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Episode 113:

“The First Draft: Structure v. Freedom”

Mike Michalowicz:

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. All right, AJ. I have a choose your own adventure start for, don't write that book. So you pick, do you wanna hear about the rabbit attack the drug story? Or, and there will be drug references in it. But all G rated and then, or heart palpitations. What would you like to start off with today?

AJ Harper:

Attack rabbit.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay, so my daughter behind me, if you can see the video, is a cage. So my daughter's visiting with her boyfriend Marco from Chattanooga. They came up for Thanksgiving, and now we're recording this on the 25th. So Thanksgiving's two days away. They arrived early November. And my wife voluntold was voluntold to babysit while they did some travel around and so forth. So we have the rabbits that need to be cared for and her dog. So last night while I was at work, Marco, her boyfriend comes in here in my office, 'cause this is where their key, this is the only place in our house that we have left, because we have my, my son's here. It's like the place, there's this construction going on. It's like insane. And he, one of the rabbits jumps at him. So he moves back, not like an attack, but I'll call it the attack rabbit. He jumps outta the cage, he trips over the cage, knocks over a statue my parents gifted to me, like this wooden statue broke it, <laugh> fall, which honestly, I, I knocked it over before and it had been broken once before, so it was not a big deal. He feels so guilty, knocks over. So things are knocked over this, this office I come in and destroyed. He's upset. He's like, will you ever talk to me again? <Laugh>

AJ Harper:

Who, the boyfriend ?

Mike Michalowicz:

And Yeah, yeah, yeah. I love him. I love Marco.

AJ Harper:

You told me before that you really like him. I

Mike Michalowicz:

Love him. And he wants to go like, oh, I think I'll get this repeat.

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AJ Harper:

Is this his first trip to your house?

Mike Michalowicz:

No, no. He's been here many times.

AJ Harper:

Oh, okay. Because, so that would've been worse if it was like, oh, I'm meeting, like, I'm meeting the family in the home and I broke this down.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, God. Could you imagine? At times, he's my favorite son. He's, he's amazing. He's amazing.

AJ Harper:

Favorite child?

Mike Michalowicz:

Favorite child, yeah, <laugh>. And so then little part of me, the little, the little evil fun part is like, oh my God, isn't like, maybe should, maybe he should do a story around that. Like, that's an heirloom. But I was like, if I do this, it'll destroy him. So I just said, ah, don't worry about it. It, it's, I actually-- statue anymore. Didn't

AJ Harper:

Didn't we just do it?

Mike Michalowicz:

Didn't we just do what?

AJ Harper:

Just do the thing that, oh no, you were gonna say it's an heirloom.

Mike Michalowicz:

I was gonna say it's an heirloom and you know, go happy on it. Yeah. There's gonna heavy you on it. 'cause I'm like, that'll be some fun. And I'm like, that won't be fun. That'll like throw him. And there's no restoring from that. So I said, no, it's because it ain't an heirloom. It's kind almost a goof thing. But now I'm thinking about modifying. So it's, it's a wood statue and I'm thinking about drilling a massive hole into it and making a compartment for some kind of storage of something. Chapstick. I don't know what this store chap. The store. Oh, it's a, it's, it's an African boy my parents got when they were in Africa or African man, boy size, very short maybe like two feet tall. And he's smoking a pipe. It's all carved outta wood. It's a beautiful piece. My parents had it in their living room. So when my father passed away, we started dividing up some stuff. My mother's still alive 'cause my mom was cleaning out the house and all

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of these, I do not want. My sister and I said, well, I'll take this. You take that and then here's what we're gonna donate. And the statue was in the donate bin. I'm like, that's coming home with me. So that's what I,

AJ Harper:

Okay,

Mike Michalowicz:

But it's not my prize possession. My prize possession. I'll show you. Hold on. 'cause We got video. Okay. This is my prize possession. So it's a, for the people listening in, it's a little statue also of a, of a kid with a belly or a man with his hands wide open, but under it says, I love you this much. There was a remember white elephants, the, the things that schools would do. Yeah. Yeah. So I went to a white elephant and we were allowed to buy one thing. This cost me the nickel. And I, I bought this. But over his shoulder is a watch. That's the last thing my dad was wearing when he passed away, was his watch. It was his favorite thing as a, a citizen's watch. So and I gave this statue. I bought it when I was a little kid, like in kindergarten before my dad, and he held onto it. So oh no. Yeah. Honors my dad.

AJ Harper:

That's so sweet.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Yeah. Alright, lemme put this back and let's kick into it. Oh my God. As I was putting that back on the shelf, the dust and fur, like, I didn't realize I picked it up. There's a perfect square where it was standing of cleanliness and everything else was dust and fur.

AJ Harper:

So you're, you have a fur. I didn't know this. You are, you don't want any fur.

Mike Michalowicz:

I don't want any fur, any, any particulates flying through the air that I can see it, it gets to me and it's just, it's just covered. It's a, it's a, it's a, a blanket of, of rabbit fur, which is, it is very light. It's not like dog fur that sits this, this, you just walk by the room and there's like a swirl behind you of rabbit fur.

