this and this. And the problem is this and this and this and this and this. It's not, "Does this go for the main thing they want the thing that they, that holds the highest stakes?" Highest stakes.

Mike Michalowicz ([18:09](#)):

Highest stakes. Oh, I like that.

AJ Harper ([18:10](#)):

Right. because then your book is a must read. Your book is, "I gotta get that because I want that so much."

Mike Michalowicz ([18:19](#)):

Yeah. Right. And then do you, with the other kitchen sink components, is that subsequent books?

AJ Harper ([18:24](#)):

No, I, no. I mean, maybe, but I think it's mostly just other things you talk about in the book. So, identifying an ideal reader is about zeroing in on that main thing they want. And the main problem standing in their way. And again, hear me when I say this, *their* perception of the problem standing in their way, this is crucial. This is where authors get tripped up, is they think, "Oh, the problem is this!" And that's the book. Yeah. That's you telling people, the problem is this, let me help you solve it. But actually, most people come in and they think it's one thing. Like for example, in *Clockwork*, people come in thinking they have a productivity issue. "I just need to be more productive." In the opening story, right? Because we knew that yes, the story is designed specifically to connect with people in the pain point.

AJ Harper ([19:20](#)):

"I want more time to be free from my business" to, and we went right there with the family vacation. Yeah. There's nothing worse for an entrepreneur. Yeah. Who I, who is tied to their business than the freaking family vacation. And I've been there. I mean, I think the worst fight my wife and I ever had was on vacation. Because of work. Because she had gone into town, we were renting the cabin, and I took a work call while she was gone and didn't get off it fast enough. It's like, "Oh, dang, I should have hung up just two minutes earlier." And she saw me on the phone and lost it. And she had every right to, I mean, those were the days when, I mean, we

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go to this island, as you know. No Wi-Fi. They have Wi-Fi now everywhere. But at the time, you had to go to the library. So, I would drive to the library at, say, 11 o'clock at night.

Mike Michalowicz ([20:13](#)):

Wow. Yeah.

AJ Harper ([20:14](#)):

Sit in the parking lot, try to tap into the Wi-Fi on my laptop. So, I, I resonate. You resonate, right? Yeah. I resonate with that. Yeah. We took that story. Yeah. Most recognizable. Yeah. And then turn the productivity piece on its ass. So you go in thinking, "I just need to be more productive, get everything done before my trip." Which is a fallacy. And then correct the problem. But if you go immediately to—

Mike Michalowicz ([20:42](#)):

"Here's the fix."

AJ Harper ([20:43](#)):

Here's the fix. It doesn't help the reader feel seen.

Mike Michalowicz ([20:47](#)):

Right. And they, they won't even believe you. 'cause you don't get them yet.

AJ Harper ([20:49](#)):

Yeah, exactly.

Mike Michalowicz ([20:52](#)):

What about if there's secondary audiences, if it goes beyond just your, is it even possible that beyond your ideal reader, there's these secondary and tertiary audiences? If there is, how do I address them or do I even need to?

AJ Harper ([21:05](#)):

So you, you can address them. But you don't write *for* them.

Mike Michalowicz ([21:09](#)):

What's the, what's the difference?

AJ Harper ([21:11](#)):

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Okay. You're writing for this primary audience. So, every decision you make is based on what's going on with them, what they understand, how they feel about the content. If you don't do that, if you try and write for all these different audiences, it just turns into a bunch of.. sort of, um, superficial. Everything is too general, too. Everything, everyone. And it's the specificity that connects us. I think this is something that's hard for people to grasp at first. At least that's my perception. Maybe it isn't for you if you're listening, but we think if I'm too specific, I'm excluding someone. But I've never been to the Jersey Shore. I don't have your... Well, okay. I have been once, but it's not my story. I have a different story. I can still put myself in your shoes with the specificity, even though we have a different business, different story, different family.

Mike Michalowicz (22:15)

Yep. Right.

