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Episode 146:

“How to Write on an Airplane”

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.

Mike Michalowicz:

Do you, do you fly a lot? Like what, what's your frequency of flying?

AJ Harper:

Right now it's, I've upped my travel, but normally I'm not that, I mean, maybe six, seven times a year. Okay. Eight times. Eight, eight flights. But now it's -

Mike Michalowicz:

Eight flights or eight trips are like a 16 flight. Trips. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. And where do you typically go when you're flying?

AJ Harper:

Uh, often Minneapolis.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. That's to see family.

AJ Harper:

Yes. Um, that's my main airport if I'm going up to the lake as well. But I might be flying if I'm flying on business, it could be anywhere. Yeah. Yeah. So I just got back from San Francisco. Oh, that's a long haul. Oh God. And I took a red eye like a dummy. But I had to. I had to get home and they're just, I tried every configuration. That's

Mike Michalowicz:

Courageous.

AJ Harper:

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I know. I feel like I'm kind of still paying for it and it's been five days since I got home. <laugh>
And then Monday I go to Toronto.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. That's not too bad. Do you fly Porter for that?

AJ Harper:

What?

Mike Michalowicz:

Porter.

AJ Harper:

No.

Mike Michalowicz:

Have you heard of... Okay, so Porter is a Canadian airline that flies to Toronto. They probably have other locations too, but has a private airport in Toronto that puts you right in the city. If you fly to the main Toronto airport, Toronto Pearson, you are about an hour out from the city based upon traffic, it could be even worse. If you fly Porter, you are seconds from the city. You literally walk under the little moat between the airport and the, uh, city and you're in the heart of the city.

AJ Harper:

What do they, which airport do they use here? Uh, Newark. Newark? Yeah. Hmm. Never heard of it. My

Mike Michalowicz:

Gosh. Terminal A, baby. I

AJ Harper:

Wonder if I should cancel my flight. Well, it's kind of late now.

Mike Michalowicz:

I'm doing a Porter flight up there pretty soon myself. Yeah? It is the best. They have, they have a, a constant stream of them. Huh. Are you flying United or Canadian? I also fly,

AJ Harper:

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I always follow Fly Delta.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, Del - oh, Delta. Okay. Yeah. P - you will fall in love with Porter if you go there with any frequency.

AJ Harper:

But see, now I have, I'm upping my travel game because I'm trying to do more s - um, speaking and appearances and networking things.

Mike Michalowicz:

You know, it's interesting because I, I was thinking why is this topic for today, which is riding on an airplane important to me, and I'm curious how it's, if it's important to you, is because of speaking.

AJ Harper:

Well, yeah, because you're going, how often do you fly?

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Oh, um, probably -

AJ Harper:

At least once a week, right?

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, one trip a week minimally. Um, usually they're condensed together. So tonight I'm flying out to Nashville, uh, the last flight out. Tomorrow I'm coming back from Nashville and then I'm leaving for Virginia a day later. So what happens is there's a lot of these ins and outs. There's a speaking season. Mm-hmm. I'll tell you when it's not. It's not, uh, when the Christmas holidays and the - Yeah. I should say the winter holidays are happening. So from December 15th to maybe January 15th or that or so - Uh-huh. Quiet's down. And then the middle of summer. So I think kids are getting out from school, people just want a break.

AJ Harper:

That's convenient.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. So I think, uh -

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AJ Harper:

So you're in it right

Mike Michalowicz:

Now. Yeah, July is a little quieter. Now I have a gig actually coming up. So, but July's a little quieter. August maybe is a little bit quieter. And a lot of these speaking engagements that I have are in warm climates during the spring, fall and winter because it's cold in the northeast. So Live's trips are to Florida, California, uh, the BVI. Um, that's very common. Hmm. Yeah. But they can be anywhere. Yeah. Um, so let's get into the topic for today. I wanna thank page two simplified, that's our imprint for, for sponsoring this episode as I do with every single episode. Uh, and what I admire about you is the willingness to kind of roll with an odd request. <laugh> So this came up literally yesterday. We were in here recording. Yeah. And it, when we have write together, it's the same thing like, "Hey, what do you think about

AJ Harper:

This? " Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

And you're like, "I can see it. " Or, or you reject it. <laugh> I, because I, I, but first I was like, "Hey, what do you think about like a three part series where we have an airplane?" Writing it on an airplane, writing in a cabin, writing while on vacation, which I have done. And, uh, you're like, "Nah, I think writing on plane may encompass all we need to talk about.

AJ Harper:

" Well, I don't think we need a three part series - Yeah. About locations.

Mike Michalowicz:

I love that you went with it.

AJ Harper:

Of course. Yeah. No, it's a good one, I think. Also, it's good when we dar - we disagree.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, exactly.

AJ Harper:

Because I don't write on planes.

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Mike Michalowicz:

Why don't... Okay. Well, I don't.

AJ Harper:

We're gonna get into it, but I mean, I think it's good for listeners to understand that we're, you write on planes so much that when we're in writing season, working on one of your books, we will build in our schedule. Right play. So I'll say to you, when do... I'll text you or call you and say, "When do you fly next?" Mm-hmm. And then you'll say Thursday or whatever. And then, and then I will prepare. So either I'm gonna give you prompts or I'm gonna give you something to review. Yep. And, uh, or just instructions. Correct. And then I know I need to have that there in time before you get on the plane. And the whole writing season is like that.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah.

