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Perish, then Publish : What You Might Do If Tenure Eludes Your Grasp

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Perish, then Publish: What You Might Do If Tenure Eludes Your Grasp

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The Word Works, Tokyo

消滅してから、論文を書く：終身在職権をつかみ損なった場合に、あなたが行うこと
ザ・ワード・ワークス、東京

Abstract

The author, an anthropologist living in Japan, recalls his own experiences of academic training and research, and his transition to independent researcher and commercial copywriter. He encourages academic researchers to develop their own strategies for work, and to use their training as a foundation for survival outside the academy, if their academic ambitions cannot be fulfilled by a secure academic job.

日本在住の人類学者である筆者が、みずからの経験した学校教育と研究活動、独立した研究者から商業コピーライターへの転身についてふりかえる。筆者は、学術研究者が、経済的には安定しつつも、研究機関での仕事で、みずからの大望を実現することができない場合、みずからの仕事に対する戦略を練りあげ、自分の受けた教育訓練を学界以外で生き残るための基盤として用いるよう奨励したい。

The academic job market is brutal. With the chances of securing a tenured position increasingly slim, academic researchers are asking themselves how to turn their language, research, and writing skills into tools that will earn them a living outside the academy. As someone who's been there and done that, I have a few thoughts to offer.

I begin with a vivid memory. It was not yet a year since I had been hired as an English-language copywriter by Hakuhodo, Japan's second largest advertising agency. Kimoto Kazuhiko, the Senior Creative Director who had hired me was swearing up and down that he would never, ever, again hire an academic. I was a researcher who had written a Ph.D. dissertation in cultural anthropology. I had published a handful of academic articles. After coming to Japan, I had spent not quite three years working as a rewriter, writer and editor for a small corporate communications company. Still, said a furious Kimoto, when it came to writing advertising, I was clueless.

The Academic and the Copywriter

The good news is I learned fast. A few months after this incident I won my first advertising prize, for an ad for Canon typewriters. But what had I learned? And why had Kimoto-san been so upset?

As an academic writer, I had written for peers and mentors, a small group of individuals who shared my esoteric interest in the anthropology of ritual symbolism and an even more esoteric interest in Taoist magic. Coming of academic age before the writing revolution of the eighties that made anthropologists more self-conscious, more subjective and experimental. In their writing, I had learned to write in the cool, passive, objective mode of humanists pretending to be scientists.

Like the economists described by Deirdre McCloskey in *The Rhetoric of Economics*, I was pretty good at facts and logic and constructing complex arguments. I was lousy at stories and metaphors—and the craft of isolating a simple message, finding the right metaphor, and writing a short, simple story that brings an ad to life was one I had yet to learn.

Consider, for example, that first prize-winning ad I mentioned. We are talking about a time not so very long ago, when personal computers were just beginning to filter into business and laser and bubble-jet printers were only theoretical concepts. Most business-related writing was still produced with typewriters. The IBM Selectric with its bouncing balls for different fonts dominated the market. My client Canon was the challenger promoting a new technology, the daisy wheel. Like IBM's bouncing ball, the daisy wheel let you change fonts. It was also faster and quieter. But the message that Canon wanted to push was the quality of the documents its typewriters produced. IBM's bouncing ball was prone to producing uneven lines caused by misaligned characters. Canon's daisy wheel was a more precise mechanism able to produce line after line with the characters perfectly aligned.

That was the orientation. The copywriter's job was to make the message eye-catching—to grab the reader's attention—to find an emotional hook, and, as far as possible, to communicate the whole message in one vivid headline. The line that won me that first prize was,

We put our reputation on every line.

It talked about Canon's reputation for visual quality—a legacy from its camera business. It spoke to the feelings of business people for whom better looking documents would be more effective sales tools. It evoked a sporting metaphor, communicating a challenge to the market leader. And the "every" in "every line" provided a bridge to the body copy that spelled out what Canon wanted to say about its daisy wheels.

That, at least, is how we sold the headline to Canon. The prize was icing on the cake.

As I reflect on these memories, I recall a favorite work of literary criticism. In *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World*, Stephen Owen argues that every literary genre assumes a specific art of reading.