AJ Harper (22:17):

I still am there with you in that moment. In the specificity, we connect. When it's too general, we don't connect. So, I could tell you a story that's so personal to me, which I have. And you, if I tell it well enough and connect on the emotional points, you'll immediately say, "You know, that reminds me of..." That's how you know it's a good story. "Oh, I felt that. Oh, let me tell you about my version of that." But when we try to go too far, too general to speak to too many, you know, I see this... This is how, this is how it shows up in a book. You'll see in those opening pages, "Maybe you picked up this book because, uh, you're, you're feeling insecure about starting a business. Or maybe you started a business and you..."

Mike Michalowicz (23:07)

<laugh> Right.

AJ Harper (23:09):

"And things aren't going so well. Or maybe you want to sell your business." Like, it just goes on with "maybe, maybe, maybe, maybe." And you're trying to cover all the different levels of entrepreneur. Well, now I don't trust you anymore.

Mike Michalowicz (23:22)

That's right.

AJ Harper (23:25)

You don't actually know why I'm here. So, the second, but to answer your... So, that's number one is write for primary. And what's funny is other people will read it. If it's great for primary,

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other people can still, they recognize a great book. But you can still pull in secondary in other ways. Look, let me give you an example. You remember Tricia Timm, we interviewed her for *All In*, she wrote, um, oh God.

Mike Michalowicz ([23:52](#)):

I can Google. I I don't recall the book.

AJ Harper ([23:55](#)):

She's, um, *Embrace the Power of You*.

Mike Michalowicz ([23:57](#)):

You're, you beat me to it. You are the Google <laugh>.

AJ Harper ([24:00](#)):

Well, she's my student, so I— I'm so proud of her. I love that book. And she writes about— She's writing for people who are hiding some aspect of their identity at work. And they don't feel safe. They want to be open and out about whatever aspect of their identity whether it's... For her, it was, she was hiding her Latina heritage, could be sexual orientation, could be a disability, could be just... She also talked about just hiding. She was a mom. And they don't feel it's safe for them to come forward for whatever reason. But we, she saw a secondary audience with managers, people who are managing those people to have a greater understanding. Right? So, the way we worked around that, it's written for the person who's hiding, and then at the end of the chapter, there are is a section that's outside of the main body of that chapter for managers to apply what they learned by reading that chapter. So therefore now she gets this big corporate buy because it's not just for the individual, it's for people in HR, managers, et cetera., because the content is there. That's one way to do it.

Mike Michalowicz ([25:17](#)):

I want to do a call back to what you said about the reader connecting with the story so much that they want to point out their own story. Like the, you use the beach, the Jersey Shore story, and you said, "Oh, it reminds me of when I go to the island." Trisha Timm, staying late to talk with a janitor. That was her story.

AJ Harper ([25:35](#)):

That's such a good story.

Mike Michalowicz ([25:35](#)):

It was so they could speak in Spanish. Right?

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Mike Michalowicz ([25:38](#)):

That I was like, oh, that reminds me of a story back in college waiting for at lacrosse practice, blah, blah, blah. For a hang out with Michael Chen, his name was. And, um, what I think is interesting is I've seen speakers almost get offended when, at a speaking event on their book, people come up from the audience and say, I want to tell you my story. And it's like, "Ah, you know, I'm here to just espouse my ideas and not hear your story." I think it's the ultimate form of flattery when someone wants to come up and share their story. It means that they are integrating what you just taught on stage or through your book into their life now. And there's this automatic reflux, reflex to share your own story. When, when I speak, if no one shares their stories, I'm like, "Ooh, something's not landing here." So, I look for that trigger. It's a really interesting response.

AJ Harper ([26:30](#)):

But this also solves, this is a question I get all the time from authors. "How do I know how much of my story to tell? And where to put it and how to integrate it, and how much is too much?" The easy answer is if you know your ideal reader well enough, then you choose the parts of your story that will help you connect to them where they are. Or illustrate the teaching points as you move forward. But if you don't know the reader, how do you know which part of your story? So, you have a tendency at the beginning of a book, you'll see this all the time. Dump the life story, dump it in the intro. Long, long story.