AJ Harper:

Oh, all right. Well, and happy Thanksgiving.

Mike Michalowicz:

And Happy Thanksgiving. Yeah. So, yeah, we're recording this two days before Thanksgiving. Today we're gonna talk about the first draft. I, I'm really interested in hearing this concept 'cause you're talking about the structure versus freedom. And it reminds me of a story from my brother-in-law who's in the military. So I want to share that once we kick in. But first I wanna introduce you. I wanna acknowledge my part, my co-writer, my partner AJ Harper for writing one of the most important books of this century

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when it comes to writing, probably the most important called write a must read. If you don't have your copy of it, get it. Here's what I admire about you is flexibility. You, you roll with it. So last night I got the message, we gotta record this so we can't be in studio. I was actually really looking forward to not being in the house and being with you at the studio, but Adayla says, you guys gotta record video. So I was like, oh, rock and roll. Let's, let's record video. Lemme call you January. Yeah, no problem. Bing, bing, boom. So thank you for your flexibility.

AJ Harper:

I mean, I'm pretty much, I pretty much roll with it. Thank you. I'll take that. I'm proud of that quality. But

Mike Michalowicz:

You've, you've rolled like, that's, it's an itty bitty thing. You've rolled with some big things and I'm like, oh, that's amazing. .

AJ Harper:

It's true. <Laugh> It doesn't really fluff my feathers though. It's not like, it's a lot of efforts. By the way, behind me is my dog. In case anyone's watching the video. My dog Greeley. I feel, I, I gotta say I was showing people some pictures of my house when you were hanging pictures for me. You just told me you don't like animals on the furniture. Right. And there's a, I have like four pictures of you

Mike Michalowicz:

With Greeley.

AJ Harper:

With Greeley on the furniture.

Mike Michalowicz:

So, so here's my, this is why it's not like an OCD or something other people have as other people's houses.

AJ Harper:

Oh, I got it.

Mike Michalowicz:

If you permit it. Absolutely. So when most people allow their animals on the furniture or their pet's, dogs, cats, of course. And it doesn't pay me at all. I actually like it except for my house. Yeah. Okay. Because I, yeah. So it was,

AJ Harper:

Whatever. Okay. Well you're new. Yeah. Well, I admire the fact that you are, despite the fact that there's some aggravation with having a house full of people and construction and just a, it's compound effective. What you're dealing with right now. I have a quiet house. But you're dealing with a Yeah, yeah. A loud

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house that you're, you know, you still love it. You love having all of your people around. Totally. And so you're not gonna, you're just gonna roll. You're just gonna stand next to the rabbits and deal with.

Mike Michalowicz:

That's what I do. I'm just a stander now. I'm a stander. I never get a kick out of it. It's almost like fun. It's like, oh, have the dog sit here. 'cause Then, then dad can't sit there. So it's kind of, it's kind of a game. <Laugh>

AJ Harper:

But you roll up them. I like that. That you are, you're not gonna put your foot down about certain things. You'd say, okay, it's a moment in time. We'll get through it.

Mike Michalowicz:

The thank you, thank you, thank you. And the alternative is so much worse. I'd way rather have my children, the animals, the insanity than the silence. Like, that's, it's so appreciated. Who, so the topic of structure versus freedom. Who, who requested this? What's, what's Natalie's background?

AJ Harper:

She is a super fan of this, of this podcast. And then she is also a recent alum. You know, my workshop ended last week after four, sorry, 14 week haul. So she's now a new alum of that workshop, but she's also been for a long time, an avid listener of this pod. And she listens first thing on Thursdays and she said, Hey, I really wanting to talk about structure versus freedom, because I get a little intimidated by structure. And then when do you let go of it? And I thought, that's a, a worthy topic. We should talk about that.

Mike Michalowicz:

What's Natalie's like book that she's writing or,

AJ Harper:

So she's writing for people who wanna resolve some sort of conflict with someone they care about. But they, but they struggle to do it because they're really afraid of losing something. So, you know, when you have, you avoid the conflict because makes you... Yeah. So she's writing for those people. And she was a long time leader in AmeriCorps and applying some of these leadership principles that we know work in organizations and businesses and so forth, but to individuals and their conflicts with each other.

Mike Michalowicz:

That's amazing.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. The book's amazing. So she's she's an avid listener and she wanted to talk about structure.

Mike Michalowicz:

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Oh, thank you Natalie. I can't wait 'til your book comes out. That's one I am buying pre Is it? When is ready, ready for pre-order, please.

AJ Harper:

She's, I mean, I wish we could have pre-order links for all my students while they were writing so they could see how excited people would be. But no, she's in the process of finishing the revisions.

Mike Michalowicz:

You know, we'll talk about it when we do The Money Habit updates. I got some more pre-orders yesterday. It's just interesting about a book in that I, I didn't really understand this. People will order something because it's meaningful them for them in that moment, regardless, or regardless if it's available for purchase or consumption. So meaning The Money Habit, people bought it six months ago because they have a money challenge and there's some form of resolution. Even though the book isn't there, they're still willing and desirous to make the investment, which was, it's kind of surprising to me. So like Natalie's book, like, oh, I'll preorder it right now. And almost, and maybe subconsciously if her book doesn't come out for another year or two when it appears it, it will feel like a gift. But the commitment's been made in the moment.