Thus, for example, English romantic poetry assumes a reader who is looking “through” the specifics of the poem for a transcendental message “behind” or “beyond” them. Like the shadows on the walls of Plato’s cave, the words of the poem are only reminders of what are supposed to be universal forms of thought and feeling.

In contrast, traditional Chinese lyric assumes a thorough knowledge of the Chinese classics—a knowledge so specific that when the Tang lyric poet Du Fu mentions a certain bend in the Yellow River, his assumed reader will instantly know not only its precise geographical location but also a wealth of allusions associated with that particular place. These are, says Owen, right there on the surface for the reader with the art of reading that Du Fu takes for granted. He does not look behind or beyond them in search of something else.

It is, of course, a commonplace that an author should consider the audience for which a work is written. What I think I learned from Kimoto-san and from reading Stephen Owen goes a bit further. It involves a heightened awareness of not only the reader for whom we write but also what has to be done to produce a certain effect on a reader whose art of reading may be different from our own.

As an academic writer, I assumed a serious, careful reader—a reader already interested in the subject I was writing about. This reader looks for cool, objective argumentation—that massing of facts and logic McCloskey talks about, along with the references to others’ work that demonstrate my membership in the group for which I am writing.

As a copywriter I learned to write for fickle, careless readers with a short attention span. In the best of cases—writing car ads for car fanatics is one example—they might have a passionate interest in what I was writing about. More often, however, my readers would be like shoppers scanning supermarket shelves, sometimes attracted by the familiar, sometimes looking for something new, but rarely taking a great deal of time to carefully read the lists of ingredients or study the legally mandated warnings.

I would have to attract their attention, find a hook strong enough to stop them and keep them reading, and deliver a simple, compelling message. “Keep It Simple, Stupid” would have to be burned in my brain. Facts and logic could not be ignored, but emotional bonding would be my aim. Seeing myself as one of my readers required far more humility than my academic writing displays.

Writers vs. Those Who Write For a Living

Truth be told, however, the academic and the copywriter in the parable I have just constructed are only good-to-think because they seem so different. They form a binary opposition—a sure sign of primitive thinking; Claude Levi-Strauss was right about that. What we call the real world is, in fact, more complicated.

At a recent meeting of SWET, the Society of Writers, Editors and Translators, Larry Brouhard, the founder and president of ICCS (Inter Cultural Communication Services), described his long career in the technical documentation business. He began with his own binary opposition: writers vs. people who write for a living.

Writers, says Larry, are people who write on spec. They write and then hope to sell what they have written. A few become rich and famous; most remain poor and unknown. In contrast, people who write for a living write what they are commissioned to write. They know, in advance, what they will be paid. They may not get rich, but they often make a decent living. Since they often write anonymously, their fame is limited to their clients and a few professional peers.

Like the academic and the copywriter, the writer and the person who writes for a living are also stereotypes. As a copywriter, I often write copy before I know what I will be paid. Sometimes I am paid more than the price I might have tried to demand before the job was done. That can happen if what I have written has helped to win new business or a long-time client who thinks that he owes me a favor has a lavish budget to dispose of. Still, I can recognize the truth in Larry's stereotype. I am not the proverbial author in a garret, writing the great American novel and hoping to produce a bestseller.

When I write as an academic, I am, indeed, a writer, someone who writes on spec. I write and then look for somewhere to publish. Plus, I don't expect to be paid very much. In the case of an article placed in an academic journal, I won't be paid at all. Since I don't have an academic career to worry about, my only reward is vanity.

By academic standards, my book, *Japanese Consumer Behavior: From Worker Bees to Wary Shoppers* has done fairly well. In the first year after publication, it sold more than 1,600 copies. If an article I read a year or two back in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* was correct, that's more than twice the 700-copy average sales of an academic monograph in the social sciences or humanities.

My first royalty check—a bit over five hundred English pounds—was nice. But it's no way to make a living. It took me three years to write that book and nearly four before it was published. While writing for a living, I have made that much in a single day.

Why, then, did I write the book? I wanted to. As a young academic, I was green and tactless, no way to be in a falling market for academic jobs. I failed to get tenure and saw my academic career go down the tubes. So, yes, I did have something to prove.

I also had an incredible opportunity, to look over the shoulders and through the eyes of Japanese researchers free to follow their whimsy in looking at changes in Japanese consumer behavior. And I had the support of my wife and partner, Ruth McCreery. So I was able to indulge myself.