AJ Harper:

When are you flying next?

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, that's it. When's your next flight, Mike? Yes. Before we kick into it, I wanna show you my shirt. I don't know.

AJ Harper:

Rock, rock and so - rock 'em robots.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, but we see what they're doing.

AJ Harper:

Hugging.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, they're hugging and kissing. So, I don't know, Matt, if you can see that on the camera. Is it,

is it seeable? Oh yeah. No, that's so funny.

AJ Harper:

They're, they're making out? Robot' such a great t-shirt. Yeah. Robots are making out?

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Mike Michalowicz:

I guess they're making out. But I wanna tell you how I acquired this. So my friend Tony was wearing this. And, um, okay, yeah. Perfect timing. You got some coffee down the throat. So my friend Tony's wearing this and we're at this event, this big party. There must have been, you know, about a hundred people there. And I'm like, I love that t-shirt. He's like, "You know what's so funny?" He goes, "People comment on this t-shirt all time." He goes, "This is the third one I've had because people want it." And he knows what the source is. Mm-hmm. So he's like, "You want me to know the source?" I said, "No, I want that t-shirt." He goes, "Like the one I'm wearing?" I'm like, "Yeah." He goes, "Okay." He goes, "That's what people want. Fine. I'll, I'll clean it up. I'll mail it to you."

Mike Michalowicz:

"I said, no, no, no, Tony. I know how this works. I know how this works. You're gonna forget or I'm gonna forget and I'm gonna lose on the opportunity. So, uh, I'm wearing a T-shirt now. Your wearing a T-shirt. Swap them. We did T-shirt swap, swap on the spot. Mm-hmm. He's like, "No one's ever done that." And I think, uh, this is kinda how I'm wired. When I see something where there's an opportunity, I know the more time that transpires, I'm less likely to follow up on it. So I gotta jump on it quickly. Yeah. And now it's my favorite t-shirt. It gets commented on constantly. This is the rock for the people watching or, I'm sorry, listening and not watching. This is the rock 'em robots that, you know, are constantly going at each other, knocking their heads off and they are embracing each other and falling in love."

Mike Michalowicz:

Love it. I think it's great. And it gets commented on... Of all the t-shirts I have, this gets commented. Pretty good shirt. It's a great shirt. Yeah. I wonder where it came from.

AJ Harper:

You should, you should figure it out.

Mike Michalowicz:

I should. Yeah. Like who sourced this? Okay. So I- let's get into the topic of today. Um, and here's a topic. Buy write a must read. <laugh>

AJ Harper:

It's not the topic today.

Mike Michalowicz:

Um, no, here's the topic. It's writing on an airplane. So, so you don't or what's your story? Why don't you?

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AJ Harper:

Do you wanna introduce us? What if this is the first time someone's listening? Didn't

Mike Michalowicz:

I say this? Oh, I didn't say. No. I said what I admire about you, but I didn't...

AJ Harper:

You... Yeah. And I didn't say what I admire about you, but I thought of it when I was walking down towards your... We're in your basement right now. Okay. I was, right? Yeah, we are. Yeah. So I'm walking down toward your basement. Yeah. And I was just wanting to... I've commented on this before, but I think it bears repeating and since you're wearing the shirt it fits that I just admire that you are comfortable with your dorkiness. <laugh>

Mike Michalowicz:

Thank you very much.

AJ Harper:

Yeah, you've, you claim it, you own it, you're good with it. You

Mike Michalowicz:

Lean into it. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you for that. I mean, that means a lot. Yeah. Um, so in case this is the first episode people are listening to, this is **AJ Harper** in the studio. She's an author of Write A Must Read. That's why I suggest you get the book. We have co-written every one of my books together. A dozen. A do... Yeah, a dozen books together. The most recent is called The Money Habit. So if you wanna get a second book, I invite you to get that. What's so nice, I don't know if I told you about The Money Habit, is it's getting notable traction.

AJ Harper:

You said,

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Yeah. So there's that first phase and this is important for all of our author listeners is some people say you have to sell 10,000 books. And it does seem to be a magical number. Publishers catch, catch their eye when 10,000 books, print books are in circulation. Well, we've passed that 10,000 mark. And, um, what we've noticed is I'm getting reader feedback with a higher degree of frequency. It's not profit first level, but it's higher than my other books. Each book has a call out to contact me to, so I can engage with the reader, give them more information. And the money habit now is in the second slot of frequency.

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AJ Harper:

Oh, that's interesting.

Mike Michalowicz:

Now, I mean, the book just came out. There was a massive loss. Uh, loss. A massive launch. There was 8,000 books that sold in the first week, so that, that could be some of the momentum. But we launched in January. As of this recording date, it's May 18th, I think. So, you know, quite a few months have passed and now there's this engagement. I'm committing to this process. I've done it. That's a big deal.

AJ Harper:

Well, what you're saying is more people are committing to the money habit than they say we're committing to all in or other books.

Mike Michalowicz:

That's right.

AJ Harper:

Exactly. So that's a good - It's

Mike Michalowicz:

A good indicator.

AJ Harper:

Indicator of things to come.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. And the sales have stabilized right now on Amazon, which is our primary metric because

it's... I think they've moved back to ranking multiple times a day

AJ Harper:

Again. Oh, for sure. Yeah. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

And we're in the 30s to 40s, thousands. Now, comparatively, Profit First is usually around 900 to 1200. That range. I, I aspire to have this book there or actually. But

AJ Harper:

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It wasn't to start.