AJ Harper:

You know, that's really interesting too, to think about how can we get pre-ordered way before just when. Yeah. Just, we should think about that. We just, when you people are talking about it.

Mike Michalowicz:

Well, Kickstarter, I, things kind of proved out that that concept works. So, alright let's talk. What structure is, and is this the o- is freedom the opposite? Like I don't understand what can you define both?

AJ Harper:

Well, you know well, I think what inspired it is I'm really hardcore about structure in my program. And so I require a lot from my from my students to do not just fundamentals, but to get a very detailed transformational outline. Going to be very clear about that, to be very clear about the sequencing. And so sometimes that can be intimidating for folks. And well, freedom would be, lemme just write, lemme just write and see what happens. Versus thinking about where does it go and am I hitting all these points? Where does it go in, where does this section go in relation to these other sections? And why? And so that can feel like being in a box sometimes. And then the, the total freedom though can feel a little unhinged. Like you don't know if it's worth anything, what you're writing, when do you stop, how do you know if it's good, can you use it or not? And I think there's a happy medium.

Mike Michalowicz:

My brother-in-law, Alan Harding, and the reason I share his name and put emphasis on Harding is a drill sergeant, retired but he still serves in the military, but not in the drill Sergeant capacity works for the Army. And I said, tell me about bootcamp. And he was, you know, kind of going through it. And I said, gosh, there's so much structure, like every moment is planned and prepared for you. And I said, is you, you must be crushing these kids. And he looks at me, he goes, this is their freedom. And I was like, what?

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With that much structure, he goes, people thrive under systems until they get it. And without it, they don't know how to take the next step. So structure, structure allows you to know what the next step is. He was explaining and you get to move in this process. And once you're through that, you now have a, a, a wiring in you that allows you to start expressing yourself. He goes, if if soldiers showed up and they didn't go through bootcamp, there would be a disaster. It it's building this kind of framework inside them. Are we talking like the same thing basically? Is this like, is structure kinda the, the bootcamp?

AJ Harper:

Well, there's structure by how you're structuring your time and your day. And I can see how that can feel confining. It's funny you say bootcamp. 'cause I would bet the students who just graduated from my program would say it felt like bootcamp. I mean, they were, oh, interesting. They're dragging. You know, we're all dragging at the end. Yeah. why do I do it like that? I could make it simpler. I could make it easier. But there's an incredible shift that happens at the end that is cumulative. It's not, it's not something that happens because of what I'm teaching that week. It's because of everything they've done up until then. And a little bit about the, it's a little bit about the grind too. That there's a turn that happens with the students where they start to say to me, this is what I'm going to do, versus what do you think I should do?

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, when do you notice that?

AJ Harper:

Like week 13 ish out of 14 <laugh>.

Mike Michalowicz:

I'm telling you, it's just like what I understand the military's like, there's a turning moment.

AJ Harper:

Yeah, it's a turn. And they don't, and they don't always, they don't, they don't really notice it, but all of a sudden they know what they're going to do and look to me maybe for confirmation, but they're not looking me for me to tell them what to do. And it's because they have it. The drills of so ingrained about how we focus on the reader. Focus on the reader focus. Go back, start over. Let, let's look at this again. Let's, that's not the right way to approach that. You tried, let's do it again. And there's a bit of a grind at the end where they're turning in so much to me. That they have to, there's almost nothing else they can do for those last five weeks. They just have to plow and it feels hard. But then there's, but then it turns and, yeah, I'm not saying it's not hard, but they, they do turn and all of a sudden it clicks.

Mike Michalowicz:

What's your intentions behind structure? What do you hope these people will realize or come out with?

AJ Harper:

Well, so there's structure for how, like a program, like a bootcamp or my class is structured. But then I think what Natalie was asking about is the structure of the book itself. How much time and effort are you

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devoting to developing structure and then adhering to structure? I think it's the adhering part. It can feel very intimidating. I want writers of prescriptive, non-fiction and even creative non-fiction to be completely devoted to structure so that they have an idea of if they're actually serving the reader. If we're just wandering around writing anything, we won't feel like writing. It's for us. And there's merit to that. We can write for ourselves for sure. But if, if we're writing prescriptive nonfiction or anything that's designed to help somebody change, we have to be devoted to that change. And the only way you can be sure of that is if you provide structure and thoughtfully consider the reader and their journey throughout. And so you have to actually think, what do they need next? What do they need now? What's happening now? How can I help them? How are they reacting to this? And it's, it, it can feel very difficult, cumbersome, tedious process when all you wanna do is be free and write. But what you write won't land if you haven't considered it.

Mike Michalowicz:

You said this works for prescriptive and some kind of creative nonfiction. Could you define creative nonfiction and does it apply to fiction?