But, enough of this self-indulgence: What advice can I offer to those of you who are facing the difficulties with which this talk began?

You have spent years learning the art of academic research and writing. But the same thing is happening now to you that happened to me in the mid-1970s. The academic job market is shrinking. In Japan universities are closing, and like other salaried employees, their faculties face restructuring. If you find yourself in this situation, what are you going to do? What are your options?

If you really love the academic life, you can try to succeed academically. But you'll have to be quicker, smarter, more tactful, and work much harder than your predecessors and peers. My prayers go with you. If you lack the obsessive edge that makes a strong competitor, you might want to think again.

Also, you should ask yourself if writing for a living is really what you want to do. You are smart, well educated, and reasonably well disciplined. If you have good people skills or like getting things organized, you might do better in sales or business management. Ruth and I know several people who, leaving academia, wound up as highly placed executives. I think, for example, of Robert M. "Skipp" Orr, who taught American politics at Temple University, went on to become a government-relations officer for Motorola, and is now President of Boeing Japan.

I know that it may be difficult to imagine leaving the Ivory Tower behind, but the biggest single barrier to finding success in a new career may be the box you have put yourself in. Please do think about that.

Let's say, however, that you love doing research; you love it so much that a non-research career is totally unappealing. Research provides a livelihood for all sorts of people outside the academy. Financial analysts do research. Market researchers do research. People who work for government agencies or NGOs do research. Many of them started out as academics.

Here, I see four critical questions..

- What do you want to study? If you're going to spend your life on a subject, it might as well be something you want to learn more about.
- How do you want to study it? Desk research? Ethnographic fieldwork? Survey research? Focus groups? Statistical analysis? Experiments? This isn't an academic question. It is how you will spend your working life. Again, you might as well like what you're doing.
- Question No. 3 is a killer: Is there anyone willing to pay you to do it? For if there is no demand for whatever you want to do, that, too is no way to make a living.

- Question No. 4 is also a tough one: Can you deal with the ethical issues involved in doing research whose ultimate goal is profit or promotion of policies with which you may disagree? Only you can draw the lines where your conscience tells you to draw them.

We come, at last, to writing for a living, the craft into which I stumbled willy-nilly when my academic career collapsed. Briefly, then, here's how it happened, and what I believe I learned along the way.

Leaving Behind the Ivory Tower

It was Christmas, 1976. When Ruth came home for the holidays from her masters program in East Asian studies at Yale, I had to tell her I had failed to get tenure at the college where I was teaching, I had, however, received a grant for another year of research in Taiwan. Ruth told me that she was pregnant.

After our daughter was born, we headed off for that year in Taiwan. While we were there, Ruth applied for and got into a Ph.D. program at Yale in Japanese literature. It was her grant for a year's study at the Stanford Center, then located in Kojimachi in Tokyo, that brought us to Japan in 1980.

Shortly before we left for Japan, one of Ruth's *sempai*, Robert Danly, had us over to dinner. As dinner finished he asked me, "John, what are you going to do in Japan."

When I said, "I don't know, Bob. I hear you can earn good money teaching English."

Danly replied, "Teaching English is boring."

"What do you suggest?" I asked.

Danly, who had worked at Asian Advertisers in Tokyo between his B.A. and Ph.D. in Japanese literature, replied with a list of people that I should call when we got to Japan. The second name on the list was Robert Cutts, then a partner at a company called Dynaword. Dynaword was doing daily translations for IBM Japan and, I, who had just spent a year working as a research assistant in the Yale Artificial Intelligence program, knew a bit more about computers than most would-be editors in those dark ages before the PC became something that everyone uses.

I started out as a rewriter on the IBM account. Three years later I was writing and editing the *Sony Marketing Hotline*, an in-house magazine in which Sony announced new products to its distributors and shared examples of marketing successes. That's when I met Wick Smith, my predecessor at Hakuhodo, just as he was being headhunted by Nippon Design Center. He was looking for someone to replace him as a Hakuhodo copywriter doing ads for Canon and NEC.