Mike Michalowicz:

But it wa - yeah. Profit First wasn't to start. And, um, the money habit as a general rule doesn't slip into a lower volume than a 30 to 40 ranking. It may, but it, it hasn't. So that's a good indicator of a stabilization point and now it's a, how do we get it, you know, out there in a bigger, better way?

AJ Harper:

Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

Um, so you have an opening question, which actually was not gona be the questions. <laugh> But it says, what's the weirdest place you've written non-journaling, but for -

AJ Harper:

Well, I wrote non-journaling because I don't think it counts. Yeah, it doesn't - I mean, actually writing for a book or a speech or something where you act - this is, I am producing something.

Mike Michalowicz:

So what's the weirdest place you've...

AJ Harper:

Well, I don't know if it counts as weird, but I mean, I've written on a, I've wri - definitely written on the airplane, but I, I've also -

Mike Michalowicz:

The general rule, you don't like to.

AJ Harper:

I don't enjoy it, but I will do it. Yeah. I've written in the, in the moving car.

Mike Michalowicz:

I've done that, yeah.

AJ Harper:

I've, I've written on a ferry. I've written - I haven't done that. Um, you know, in all sorts of weird corners and, you know, hideaway spots and buildings and stuff. But probably the moving car. I

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don't know if it's so weird. But I think the thing that's weird about it is when you're on... I have done it on a deadline. Yeah. I've done it where, this is back when I was ghostwriting. I think it was, I think it was back cover copy. I remember driving. My dad was driving. We were visiting him. And I said, "Just hang on. I need to finish this back cover copy." And then I just wrote it real, you know, qu - honestly, very quickly. Yeah. And then done, sent it. And, um, I think he was shocked, you know? Yeah. And it's kinda, actually it's kinda hard to write in a moving vehicle.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh my gosh.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. Especially when there's, like, a baby in the back and your dad's talking and -

Mike Michalowicz:

Right. You're, you know - do you have a headset? Well, we'll talk about gear stuff, but do you, did you have a headset on or something to block out the room?

AJ Harper:

No, I'm so old school, Mike. Okay. No. But I'm just saying, I think that's probably as weird as it gets for me.

Mike Michalowicz:

Probably the weirdest place I've written is in a green room right before going on a broadcast. I think it was like a news channel or something. Mm-hmm. And, um, I don't carry a laptop. I use an iPad, but has a keyboard built into it. I like it because it's just so compressed, so small. It's not

the perfect art writing platform. I've tried to convert to a Microsoft based thing because it has, it supports Word more effectively. But that was weird. I was gonna say, just for the shock values, like, "Oh, I've written on the back of a camel while riding across the desert."

AJ Harper:

But you haven't.

Mike Michalowicz:

But I haven't. I was gonna say that just to see you get shocked and say, "Are you serious?" I'm like, "No."

AJ Harper:

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I wouldn't, I, okay, I would believe you about a lot, but probably not that.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. I've never done anything like that. But I have done,

AJ Harper:

Like - Oh, okay. I've written on the, at the lake, you know, on the beach. Huh? You've probably done that.

Mike Michalowicz:

I've written on a beach way too many times.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. To many times.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Yeah. That, that was, that's why I wanted to talk about writing on vacation. Um,

AJ Harper:

So sneakiest was, and I think I might have even mentioned this before, uh, in the parking lot of the library trying to siphon off the wifi.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, I've done the wifi siphoning too. Yeah. Were you trying to park just close enough to the

building? Yeah.

AJ Harper:

There was no other option. This was on the island back in the day before. Now everyone's got wifi, but you really had to go into town. And I was sneaking while I went out after my family went to sleep because I wasn't supposed to be working.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, naughty, naughty.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. So I was in the parking lot trying to get as close to the library as possible, riding in the car, which is actually awkward if you're, you have to move away from the driver's side because the steering wheel is in the way. Yep. I was not the only one there doing that.

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Mike Michalowicz:

Oh.

AJ Harper:

It was just me and a bunch of dudes.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, all, yeah.

AJ Harper:

We were all like sneaking back into our family's cabins.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh my gosh.

AJ Harper:

And in pubs, I've written in pubs. I've written in, I've definitely written in bars. I used to like to write in bars. Yeah. I don't drink that much. I just sit at the bar and order like a Diet Coke. Yeah. And then I would ask the bartender, "Can I just sit here?" And there was something about the noise of it.

Mike Michalowicz:

Well, yeah, I wanna talk about that too. So - Yeah. So maybe we start getting to some - Coffee

shops. Some of the strategies. Yeah. Yeah. Um, okay. So, uh, I think airplane writing, why I wanted to talk about this subject and why it was so important to me is I would say of the books that we've done, 80% of my writing time has, maybe I'm oversaying, but 80% of my writing time has been on airplanes.

AJ Harper:

I forgot. What? I'm sorry. Emergency room. Y

Mike Michalowicz:

You know, I was actually gonna ask you if, if you've done that.

AJ Harper:

Because I remember - I totally forgot. I wrote tons of write a must read.

Mike Michalowicz:

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You in the emergency room or someone else?