AJ Harper:

Oh, okay. Yeah. So that's a, that's a big question. Creative nonfiction, like memoir.

Mike Michalowicz:

A memoir. Okay.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. Okay. so

Mike Michalowicz:

Does this apply to fiction books?

AJ Harper:

Well, I think structure is important with fiction, but I am a, I am a pantsier when it comes to fiction. And that means I write by the seat of my pants to, to, it's an official term by the way.

Mike Michalowicz:

Is it really?

AJ Harper:

I like, yeah, it's called plotter versus pants in fiction. Do you focus on plot first and then write, or do you pants it and I'm more of a pantsier who will plot out the next few scenes. Does that make sense?

Mike Michalowicz:

It not only does it make sense, I just had like this massive deja vu mode moment. So I was like, okay, that's wild. Okay. So,

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AJ Harper:

But in nonfiction, if you're delivering change, I think the structure is absolutely essential.

Mike Michalowicz:

How do you structure your structure to serve the reader most deeply?

AJ Harper:

Well, it starts with fundamentals, which we talk about all the time on this program, which are who's your reader, reader statements, understanding what drives them what they want and what's standing in the way. Then it's core message, which is transformational on its own so that they can understand the main perspective shift they need to make in order for the change to happen. And then it's the promise of the book, what will be delivered by the time you turn the last page. When you have that, that becomes then the filter for all the content. So you can weed things out that you don't need. And the promise actually becomes a guiding force. So you can decide are you actually delivering on that promise or not? With the content you have and the way that you have it. But the rear comes into play with, okay, this is the starting point.

AJ Harper:

Where are they right now? When they open the book and you're gonna get them over here to the promise, there's a sequence of information that needs to happen based on the starting point. If you, you know, I'm, I'm in Nyack, you're in Boonton, there's a sequence I have, people have to know first how to get onto 87. Then they have to know where to go to get into New Jersey. Then they have to know the turnoff, you know? So I can't just say, you know, turn at exit. I think it's what, 45 or something? I can't say turn at exit 45 if you don't know which highway you're supposed to be on. Does it make sense?

Mike Michalowicz:

It makes, yeah, there's mile markers or, or notable landmarks like the Palisades Mall, which I remember every time now it's so interesting is once you travel certain routes so much, like, you're like, oh, there's that significant mile marker. And you, and you know how much you've progressed and how much you still have to go. Yeah.

AJ Harper:

So, well, people tend to organize their content into buckets, or I call it the silverware drawer, knives with knives, spoons with spoons. Swift force. People have heard me saying this a lot, but let me, I hope the penny drops on this. You, you have to actually organize that. If you content that information in a way that meets your reader exactly where they are, and if you put everything in buckets or in the silverware drawer, then you're, you have massive gaps. You just end up with massive gaps of information that for you makes sense because you know your content, but for the reader does not make sense to them.

Mike Michalowicz:

Michael Gerber, in his book E-myth said, don't work in your business. Work on your business. You have a line and it's in here in the show notes. It's such a powerful line. I don't wanna say it. So I'm trying to tease it out of you. Can you share with that

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AJ Harper:

Talking? Oh, that's right. Yeah. I know exactly what you're saying now is that structure structure feels like you're stuck in a box and that it takes away freedom, that it actually gives authors freedom,

Mike Michalowicz:

Not the line's looking for you have a line, let really the second check out the first bullet point. It's a question.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. So let me,

Mike Michalowicz:

Let me, and so lemme set the stage. So yeah, we set the stage. I, I think there's, when I visit with entrepreneurs and talk about it, this is the most recited quote I hear from all literature for business owners. And it's, are you working in the business or on the business? And it's such a, a, it's Occam's Razor. It's this very refined, simple consideration. And it, it's transformative when people not just understand it, but live into it. When I saw this line, just I'll say, you shared, yeah. When you say this line, I was like, holy cow. Like, that is everything. So there's the big buildup to it.

AJ Harper:

<Laugh>, I went off on a tangent.

Mike Michalowicz:

No. Well, but let, let's, I wanna di so share the line and then let's diagnose it.

AJ Harper:

We should not be writing at our readers. We should be writing for them.

Mike Michalowicz:

Boom. Boom.

AJ Harper:

It's a version of the core message I always show, which is, a book is not about something and for someone, but when I was thinking about structure today and why, why do I really wanna round this home? I thought it's like we're writing at them, you know, like just with no, you know, when you have people who talk to you and they're not actually listening, they're talking at you, they're not asking anything. They don't pause to see what you think about it. They aren't, they don't care if you're following, they're just talking at you spears all the time. Speakers do that all the time where they don't even think about who their audience is at all. And you don't wanna listen to them. You're on your phone, you're whatever you're doodling. This is about writing for them where they are an active participant in this process.

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Mike Michalowicz:

A little tweak. And the atom is better, but I'm gonna change and swap the word two in there because I was thinking of letters. Like I always say, I'm writing my letter, I'm writing a letter to my wife, I'm writing a letter to, but I've never said, I'm writing a letter for my wife. And I think there, there's a whole change in my perception of, of the content I'm preparing when it's a four versus two. But you're right. But, but the two comes across as Nat because it's, [makes frustrated noise]

AJ Harper:

Yeah, I, it, the, the correct juxtaposition would be two and four, but I used at, because that's what it feels like.