Mike Michalowicz ([27:08](#)):

Oh yeah. That's boring.

AJ Harper ([27:09](#)):

Right. "I was born..." Right. I say this all the time. "This is not helpful to a reader." They care how you, they care about themselves, of course. And the way that you use your story to show them you care is to isolate the part of your journey where you are, where they are now.

Mike Michalowicz ([27:30](#)):

Oh my God. I hope everyone listening wrote that one down. When we were at the writer's cabin this last go around, you had to not had to, you decided to do a work session with your readers through Top Three Book Workshop.

AJ Harper ([27:42](#)):

Yeah. It was one of my live edits.

Mike Michalowicz ([27:43](#)):

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Yeah. So, there was maybe 30 people I saw on the screen. I was walking by, I came, I went out for a run, and I came back, and you were in the living room and I was, you let me come in and wave to everybody. Yeah. And then I sat back in the kitchen, and I was working on stuff by, I was listening in and there was one author and you're like, he's telling his life story. You're like, "You've got to go deeper." Not his life story in his entirety. It was specific—

AJ Harper ([28:04](#)):

Oh, he's writing a memoir, so—

Mike Michalowicz ([28:05](#)):

Oh, wait. But he was writing something specific to what resonates. Yeah. And you're like, you've got to go deeper. And he's like, I don't know. You're like, you've got to go deeper!

AJ Harper ([28:10](#)):

Like I, that's, I wasn't shouting.

Mike Michalowicz ([28:13](#)):

You weren't shouting, but I felt it. Yeah. I found some people are too verbose on the generic components of their story, but then are too shallow on the most important part of their story.

AJ Harper ([28:23](#)):

Yeah. I call that unpacking. I'm not the first person to use that term, but I think my students are all, oh, they see the note on the, on the side column and the margins. "Unpack this, unpack this." That just means this is the moment. This is where the juice and the heart connect to the heart of the reader. Yeah. This is where you show, I get it. Been there, done that, bought the T-shirt and then three more T-shirts. And if you can do that, the connection will, and you keep doing it? You—the reader will keep reading. And that's what we're trying to do here. We're not trying to just write a book that no one reads. We're trying to write a book that people read, take action on. And if they do that, they will tell folks. And it's really that simple. But if we don't unpack the key moments that correlate by feeling or situation, feeling of frustration, feeling of loneliness, rock bottom. But it can also be positive, right? Getting the thing you want. Realizing, realizing that you need to do things a different way. Those realization moments are everything, but we tend to just pass by. I call it driving past the historical marker.

Mike Michalowicz ([29:39](#)):

<laugh> I like that. Yeah. That's cool. That's a good analogy.

AJ Harper ([29:42](#)):

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Yeah. Just you need to pull over, take some pictures, show people you don't just keep driving down the road. And we tend to do that with those life stories. We want to get all the exposition in all the details. All the backstory that we think our reader needs. And they don't give a crap. What they care is: "Do you understand me? Do you know me?"

Mike Michalowicz ([30:03](#)):

Do you know me. In your book, *Write a Must-Read*, I think you were originally going to title that *Readers First*.

AJ Harper ([30:07](#)):

Reader First. Yeah. Which is my reader first methodology.

Mike Michalowicz ([30:11](#)):

So, what's the reader first application to the avatar or the ideal reader I should say?

AJ Harper ([30:17](#)):

Once you have the reader, then you make all writing and editing. And I would even argue marketing, decisions based on that reader. Okay. So, you've got to get it first reader first. Literally do that first. And we did that. We were just at the writing cabin very first thing we did. And spent some, quite a lot of time on it. And I think we probably will revise some things actually with getting more intel.

Mike Michalowicz ([30:43](#)):

Yep. We have some interviews already lined up.