AJ Harper:

Both. <laugh> It was a rough time. And I've definitely written when I, I definitely would take my, make sure I had, when there was a lot of medical stuff happening in my family, I was writing write a must read. Yeah. And I just would grab it out the door because I didn't know. I could be there for 12 hours or a couple days and I just had it with me. I remember - I can

Mike Michalowicz:

See you enrolled in the gurney room. We got a code blue. Yeah. We got a code blue. And you're Like, <sings>.

AJ Harper:

I mean, it's not that far off. Although I also, I wrote a lot of my notes app too, you know, just on my phone. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

I use that.

AJ Harper:

So, okay, that's my answer now. Emergency room.

Mike Michalowicz:

I'll take it. When something you said that's interesting to me, uh, what was the bar? Because I think that noise is very helpful

AJ Harper:

When - The din. The,

Mike Michalowicz:

Yes. Mm-hmm. Yeah, it's a white noise of sorts. And why I like airplanes specifically is it's a focus time. You don't, you have an option to turn on or off the internet so I keep the internet off. I have a headset on. I listen to non-lyrical music because lyrics I start getting hooked into the lyrics and start singing along in my head. Yep. Um, and I don't, you're kind of forced to stay still. Like you can't, "Hey, let me walk around. I'm getting a cup of coffee." You're sitting there packed in with other people. Mm-hmm. Uh, and you don't want your eyes diverting. It's actually, for me, it's a very forced discipline and that's why I like writing on airplanes.

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AJ Harper:

Okay. Well, so is that mostly where you write?

Mike Michalowicz:

I would say 80% of my writing over time... Now, maybe I'm overstating that, but it feels like 80% of my writing has been on airplanes or in the sitting area before boarding

AJ Harper:

An airplane. Yeah. I definitely will write and say the lounge.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah.

AJ Harper:

Um -

Mike Michalowicz:

Now what, what's your version to writing on an airplane?

AJ Harper:

It's, I, it's just, I don't like hearing, taking everything out. I don't know. Oh. It's not, I don't know. It's, I also don't feel like I'm in a composing mode. Yeah. Uh, but I, I do like to edit on airplanes.

There's a difference. I'm using a different part of my brain. Oh, okay. Um, but I don't use a laptop when I do that. You know I've started almost never bringing my laptop?

Mike Michalowicz:

So what do you do? How do you do it? On your phone?

AJ Harper:

No, dude. It's called a printout.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, that's so old school.

AJ Harper:

It's the best. Are you kidding me? The feeling. Yeah. Of a manuscript. Yeah. Inside my messenger bag. Yeah. And I've got the pens and the highlighters. Yeah. And my post-its and my

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little post-it flags. And I know it's in there. Back when, back when I was, um, a publisher and an acquisitions editor, I sometimes had multiple manuscripts in my bag. What, oh my gosh, what is better than that? Nothing. <laugh> Nothing. So I will print it out and bring it with me only at a certain stage. Mm. So if it's, we're at, you know, the first big pas after a first draft, delicious.

Mike Michalowicz:

When we had the great, um, battle over, uh, our markups - mm-hmm. Uh, where you won -

AJ Harper:

Pass pages?

Mike Michalowicz:

Pass pages, yeah. I didn't... Usually I do a printout also. And I didn't do a printout. I was like, oh, it's more efficient. That's why you lost. I lost. I got crushed. There is something... I, I wonder if I consume it more slowly with a printout. I've done that same thing on the plane.

AJ Harper:

Your eyes see it differently. Clearly. Yes. And then they're, oh my gosh. Being able to write on it and then all, uh, just it's beautiful, marked up. Yeah. I don't know. It's, to me, it's joyful. And I like on the plane to just take it out and just play with my pages and have that kind of analog experience and get away from a screen. So I love bringing them.

Mike Michalowicz:

Well, let's go into the kind of equipment or the -

AJ Harper:

That's my equipment. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

So -

AJ Harper:

Office supplies. Okay.

Mike Michalowicz:

Well, let's start off in this - But

AJ Harper:

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Yours is different. Mine's different. You've got a whole setup. For

Mike Michalowicz:

Sure. I, I wanna go all the way to the backpack, like, kinda level.

AJ Harper:

Okay, do it. Okay. And we also, by the way, if you go into the way back, we do have an entire episode on author gear.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, we do. So

AJ Harper:

You could also listen to

Mike Michalowicz:

That. That's right. That's 100% right. Um, I have a cheapo, like, \$30 backpack. I don't even know the, the brand of it. They have these extremely expensive ones. And I found the more compartments, the less effective it is for me. 'Cause, because they're, they're presupposing you're gonna have a laptop that's of a certain thickness and now you can't fit in that printed manuscript

or something. Yeah. So I'd rather have just two big bins. I have one kind of the front bin and opens... Another little benefit of a backpack on, for when traveling on an airplane is one that can open totally flat. So right before I get on, I can take my necessary gear out and close it up without interfering with other gear. There's some backpacks that only the zipper goes down halfway and you're kind of pulling things out and other things get pulled with it.

Mike Michalowicz:

So when boarding a plane, I open this backpack and I take out, uh, only three things. One is my iPad that has an attached keyboard and has a, the iPad pen. Uh, all attached to the iPad. The second thing is I have this li- little slightly inflatable pillow. And it was designed for, like, if you go to a sporting event and you're seeing one of those hard bleachers, you can kind of blow it up and you have a little cushion to sit

AJ Harper:

On. It's a butt pillow.