Mike Michalowicz:

That's what it feels like. I was just at an entrepreneur event, and by the way, I went through my checklist of things you want to hear. We started off with Rabbit attack. Next week we're gonna pick between Drug story and heart Palp, so we're gonna get 'em all out. Drug story is the funniest one.

AJ Harper:

Okay.

Mike Michalowicz:

But drug story part of it was this group of entrepreneurs, like too many people to be in a room as, as like, say 50 folks, entrepreneurs. And half these people did not know the other half the people. So the common question is, what do you do? And and I always say, well, I'm an author. And what's interesting is for many people it's like, oh, tell me about, like, it actually triggers intrigue because, because even though many people have written books, very people, that's their career or their life's mission. But in this room, there was a little bit of the subtle eye roll. It's like, oh, another author because everyone in here has written a book and what? Oh, really? Yep. And then the question is, so, so what do you sell? What do you sell from it? Or with it, like, it wasn't said that way, but it's sad. This community expects a book to be a sales platform. And these are very, you know, quote, successful, however you wanna define that. But I'm just basing it upon the size of our business, very successful entrepreneurs. And yet there's this expectation that a book is written at you.

AJ Harper:

But the, but the irony is that, that, that you're gonna sell more if you care about change. I mean, ah, it's so infuriating. It, I've had, I've worked with authors where this is pri this book is primarily a lead magnet. And even if I have authors who come into my program and say that by the end of it, my goal is that they no longer think that way about the book, that I'm writing this for my clients, I'm writing this to get clients. Okay, same difference. You should still be writing a book that's designed to deliver change. It doesn't matter because if you do deliver change, that is the ultimate lead magnet. So don't, it's so twisted. It's fair. Yeah. So you need to write for, and the, and the thing about structure is that, that's, that's what enables you to write for structure, enables you to write for, because structure requires thoughtful consideration.

Mike Michalowicz:

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It's I dunno if you hear the noise now, the construction has officially started. There's a in the background. Oh, good. I'm gonna, after we record this, I'm gonna race to the office because it's, it's getting louder and louder. Which by the way, I was listening to one of our episodes where the phantom music started playing. It wasn't there for our listeners, but for you it was so loud. And I'm like, I think you're hallucinating. And then I started hearing, I'm like, oh my God, we're co-hallucinating. Okay, well just final, you know, putting a little bow tie on that story is, it's unfortunate that many individuals are choosing to write that book where the consumer, and these are people that consume books left and right, have an expectation. It's being written at them. That's a sales platform. And so I agree.

AJ Harper:

They're predispose, they're, and so now you've got people who pick up a book, they ah, they, they're really skeptical, you know? So

Mike Michalowicz:

They're skeptical. Exactly. They, well, just talking to me, they're, they're skeptical. Like, oh, you're an author. Oh gosh. Tell me about how it brings about efficiency when you have structure.

AJ Harper:

Well, you can write, you know, when you're wandering around in the draft, who knows how many words you're gonna write before you realize if you can even use it. You know? And now you're always gonna write words that you don't use, that's normal. No words are technically wasted. But by having a detailed outline and you a thoughtfully considered structure, now at least you know, there's a pretty good chance it's going in the book. Now at least you're writing to fill gaps. You know, you could write, wander, wander, wander, and have a hundred thousand, 200,000 words and not be able to use even a quarter of it. And to me, this is a waste of time. Now I'm a professional writer. So that, to me, that sounds horrible to waste as much time. So I'm fine with cutting content that I thoughtfully considered might work. What I'm not fine with is writing a bunch of stuff that I'm not sure will ever amount to anything without any clarity. So, you know, that's the efficiency piece.

Mike Michalowicz:

The analogy comes to my head is kinda like a puzzle. My wife loves puzzling and I don't know, I if that's a term, but you know what I'm saying? And she, she builds, which it is, but she builds like many people the frame around it first, and then everything goes within it. And so far more efficient. I'm not a puzzler and so I just was matching up pieces and put like three pieces that clicked here and, and it became more convoluted than ever because there was no frame around it. It sounds like this is the same thing.

AJ Harper:

Yes. And I am also, if, if puzzler is the term, I don't know, I'm just like Krista.

Mike Michalowicz:

Pantser Puzzler,

AJ Harper:

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Or like to do the out the, the edges first. You notice how I said wandering around in the draft earlier? Yeah. And then we were talking about driving from Nyack to Boonton. It's like that, it's like clear direction right. Versus wandering around. And and so it's gonna be much more efficient. I could wander my way to Boonton, but it might be a few weeks till I get there. And knowing some of the towns along the way, I might get stuck there forever. <Laugh>, right? <Laugh> not, not make it out. Yeah. But, you know the other thing I would say is when you wander around, when you don't have structure, you are more likely to get waylaid by your inner critic trolls because you don't feel the clarity. Clarity provides confidence. Clarity provides confidence. So if you don't know if what you're doing is making any sense or anyone's gonna care, or if you, if it's any good or if it's even gonna be used, it's very easy for your integrated trails to say, see, you really shouldn't do this. You don't know what you're doing. And Seth, I think it's dangerous actually to start with a blank page and just see what happens, at least when it comes to this type of book.