AJ Harper ([30:44](#)):

Yeah. We're going to do a little more digging. Yep. So then once you have that, you can make decisions. What is in service to my reader? That's what reader first means. It's always when you have to decide, "does this go here? Do I need this? What am I missing? Is this, is this doable? Do I need all these stories or should I cut some?" Um, all of that, those decisions that you feel nervous about making as an author are easily solved when you decide to ask yourself, okay, is this helpful to my reader? And will it help me deliver on the promise I've made to them? So, what do they have to unlearn or learn in order for you to deliver on their promise? What are their burning questions about that problem? Your topic? What are their fears and concerns around it? Um, also thinking about how would your reader react to the content? This is... Okay, this is a game changer, and most people don't do this. We tend to think about our content. And even if we connected with the reader in the first chapter, we did a good job. It's like we forget about them <laugh>. But if you were sitting and talking with someone, sharing the same information, they would react to it.

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Mike Michalowicz ([32:05](#)):

That's right.

AJ Harper ([32:06](#)):

They might get upset. If you're challenging something that they've believed their whole lives, for example. That would be upsetting. Or they might be super psyched, or they might have turned a corner, they might have a big aha. They might feel bad. They might have the veil lifted and realize they've been making bad choices. All you have to think about that the, their journey through your content and when you do and then make adjustments and how you make adjustments isn't just in what you choose to include. It's also just acknowledging that experience right in the text.

Mike Michalowicz ([32:45](#)):

You know, yeah. You may be upset right now. Yeah. Um, how do you, are there hacks or techniques to considering how they'd react without being able to see them?

AJ Harper ([32:56](#)):

I mean, you can do a test drive. We did a whole episode on that. Yeah. You can, you can test the content itself, but I've found that just considering it—

Mike Michalowicz ([33:05](#)):

Yeah.

AJ Harper ([33:06](#)):

—is enough. And you get better at it. So, in my, in with my workshop, I notice my students over time, they practice it, they just keep asking themselves. And I'll hear them say things like, "You know what? I just feel like it's too soon for them to learn this." And that's my happy place. Oh, thank you Lord. Because that's when they are figuring it out for themselves. Or they'll say, "You know what? I just think this story would be better over here. Because I think it's really hard. They don't need this. Um, this is extra. I don't need to ask them to do this. This is too hard. Let me simplify it."

Mike Michalowicz ([33:40](#)):

And it's, well, let me tell a little story there. Yeah. Jesse Cole, founder of Savannah Bananas, they leave a pair of shoes on the table when they're having discussions around serving their customers. And as a customer's shoes. They had one of their fans leaving one day and the shoes were wetter, mighty. The guys take them off and they said, "Hey, can we keep your shoes?" And they gave them a new set of shoes and those are the shoes they keep on the desk. So it forces

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that constant consideration of how would the customer feel about these thoughts we have. Yeah. So maybe, maybe, maybe have your ideal readers equivalent of shoes on your desk as you're writing.

AJ Harper ([34:13](#)):

I mean, or just put a Post-it that says reader first next to your desk. The thing is, you get better at it. Yeah. It just takes practice. It becomes ins it, it becomes instinct eventually. Yeah. Yeah. And you'll get, you'll get great at it. It's just by asking yourself the question. You don't even need an editor to help you. You just need to ask yourself.

Mike Michalowicz ([34:34](#)):

And are there real, any other reader first tips?

AJ Harper ([34:37](#)):

Uh, you know, I think the biggest one is doability. Yeah. That's one of the immutable laws for your book. Yeah. It's also one of mine because it's crucial because if a reader can't do what you're asking them to do in a prescriptive non-fiction book they won't do it. And now you don't have as many people telling people about the book because they didn't experience change.

Mike Michalowicz ([34:57](#)):

And that's why they came to it in the first place. Um, what about the research that we can put into identifying the ideal reader or getting a better understanding for them?

AJ Harper ([35:06](#)):

So we talked about just asking on social. Maybe doing surveys. But Reddit's a good place.