Mike Michalowicz:

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It's a butt pillow. But it folds enough and I use it for lumbar support. You can see this. I have a pillow behind my back right now. It hurts my back if I don't have some form of lumbar support at a certain point. So I use that for lumbar support. And the second thing is, I think it's called the flap and you can find it somewhere. Surely on Amazon. And what it does is it clips to the chair sitting in front of you. Now the nice thing about the iPad is you can take the screen out of the keyboard, put the screen on this flap, and now it's eye level so your neck isn't... Everyone's neck is bent down on an airplane, right? Yeah. Now my neck is straight up. And then I have a, I forgot one other thing, a portable, um, foldable Bluetooth keyboard that I flap out on my little tray in front of me.

Mike Michalowicz:

It's shocking. I have enough room for, uh, I usually get tea, ginger tea. I got enough room for my tea, whatever, uh, little food item they give you, the crackers and stuff and my full keyboard. And there's still space on that little tray.

AJ Harper:

What is your neighbor saying to you? Something like - 'Cause you've got a whole, like, you're just, uh, you're... No one else is doing what you're doing. Yeah. For sure. No. So what, what are people saying to you?

Mike Michalowicz:

Shockingly, very few people say anything. Okay. Everyone's, everyone's in their own world. Most people have their, their movie or whatever on their iPhone. They're cleaning their neck in some awkward position and watching it. Or the person's sleeping, gaping mouth, breathing in your face like, "Oh my God, did you have to eat sardines?" The people that do ask more often ask about the technology. They're like, "Oh, that's so interesting. Where'd you get it? " Very few people ask, "So w- why are you doing this? Or what do you do? " I would say, out of the people that ask me, one out of 20 or 30 will say, "What, what's your career?" So

AJ Harper:

If you ha - if you have it on the screen though, and it's in manuscript, so when you're, when you're just doodling around or taking prompts from me, you aren't worried about the format. But eventually, because very early - Yeah. Very early I have us in the correct manuscript format. Yeah. We don't wait till the end to do that. We're, that's, I'm kind of a stickler about that. So what are they, can they see on the screen then if it's up there that they can see this is a, this is an actual manuscript? No,

Mike Michalowicz:

Because I have a screen filter that if you're even off by about 10 degrees, it goes black.

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AJ Harper:

So they can't actually see what seat - You're not worried about confidentiality.

Mike Michalowicz:

No, no. Interesting. That's something I caught onto because I noticed someone looking at the screen one time. I was like, "Oh." Yeah. Um, and I've done that. Like someone's watching a movie and they're like two seats over and I start getting distracted. I'm like, "Oh, what movie are they watching? Have I seen that

AJ Harper:

Before?" That reminds me. I had the coolest experience. Have you seen the movie Rental Family? <laugh> No. With Brendan Fraser? No. First, you would love this movie.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. Is it, it's a comedy, it sounds like?

AJ Harper:

It's a, it's like a, it's a, it's a comedy, but it's really, it's a dram - it's a dramedy. Dramedy. He's living in, I believe, Japan.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay.

AJ Harper:

And he's an actor. And he, um, accepts this job where they're rental fam - like they go and pretend to be -

Mike Michalowicz:

24 by seven.

AJ Harper:

Just depending on what the client needs. Right? So I want mourners. I want <laugh>. Yeah. I want, um, uh, I want you to pretend to be my mistress that I'm breaking up with. So my wife thinks I broke up with my mistress, but maybe I didn't. Or I meet up someone to pretend to be... So he ends up pretending to be these different people. Oh, one was, um, aging father. I want you to pretend to be a journalist who's gonna interview him about his life. Okay. Right? Yeah. So this is ho - so of course things ha - right? Of course, yeah. But I'm watching Rental Family and I'm totally engrossed. And then I notice the guy sitting next to me is watching it, but he's not

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watching it on his screen. He's watching it on mine because he got hooked. And then at one point he had to go to the bathroom and I was like, "I think he's watching this.

AJ Harper:

" So I paused it for him.

Mike Michalowicz:

No way. Without saying anything.

AJ Harper:

Well, I didn't say anything. And he comes back and the first thing he said to me the whole flight was, "What did I miss?" Yeah. And then we had this whole conversation after it was over. He watched the whole thing without being able to hear it because he was just, I had the, um -

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, sometimes on. Yeah. Oh, that's brilliant.

AJ Harper:

Anyway, it was one of the - What did me?... Most charming exp - That's amazing. Stranger experiences I have when we were watching it together. Yeah. Um, anyway, I just had, that reminded me of you. That's an awesome story. But you've gotta see that, that movie you would love.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. Rental family.

AJ Harper:

Rental Family.

Mike Michalowicz:

So, um - So

AJ Harper:

You've blocked. No one knows what you're doing. But,

Mike Michalowicz:

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You know, if every, every so often some, someone, it's rare, but we' say, "Oh, what, what do you do? Why do you have the setup?" And I'm like, "I'm an author." And there's always this pause, like, "Like a real author?" <laugh> I know. It's really interesting.

AJ Harper:

I know. It's such a mystery to folks.

Mike Michalowicz:

It's such a mystery to folks. And they get excited. Yes. Um, once I was, once I was on a flight and someone actually recognized me and said, "I love your work." This became very weird. And I said, "Oh, I'm, I'm so appreciative of it. " And a person walks by. I was sitting up farther up in the plane and he walks to the back. Now the, the woman sitting immediately to my right, there's only one other passenger next to me on my right, goes, "Are you, are you famous?" And I'm like, "No. No." Uh, and she goes, and she starts like leaning forward to look back at me to get my full face. It was the creepy.