Mike Michalowicz:

Have you noticed that the authors who go through your workshop, that they feel a, a freedom once they have the structure? And, and what's the expression of that? Maybe that's, maybe that's how you started, but I'm just wanna hear it again. Maybe.

AJ Harper:

So I think there's a I think it, it gives them confidence. I don't, I don't know that it gives them freedom, but I think that the freedom it gives them is then, so when I said earlier that the quote that you <laugh> that I got wrong, that you pulled off my show, my show notes, my little outline, that structure gives you freedom. What I mean is now it gives you freedom to explore other things. So here's the thing, you have a detailed outline. You, you can, you have so much clarity, you can now say, alright, let me see what happens if I try this or that. But you have context for it. If the whole thing is just a whatever, you don't really have the freedom to try other things. You have a little smirk. Why do you have a little smirk? <Laugh>

Mike Michalowicz:

Be I'm smirk. Because the irony what's happening right now, the noise is so loud, <laugh> okay? The whole house. And what they're doing is they're building the podcast room, which is the silent room, and they're putting in all this material to make it dead silent. And so the irony is we're trying to record a podcast as they build a podcast room. And I can barely hear you. It's like, so

AJ Harper:

It's hemo those mornings, and there's rabbit stuff in your, and there's rabbits and fur,

Mike Michalowicz:

There's rabbits, and there's, oh my God,

AJ Harper:

Here's what happens. You have a structured outline, then you realize you have maybe some, some gaps in content. Or maybe there's a story that you need to put somewhere and you don't. It's TBD, you don't know

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what it's gonna be. That's the time to be free and explore. But you know, kind of where it might go and what you need. So it gives you the freedom to say, ah, like, okay, here's an example, Mike, I'll say to you, I really need, well, when we're in writing season, I'll say, Mike, I really need a story that conveys x, y, Z. That's right. And then you say, okay, and then you are gonna go be free. And what you'll send me are maybe, maybe it's one story, but often what you do is send me a couple things and you'll have just been totally free with it. And you just write the whole thing. And you know, you'll probably cut it down. Or I'll, I'll probably cut it down.

Mike Michalowicz:

You'll probably cut it down.

AJ Harper:

But you are free in doing it because I have given you specifics about what I need you to convict.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. So what, how I envision it is you give me kind of this aquarium and then I'm allowed to swim all around there. But, but, but I stay within the aquarium. And then you take it and say, here's the elements of that route that are the best. Yeah. I'll tell you, to me it's very freeing because of that. The structure keeps me corralled, but I can run and I can run. And I also know most of it's gonna be I that's not wasted. It's not gonna be it to the final cut, but, but there's the juice there. It's like it's like squeezing a lemon as well as you can. And everything's come out, comes out. As opposed to trying to squeeze a rock, which was kinda the mentality before when I wrote, when I attempted to write my first book, just absent everyone else, it was the antithesis of what we're talking about. It was just running all over the place. And you, and you had to corral that. And that was almost impossible. It actually wasn't possible.

AJ Harper:

It's actually harder to take a book that you've already written a draft and haven't done this work, and then try and revise it than it is to start from structure to begin with. But, okay, so imagine this. So I'm in workshops on my mind since we just ended, but, so yeah. I know I need an opening story that connects to the main takeaway for the chapter. That's part of the structure. It takes students a while to realize it could be almost any opening story. It doesn't have to be, but we do need something that connects to the takeaway. So the specificity of what is needed here. That's the structure part. Then be free. What story could it be? It could be from your own life, it could be from someone else's. It could be from the media. It could be a scenario, fictional scenario, as long as you're transparent about it. And so, oh my gosh, the freedom in that. It could be almost anything, but it must connect to the takeaway. So the constraint of that is the freedom that helps you decide on a possible story that you could try. But then maybe it doesn't work. Okay, fine. Try something else. And that, so there's freedom within the structure to play around and find what could work here for the objective of this part.

Mike Michalowicz:

In our prep notes, you shared something, you put it in bold, and I'm like, this is, it is that structure reveals gaps. What does that mean? Yes. What does that mean?

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AJ Harper:

Well, again, the reader's starting from point A and we gotta get 'em to Z. If we just write in our best effort to get there, we, and we put all of our stuff in buckets to the silverware door, we will have big gaps in knowledge. If you focus on the structure of the reader journey, they are here now. I need to get them here and then here, and then, oh, wait, they don't understand this thing about the journey. They need these tools. They need to pack this and that. Oh, they've never experienced a, this kind of terrain. I've gotta help them. And you're thoughtfully considering this whole journey. They're gonna get there, but if you don't do it, you will have massive gaps. And, and maybe little gaps in understanding. So I call it the structure, not just the outline. I call it the progression of understanding, the progression of what do they understand on page one to a new understanding at the end of the book, which along the way has several penny drops.