Mike Michalowicz ([35:12](#)):

Do you use Reddit much?

AJ Harper ([35:13](#)):

I have started to use it because you recommended it. I used to stay away from it because I felt like it was just people talking about conspiracy theories all the time.

Mike Michalowicz ([35:22](#)):

<laughs> It's not!

AJ Harper ([35:23](#)):

I obviously was in the wrong place.

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Mike Michalowicz ([35:25](#)):

<laugh> I was on there. I-I'm an amateur guitarist at best. I'm, but I'm interested in it. And some people go on there and they say, here's me on day one playing guitar. And I would love people, community, the community's feedback as I progress. And then they show an update week one, month one, year one. And you can see these people progressing and the community rooting for them. But you also learn all of the stumbling points that someone that's progressing through this experience is having and how they're supported. Like those people have written out a lot of the formula for you. It's a really interesting way to realistically watch a, in this case, guitars go through the experience.

AJ Harper ([36:04](#)):

I think you could also look for associations that serve your ideal reader. They often run their own surveys and do their own statistical reports where you can grab that report and see: What do they identify as their big problems? You know, they ask these questions already, those big associations. That's another way to do it. Um, and then this is the, I believe you learned this from James Clear?

Mike Michalowicz ([36:28](#)):

I did. Yeah. I know it was coming.

AJ Harper ([36:30](#)):

Three-star reviews.

Mike Michalowicz ([36:32](#)):

Three-star reviews. Yeah. So the tip was this. He said, people give their most integral criticism in three-star reviews and their most integral compliment. He goes, the five stars are blowhards and the one stars are trolls, but the three stars are the most integral. And a little bit in the fours and a little bit in the twos but read the threes. It was so fascinating is what I do now is I look at all the comp books for a book that we're writing about. I look at all the three stars and say, what is the lesson I'm learning here on what the ideal reader needs to be served with?

AJ Harper ([37:03](#)):

Yeah. Comp books meaning comparative titles, comparatives. And I think that's also really helpful. So you can do a combination of these things. You can also do the test drive, like we talked about, to see, to learn more about your reader and how they perceive their problem.

Mike Michalowicz ([37:19](#)):

Let's talk about, uh, when you nail the ideal reader, once you understand who they are and you can succinctly present it, what are the wins?

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AJ Harper ([37:27](#)):

Well, you can write a book that speaks to them, right? That would be number one. But this is huge. You can pitch <laugh>.

Mike Michalowicz ([37:34](#)):

Yeah.

AJ Harper ([37:35](#)):

I can't tell you how many publishers I've talked to who have said one of their biggest issues is they, their the per— The author who's pitching does not understand, cannot articulate who their reader is.

Mike Michalowicz ([37:47](#)):

Yeah.

AJ Harper ([37:48](#)):

This is such a common problem. So you, you just had Trena, um, at your event. And do you know what she said was, uh, we love working with AJ students because they understand their reader. That's her main thing she wants.

Mike Michalowicz ([38:04](#)):

Trena is the co-founder of Page Two, which is a hybrid.

AJ Harper ([38:07](#)):

Trena White. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz ([38:07](#)):

Yeah. Which is a hybrid publisher. Um, probably one of the authoritative ones if, if not one of the top three I'd say in hybrid publishing right now.

AJ Harper ([38:14](#)):

So, publishers want you to know that because they know it's going to make a better book. But it's honestly so that you understand the market. And you know how to, where are you going to sell this book? So, if you can act, if you have knowledge of that, not only does it show to them that you understand publishing, you understand what you're getting into. It shows you have enough. Um, you might be green, but you understand, and that's crucial. Because if you don't know that, they know you're not actually going to sell as many books. But also, it improves your ability to pitch. I just had an author who is working on a memoir, and she pitched two agents

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and they both, uh, were interested. One requested a full manuscript, yay! That's unusual to happen right away. The other one said, "let's stay in touch." And she texted me and said, "That's my dream agent. And he said, let's stay in touch." I said, "That's awesome!" What do you mean he didn't ask me for the manuscript? I said, "Because he would never say, 'Let's stay in touch' if he didn't want to, because there's too many people bothering him." So then when she did reach out, she used the fundamentals that I talk about, which is ideal reader, core message, promise, but a lot on reader wove it into the email in a conversational way.