AJ Harper:

She was trying to figure out who you were.

Mike Michalowicz:

And then, and then she's like texting. And I don't know if she tried to sneak a picture. I said, "No." I said, "That's just a friend of mine." It's just kind of a weird moment. But n- nonetheless, and then she finally settled down. <laugh> It was just weird. But nonetheless, um, posture or ergonomics - mm-hmm. For a better choice word. Very important, particularly on an airplane. This keyboard, I have it fold out, is an ergonomic keyboard where the keyboard is - It's rounded. Yeah, rounded or more of a V shape. Mm-hmm. And allows your hands to sit in the proper, comfortable sitting as opposed to crunching your fingers in and typing. Uh-huh. Which caused, um, I for a while had carpal tunnel syndrome. Mm-hmm. Have

AJ Harper:

You had that? Oh, yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

It is so painful.

AJ Harper:

It's very painful.

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Mike Michalowicz:

Ooh, it feels like your ha - everything's grinding.

AJ Harper:

It goes up your arm.

Mike Michalowicz:

And you know what? Saved me from carpal tunnel syndrome? There was a book. Go figure. On, like, I, I still have it in, in my office here. Something about carpal tunnel syndrome and these simple micro movements you can do to work the fascia of your hand. It resolved it 100%. Go

AJ Harper:

Books. So you, so you have this whole setup, you've really thought it out, which makes sense if you're doing 80% of your writing on airplanes. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

The, the sec - the next thing, by the way, as, as a headset is very important to me. I have the Bose headsets. And I put in classical music or jazz or, or something where I'm not gonna listen or sing along. Um, sometimes I'll put some rock songs on, but I'll just have it instrumentals or even if it's music, uh, with lyrics, I'll put it very quietly.

AJ Harper:

My son's father, he makes music. Yeah. Digital music. I don't know why he started doing this. He's not really a musician. He's eclectic. He has a SoundCloud. Yeah. And, um, I said, he keeps sending us these m- music to our whole family. He's always like, "Listen to this. " And I will confess that I often don't listen because it's kinda like again, you know? Yeah, yeah. It's kind of that. But the other, but, uh, I've been writing my latest book to his SoundCloud because - Oh, that's cool. Because I said to him, "Okay, look, I just want all your music that doesn't have words." So he made me an entire playlist of hours and hours of just music with no words. If you want it, by the way, I'll link you to it. Sure. Because it's actually really cool. Sure. You need a, a little bit of a variation.

AJ Harper:

There's

Mike Michalowicz:

A thing called Brain FM. Uh, it's an app. I, I think it was that one that supposedly has music that's at a certain pace that's optimal for concentration a.K.a. Writing.

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AJ Harper:

There's a lot you can get on YouTube too. I listen to a lot of soundtracks on YouTube. Just, just the, just the music.

Mike Michalowicz:

I had a, uh, flight attendant once after a long flight, must have been coast to coast, so like a six hour flight. She's like, "You wrote the whole time." <laugh> Like, like, just out of nowhere. And she didn't know what I was doing. I didn't, I didn't eat nothing. And I, I don't know, I wonder if part of it was the music. The value of a plane again is you're mitigating the normal distractions of life.

AJ Harper:

Yes. You're,

Mike Michalowicz:

You're, you're fully engaged and so is everybody else. It's the only environment I can think of where people sit shoulder to shoulder in absolute silence for that long. Maybe

AJ Harper:

Church. Uh, may - okay. So an example of that is, um, most of, most of your books and men - most of the, and all of the books I was ghost writing for, I wrote at the library. Okay. So that's another example. So there's usually - Yes, that's a good choice. A bunch of people at a table being completely quiet. And there was this whole group of, um, freelancers and we were, we were all at the li - we knew we were all doing the same thing.

Mike Michalowicz:

I think this ties into your sprints almost.

AJ Harper:

Yes.

Mike Michalowicz:

So just to educate our audience who may be new to this, I, I haven't participated, participated in your sprints, uh, in recent times. But during the last writing season and prior to, prior to the Money Habit and, and All In in particular, I was there. I did the early morning session, which I think started at 6:00.

AJ Harper:

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It's 6:00. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

And, uh, you would be there often. Laura. But what's so interesting I think it was, maybe it was like 10 people, sometimes it was three, sometimes it was 15, maybe like eight or 10 people. And what I like about it is there was very little discussions like boarding a plane. Yep. Like, is that your seat? That's my seat. Okay. Like that was basically the same idea. Good morning. How many words you going for? Good morning. Let's get to it. Yeah. And you're right in it. Yep. And literally there's silence.m. Everyone puts themselves on mute. Some person often forgets and you, and you hear the click clack and you're like, "Please put yourself on mute." And then after 20 minutes, you come back from the sprint, there's a quick discussion, how many words did you write? There's a breather, and then you're right back at it again.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. It emulates to me, maybe the library, absolutely the airplane where it's concentration, but you feel this kind of energy that other people are working alongside you. There's a motivation for me.

AJ Harper:

That's why we do the sprints. And we do have a lot of m - um, we do s - we sometimes do just these deep work sessions where we don't do that break. So we do kind of a mix of it. But it does, we've, you know, it's only anecdotal, obviously, but we've been doing this for many years now. The people who show up to sprints get a lot done. Yeah. Compared to the people who don't.