AJ Harper:

It's not just one. And there's an unfolding of knowledge. You know, we can't just dump it. We have to let it unfold now. Oh, so you understand this? Well then, do you understand that? Because that's true. Now look at this other thing you believe. Do you think that's still true? Okay, now that you've entertained that, that might not still be true. What if I introduced this new concept to you and to help you understand this new concept? Let me give you context. Okay? Now that you understand all of that, let me pose this to you. You see, so it's a layering and an unveiling, and that's what structure does, is help you work it out. Sometimes when I'm working with students, I will talk them through it like that verbally. Okay, so then what do I need to know next? But if I don't know that, then what should I have known before? And then you can work it out. It's hard to do on your own sometimes, but it's really a, it's actually very logical. It's actually very logical. But most people don't unwind things like that because they are, they may, your brain is making all the leaps, Mike, you know how to get from A to A to D and you don't realize that people are gonna need B and C.

Mike Michalowicz:

Totally to totally. It, it the quick personal story. My wife and I had conflict over a really interesting situation. We were at an event together and the, the event was moving. There had always golf carts moving us from spot A, spot B. And my wife said, oh, I have to go to the bathroom. I'll come right back. And well, I sat there, waited, waited, and she didn't come back. I'm like, oh my God, she must have gone to this other thing in front of us. 'cause Time's running out and you have to be there. I look around, ask people whatever, she didn't come back to that spot. She went to a different spot. So my wife is triggered by abandonment, childhood experiences. I'm triggered by instructions. So, you know, if, if these are the instructions followed to them directly, and you know, for me, like when the deadline is May 14th at midnight, like there is a panic inside me.

Mike Michalowicz:

Like it's gotta be done by May 14th at midnight. And so there's this panic. So we, I find her, she finds me, and now this erupts. And I'm like, but I, I was following the instructions. I didn't move. And she's like, you abandoned me. And it's this conversation that is passing over. I was speaking at the reader like this. I followed the instructions when the reader needed to know that she was not abandoned. I went right from a two Z skipping all the letters in between. And as you're sharing this, I'm like, holy crap. I wasn't doing this for her. I was at her. Yeah. but the structure

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AJ Harper:

Enables you to, to see all of that. That that's

Mike Michalowicz:

The that's amazing. I is, does the structure need to be nailed down? I'm thinking now back to bootcamp. Every set has to be done before you can get released to the next level. Or can you start flirting with the, the, the play playfulness before the structure's complete?

AJ Harper:

Yeah, I mean this is, this is subjected everybody's, you know, everybody needs a moment when they're just playing around with a story. Everyone needs a moment when they're just entertaining a concept. One of my students, Elena King during the last couple weeks of the program, uncovered this absolutely profound framework. Oh my gosh. And it, you know, she, she said, I think she spent about 16 hours just on developing the framework. That was the time to pause, play with the framework, see if you can get it right, then go back into the structure. And in fact, what happened was the framework is so freaking powerful and genius. It's changing the structure of the book. So sometimes we play right, do the structure play, do the structure play. It's, it's not like, okay, I am now getting inscribed my entire structure and tablets and it'll be so, and that is it.

AJ Harper:

As, so I command. It's not like that, you know? And I think we fear that. I see a lot of people intimidated by structure because I think they're afraid to make the decisions, to make the decisions about what goes in the book <laugh>, to make the decisions about what's actually gonna move the needle and to be, so the urge is, let me just write. Let me just write. I wanna be free. I love to feel free, and I don't wanna make fun of it, but it's just, I think sometimes that's a fear. That's a fear of, I am going to write this, making that decision. This is how I'm going to get them there. And the thing is, you aren't gonna feel confident. You are just gonna feel confident. The more you do it. Clarity equals confidence with writing. So the more you start applying structure, trying it, and maybe adjusting structure, trying it, the more confident you'll become. Any rate, the, that decision making is, is part of the problem, is having to commit.

Mike Michalowicz:

It's funny, like, I'm thinking of movies now. The best movies adhere absolutely to, for example, the Hero's Journey. I'm thinking like Star Wars, which it's hard to argue that's not one of the most extraordinary movies of all time. The very first star, all of the Star Wars series, the, the first three in my opinion. But the very first one, it is the hero's journey. And then there's this playfulness. They stick with the structure, but there's a play around all the fringe elements that bring such life and character to it. And it sounds like the best books are the same.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. Look, there's a lot of different ways that you can execute on the structure that you created. And that's how you need to look at it. If you're starting to feel stressed out about structure, then the thing to do is to pick something in the structure, a story, a framework, a how to a bit of research. You wanna explain

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something and just play around. Just, just just play around for a little bit and then you can come back to the structure.

Mike Michalowicz:

Hmm. Anything else we wanna talk about structure before we wrap it up?