Mike Michalowicz ([39:38](#)):

Yeah, good.

AJ Harper ([39:39](#)):

He requested that manuscript. "Send me the full thing." So, it helps you to talk about your book, which is crucial. How many times have you asked a person once your book about, and it takes them five minutes to tell you. Instead, tell them who it's for and then it's, it's much easier. You can also find collaborators that way. And obviously readers and like we already talked about, I mean, you can talk about the marketing piece, but how do you market the book if you don't know who the reader is?

Mike Michalowicz ([40:05](#)):

And I, I'm going to correlate collaborators and marketing in this, uh, experience. I just had a call two days ago with a company that helps new businesses form. We're talking and I said, "What's this situation that these new entrepreneurs are in there coming to?"

He goes, "Well, these don't know what to do. They're so frustrated, they need help. They don't know where to get started."

I'm like, oh my gosh, just hearing that. It's like there's a parallel in what he's doing in helping company formations with the education. And so now we're exploring ways to work together. So, it became a marketing component, but knowing the problem they face and the frustrations they have, um, that your readers have, you can very quickly identify all the other outlets out there that are serving people in that same state. And then you can parallel, you know, parallel market or support each other.

AJ Harper ([40:50](#)):

Well that, that brings up just one little caveat, one little asterisk that I want to mention. Make sure that there are enough of your readers to buy the book. <laugh>. Okay. So, once you've identified the reader, do they exist in a large, is this a big group?

Mike Michalowicz ([41:07](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

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AJ Harper ([41:07](#)):

Are we talking ten folks? Yeah. Yeah. That's the only thing I would say.

Mike Michalowicz ([41:10](#)):

So if your ideal reader's like, "I am so frustrated of living on a deserted island, right?" <laugh>. Yeah. There's probably not enough readers. That's, that's good. Yeah. Alright, my friends, I hope you got a lot of new ideas from this that you'll deploy in your own author endeavors. We want to invite you go to [dwtbpodcast.com](#). That's our website. Don't Write *that* Book podcast.com. Also, we'd love to hear your experiences, what are your stories, and if there's stuff you want to hear us talk about, we *want to* know that too. Email AJ and myself at hello@dwtbpodcast.com. AJ's got an amazing workshop. I don't think we devote enough time to talk about at the Top Three, uh, Workshop. Could you just explain what that is real quick before we wrap it up?

AJ Harper ([41:52](#)):

Sure. It's a, it's a 14-week class in which I help authors write a book that becomes a must read, a book that people can't stop talking about. So it's um, hands-on class, hands-on meaning I teach it live, private coaching, all of that. And I only do it for a certain very small group of people. <laugh>, um, once or twice a year. And, uh, that is the class that has brought forward some truly remarkable books that are currently changing lives. So, in that I teach reader first, and it's important to note that that's a craft. It's not just an idea. It's an actual craft and I teach, teach that craft so that when authors come out of that class, they understand how to do that for the book they're working on and all the books to come.

Mike Michalowicz ([42:43](#)):

You've got to attend this class. I'm the only author on the planet that has the privilege of going through a on private sessions where we go to workshops or retreats. Um, but I've also attended some of the classes, met with the students. It's a game changer. What's the website for Top Three?

AJ Harper ([42:57](#)):

It's on my **AJ Harper.com**. Go. All right. Yeah, go there.

Mike Michalowicz ([42:59](#)):

Go. All right. Yeah, go there. Just go to **AJ Harper.com**. Yeah. All right, my friends. Um, that's it for today. Thanks for joining us. I hope you listen to the next episode. And as always, remember don't write *that* book. Write this one.