Mike Michalowicz:

How, how do people sign up for that?

AJ Harper:

AJHarper.com. It's, it's actually, to me, this is the no-brainer. Yeah. It's, I do charge a monthly fee, but I also have a pay what you can button right next to that fee. So if it, if you can't afford it, then great, go ahead. But if you can't, you could literally pick any dollar amount for your monthly subscription and come join us. So to me, it's why don't you just do that? <laugh> You know? Yeah, yeah. It's, uh, and there's no one who has as many sprints as we do. We have 9:00 and 4: PM Eastern Time every single weekday. Oh,

Mike Michalowicz:

I didn't even know other people had sprints for writing.

AJ Harper:

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Oh, some people do, but it'll be something like once a week or - Yeah, no, you - No, no, we are on the daily grind.

Mike Michalowicz:

You got to.

AJ Harper:

And you can - It's a career. And you can, um, step in anytime. You know, you can just... I often tell people too to get into the habit of just showing up to it even if you aren't in a writing funk. Just be in the space, even if you're doing something else. Um, so yeah. But I can see how the plane is kind of like that. Everybody has agreed to what we're not gonna do.

Mike Michalowicz:

That the thing.

AJ Harper:

It's, it's mostly - It's exclusionary nature. We are not going to do that. Yep.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Yep. We're not going to walk around. We're not going to chit-chat it up. There's also... I would say the closest emulation of a flight is the sprint. I don't have any other experience. Even writing solo in like a cabin or something doesn't get there because my mind goes, "Well, let me see what's going on outside." I actually drift more in a room where it's just me. It's actually harder for me to write.

AJ Harper:

See, see, when I have my, um, manuscript and my pens and stuff, I will get people do know what I'm doing. Yeah. You know, so people will - But do you

Mike Michalowicz:

Find it better... So do you... Are you more effective when there's other people in your circle agreeing what not to do that you're more effective? Or do you prefer pure solitude and you can keep that concentration going?

AJ Harper:

I, you know, it's so... I've had to write in so many places. Yes. When I started my... I was a playwright and so then I, I just... I was very obsessed with trying to figure out what my writing practice was. Um, I love to write in a coffee shop. So much so that during the pandemic when

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no- nothing was open, you can go on YouTube and you can get coffee shop sounds. <laugh> That's great. Just the, just the click, click, clicking and the little, the hum of people chatting quietly. You can't really make out what anyone's saying. The door opens. The pushing back of a chair. Yeah. You can... I listened to that. I was desperate because I, there was nothing open. That's so interesting. Um, so I definitely wrote in coffee shops for most of my life, but I think the... When I decided to become a freelance writer and make my actual living from it, I was, I was a writing wherever you can person.

AJ Harper:

I was writing on park benches. Mm. I, because what I would do is put the laptop in the bottom of

the baby stroller and I was the primary person during the day with Jack. And so I would load everything up, walk him until he was asleep. And then, uh, his dad had wanted that super fancy stroller.m. And so it would lay completely flat. Oh. So I could get a good nap out of him. Yeah. Because once he fell asleep, I could lay him almost like a bassinet. Yes. And then I would just time it and hit a park bench, grab the laptop and I'm just on my lap or sitting on a p - I was, I, I was desperate for wherever I could get writing done so I could, I really had to do it when he was sleeping.

Mike Michalowicz:

I think that's the ultimate lesson in this episode is that you can design your writing, um, experience around any environment. It doesn't have to be airplanes. That's just, I, I'm realizing, oh, that's because I'm on airplanes a lot. I've optimized for it.

AJ Harper:

Yeah, that's just your life.

Mike Michalowicz:

And at that period of your life, you were with your son a lot. You have to optimize

AJ Harper:

Around it. I'm just gonna do it whenever he's asleep. Yeah. I even when, uh, when, when we moved to, um, Nyack, he went to this Montessori preschool and he went in the morning and I would go get him and I had to, we only had one car. So I'm walking a, I don't know, a m- mile and a half home. And then by the time we got home, he was kinda ready to take a nap so I would get him. But if I, instead of laying him in his room, I would put him in the bed with me and I would scooch up super close to him and have my laptop right next to me on the other side so when he finally fell asleep, if he was touching me, he would sleep for two, two and a half hours. Mm. And then I can just very quietly type and I would type as quietly as I could while his little arm was - Aw.

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AJ Harper:

And, but if I put him in his own bed, I'd get 45 minutes. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So like all those things, you know, that's how I wrote books. Yeah. Can I get an extra hour? Can I get whatever? Oh and I also used to write at this place that I called the Copa Cabana.

AJ Harper:

There is a motel in Nyack and it is a motel. And they had a diner that was o - it's not a, it's not open anymore, but they would stay open till 2:00 in the morning. Nice. Well, when your kid goes to sleep at 6:30 - Yeah. I want to go to bed immediately. I'm exhausted. So I had to leave the

house because if I had stayed home, I just would've fallen asleep. So I would get in the car then after a full day with him, throw my laptop and go to the, what I called the Copa Cabana. That wasn't the name. I, I called it that because it had pa - fake palm trees inside of it. That's great. Yeah. And like totally like old school New York waitresses. I love it. Right? And they didn't care. They were like, they knew what I was doing. I just said, "Look, I'm just gonna come here.