AJ Harper:

I just, I again, emphasize that it's not a one time thing. You know, it's not like, oh, I nailed it. I always tell people, get about 80% there, where you feel like, okay, I have enough to go on that I can start building this. And then know that you, you're gonna have to make adjustments and you might have to go back and restructure. And, and I wanna be really clear, it might not be the whole book, it might just be the sequencing of a chapter. Sometimes your sequencing of the chapter is off. If you're really struggling with a chapter, that's probably what's happening. I see a lot of people they write the outline, then they write to the outline, and then that chapter feels like vignettes versus connected pieces. V you know what I'm talking about? I Oh,

Mike Michalowicz:

I totally know what you're saying.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. Saying, here's this thing I'm talking about. Now I'm talking about this thing. Now I'm talking about this thing over here. Right? Correct. And so once you then can get back to that progression of understanding you'll find that it just works. And sayings, that's why it, that's why it's really critical.

Mike Michalowicz:

You know, the, the most comedians end their routine on a what's called a callback joke. And it gets the hardest laugh almost in all cases, because a, it's unexpected, whatever the joke is. But secondly, it refers back to an intimate moment that we already experienced with this person. So it's funny, but it's not just funny 'cause it's funny, it's funny because we're on inside this, it's called a callback, and it feels like a book when structured right, inherently has this, that there's this building journey together. And when those elements are wove together, as opposed to independent vignettes, we're calling back. And now there's an intimacy too.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. I mean, the callback is the best thing. Whenever you, I love a callback and a comedy routine, and I love a callback and a book.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. We maybe we do a decade episode to callbacks. 'cause I've, I've seen it used so effectively,

AJ Harper:

We, we should, because we have a new issue with it, we wanna know what that is. What's that?

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Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah.

AJ Harper:

The fact that people are starting to read just picking chapters Yes. As opposed to reading in a linear question. Yes.

Mike Michalowicz:

That's, yes.

AJ Harper:

So we should,

Mike Michalowicz:

With ai, you can skip ahead so fast.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. And then also when you're on an audio book, the chapters, you know, you're, you're, it should say chapter one and then the, the title of the chapter. So you know what mm-hmm <affirmative>. What is in it. There's a lot of complaints of people who all it says is chapter 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. They wanna know what's in it so they can click, go click to it. Yeah. As opposed to just having a number. And so we're moving into a new era. So the challenge will be we need to write for both. We need to write for the person who sits down and reads cover to cover. Yeah. And we need to figure out how to make sure that a chapter stands alone, which is so,

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh my God. That's a whole new level. Oh, I love that. And we wanna inspire the skipper. Is that the word? You got the pants, you got puzzler, you got a skipper.

AJ Harper:

You go back and read from the beginning.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. To be inspire them. Like, the, the duties on us is the author. It's not the reader. The readers aren't committed. No. We have to be more committed. When, when does this episode release? Do you know

AJ Harper:

This episode? Yeah. I'm gonna tell you in, I believe this is

Mike Michalowicz:

Early January.

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AJ Harper:

I'm gonna tell you, gimme 10 seconds.

Mike Michalowicz:

Well, while she, while you're looking that up, let me share with our audience an important thing. Go to ajharper.com Right. Freaking now. Like, if you aren't getting value out of this discussion, I, I don't know what to say to you, but I'll tell you this. Knowing and doing are two different things. Go to AJ's workshop, go through the process, because the commitment is there. Did you find the date?

AJ Harper:

Yes, yes. The release date for this is January 22nd.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, great. Okay. So five days from this coming out is the release of the Money Habit. That's the newest book that we wrote together. I'm extremely proud of it. We'll have some updates tomorrow. There it is. There it is. There it is. I have one disappointing thing about the cover that I, I messed it up. It is not disappointing. Listen, it's my, yeah, yeah. I can, I'll share on the next episode. But I will tell you this is our best, best work together. This has had the most impact on readers even before it's released. And you can get your copy right now, I'm gonna find out what the bonus, there's a bonus page where you can get like, you know, one copy. You get this bonus, five copies. You get all these different bonuses. But if you just Google the Money Habit, shout out to Andrea Conway who is facilitating our, all of our out facing stuff.

Mike Michalowicz:

If you Google the Money Habit is the entire first page of Google. If you type in the money habit in SEO ai, it comes up and says, oh, it's a book by Mike Michalowicz. That is taking extraordinary effort and discipline led by Andrea to make that happen. So if you're looking for the book, just Google or whatever your favorite chat bot or AI system is, the money habit. And, and I'll tell you what the bonuses are. I, I think we're good. Next week we're gonna talk about the behind the scenes of the money habit. I'm gonna race to the office. There's a little pause of course right now in construction, but this whole place is vibrating, so I gotta get the hell outta here. So AJ, give me 25 minutes and I'll be there you are listeners. Shoot, you got 25 minute reprieve for yourself, so why not listen to this entire episode? Again? Go to dwtbpodcast.com to get our free materials all prepared by aj, by the way, amazing stuff. Go to ajharper.com to transform your writing life. And if you're interested in perhaps pursuing authorship with representation, we have penned with purpose, that's the organization that we're running to help authors out. Or you can email us at hello@dwtbpodcast.com. And you know this, don't write that book. Write the greatest book you can.