AJ Harper:

I'm gonna sit for about three or four hours. Are you good?" Oh, yeah. And they were like, "Totally." And they would, they just loved me. So I could just order like fries and a diet Coke.

Mike Michalowicz:

And this cup of coffee. Oh, you're right.

AJ Harper:

Plug in under the booth. Yes. I wrote a lot of stuff for you at the Copa. Yeah. Um, but I had to because I was gonna fall asleep.

Mike Michalowicz:

Interesting.

AJ Harper:

So basically, I think the m - for me is like I will write wherever.

Mike Michalowicz:

That reminds me of gear. You need access to power if you're using these - Yes. These different platforms. So be very cognizant of that. I have, I bought a little, um, USB splitter, I guess, like where you, you can plug into a wall, but be very careful. A splitter that, that most splitters, um, as you add more devices into it, you plug in more USB devices, the power management doesn't work and it actually starts failing charging. And if you're running off battery, you may not know

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and all of a sudden it cuts out, you're like, "I'm being charged." So I have a legit one and I don't know, um, how to explain it, but when you look to buy this, make sure that it has equal power that it sources to all things. It's a little bulkier, a little bit bigger. Also, I carry a battery as a backup, a small battery that if I, I can put 10 or 15 more minutes or f - 10 or 15 more percent juice into any of my devices in a worst case scenario.

Mike Michalowicz:

I do have a, uh, the super tip though. Um, and it's another device. It's my watch. So you can record voice memos. I've, you know, when a plane lands, like, you gotta get off the plane. <laugh> Like you can't sit there and finish out your stuff. I'm like, I have like 10 more minutes of writing or thoughts. Now I get off the plane. Mm. So I do the talking to the watch thing. And I record a voice memo into my watch at the very end, uh, if I need to. And I found that when I'm walking, you know, down the jet way or something like that, a thought comes to mind, I no longer am trying to repeat in my head to remember it. I use that device. Oh,

AJ Harper:

That's cool. Yeah. I like that.

Mike Michalowicz:

That's been super helpful.

AJ Harper:

I wanna make one note though. I think this is for all the moms and dads who are trying to work freelance and then also be with their kids. That writing on a park bench worked for me when I had a baby sleeping in a carriage. Do not do this when your kids are running around. Yeah. 'Cause I've seen that. I did, I had to, I had to stop that immediately. Yeah. That's how I ended up at the Coba at night. Yeah. Because once he was toddling around - Yeah,

Mike Michalowicz:

You gotta keep an eye on that.

AJ Harper:

But there were other people with their laptops. Yeah. And I would see they aren't, they don't even see where their kid is going. Yeah. Um, so I definitely nix that as soon as he was mobile.

Mike Michalowicz:

Plus it's a bad habit. We, we talked about that, I think in clockwork, the opening story, Long Beach Island, my favorite beach. Walking down, I stay as the only person that had a

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workaholism. And you see people teeter-tottering laptops on their knees that are sitting in their beach chair while their kid's running out of the ocean and they're not paying any attention.

AJ Harper:

That is true. For me, it was, you know, I, I had to try and make all this happen while also being a

primary parent. Yeah. And so those, that's real, you know? That's a, that's a real situation. So you just have to keep adapting, um, to that. Yeah. And that's how I ended up at libraries, at the Copa, just writing wherever I could. And I guess sometimes in a parking lot at 11 o'clock outside the library. You know

Mike Michalowicz:

What I got out of this episode is it really wasn't about writing on an airplane. It was writing in a way that fits within your current lifestyle.

AJ Harper:

Current lifestyle.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, that was really the discovery here for me. And that every device, every technology exists for it, but you can go old school and you can do it on paper. So there's no excuse to say, "Well, I can't bring my laptop with me. " Thank God you can't bring your laptop

AJ Harper:

With you. I mean, um, I will say that belief that you have to have the perfect setup is keeping you from doing stuff. The only reason that I went, I veered away from trying to get the perfect setup was desperation. If you have, I have two hours, I have 45 minutes, I have whatever number, right? You're just gonna do it. Mm-hmm. And you need to get, you need to get past that. And yes, there's ideal situations, but, um, you should be able to write anywhere.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. Next time you're flying, now you know what to do. And if you're not writing, be reading and read, write a must read. Nice. Um, <laugh> next week's episode's gonna get pre-orders way before your pub date. Um, which I didn't really understand the importance of this or how to manage it, particularly financially, until I heard some stories recently, so I'll share that. Oh, I'm excited

AJ Harper:

About that. Yeah.



Mike Michalowicz:

I heard from getting orders a year in advance. So I was like, "Oh, that's really interesting. It seems way premature." And you're like, "No, I made money in advance."

AJ Harper:

I've, I've been trying to push my students to get it way, way before they think. Yeah. And so I, one of them actually a - inspired this and asked us to do this episode. So I'm excited to hear what you

Mike Michalowicz:

Have to say. Cool. Yeah. For our listeners, go to dwtbpodcast.com. We have a lot of free materials. AJ prepared all those materials for you. So get them there. Please rate and review the show. Um, if you've heard me say this multiple times, you haven't done it yet, can you take the five minutes to do it now? Not even, probably five seconds. It really helps us get the word out. Any questions you have, Adela, our producers listening in, go to hello@dwtbpodcast.com or send to hello@dwtbpodcast.com. Remember this. Don't write that book. Write the greatest book you can. I