I had started at Dynaword rewriting. My job was to brush up non-native

speakers' translations from Japanese into English. To do the job well, I had to learn how to proofread and copyedit. Bob Cutts taught me to read proof backwards when checking spelling and to watch carefully for properly spelled but inappropriate words. I will never forget the chewing out I got when I failed to notice that, where an article was supposed to say that a client's president didn't like golf, I let it slip by saying that he didn't like gold—at a time when currency markets were more than a little unstable.

I am still not a good proofreader. That may be why, a year or so later, I found myself writing and editing *The Sony Marketing Hotline* instead. Now, besides rewriting, I also had to go off and interview people at Sony about their new products and turn the interviews into short articles. That gave me a short brush with journalism, learning to ask who, what, when, where, how and why. At the end of the day, however, I was still only summarizing what other people told me to say.

Working at Dynaword, I had slipped into the habits associated with work in “production.” In this writing environment, what the company supplies is piecework. The product is billed per word or per page. Writers who succeed in this environment learn to write quickly and smoothly--and with no great originality. Originality is hard to sell.

Here worth is measured in trouble-free volume, and a competent hack, who can crank out acceptable B+ work in a hurry, is worth his weight in gold (though rarely, I must acknowledge, paid what he is worth). Add a strong dose of academic pedantry, and it's easy to see why Kimoto-san was screaming at me on that day with which I began this essay.

Above and Below the Line

Let me now introduce another binary opposition: above and below the line. Above the line is work paid for out of the commission that an advertising agency earns when it buys media. Below the line is work paid for on a fee for service basis, the piecework realm where “production” occurs. Above the line writing is copywriting in the strict sense. Below the line writing is the kind of writing I had learned to do well at Dynaword, writing of a kind that drove Kimoto-san crazy.

Below the line writing should be quick, smooth, and trouble-free. Good enough is good enough. Nothing more is expected. In contrast, copywriting is a mystery—or at least is sold that way.

As a practical matter this means that a headline and a hundred words of body copy in an ad placed in expensive media earns the agency far more money than catalogues with multiple pages containing far more words.

Ohnuki Takuya, one of Japan's most famous art directors, says that ads must pass five hurdles; the same is true of copy.

1. *Copy has to be eye-catching.* In a world where audiences are bombarded by thousands of messages every day, a print ad has at most 1.5 seconds to capture a reader's attention. The standard TV commercial is only 30 seconds long. In Japan over 70 percent of all commercials on air are only 15 seconds long.
2. *Copy has to say something new.* Without something new to say, no message will be remembered.
3. *Copy has to be easy to understand.* Overwhelmed with information, the people who notice ads rarely have the time or inclination to parse a complex message.
4. *The sizzle has to rub off on the product.* If the audience remembers the ad but doesn't remember the product, the ad has failed as advertising. Ads are not art for art's sake.
5. *Ideally the message boosts sales.* This is, however, the Holy Grail. Agencies have good reason to shy away from talk about sales. Even those that talk about measures of advertising effectiveness prefer to talk instead about such measures as awareness, understanding, and liking.

A writer who writes for a living in a production context is likely to spend most of every day at work pounding on a keyboard, grinding out words like sausages. In contrast, an advertising copywriter spends most of each day either in meetings, or reading, or watching TV, or staring into space in search of inspiration. Ideally, at least, in the copywriter's trade, good is never good enough. The copywriter's job is to look for "It," that special something that achieves the goals of grabbing attention, providing a hook, and leaving behind that simple, easy to understand message that not only makes consumers identify with the product—in the best of all possible worlds, it even drives sales. That was the sort of thing that Kimoto-san was looking for and failing to find in his novice copywriter's writing.

Be Ready to Profit From the Unexpected

Fortunately, I did catch on fast, and that is how an anthropologist became a copywriter. Do remember though that this brief summary only describes a single life's trajectory that through its own series of accidents led me to copywriting, the art of writing advertising. It barely glances at other forms of writing for a living, like journalism, writing non-fiction articles or books, or cranking out Harlequin romances. There is, however, one more lesson to be learned from this checkered experience.

In his book *The Pursuit of Excellence*, management guru Tom Peters talks about two kinds of companies that fail. The first, he says, are those that never have enough information, so they never reach a decision. The second, he says take

foolish risks. The successful companies, he says, are those that are constantly acquiring knowledge but are also willing to seize opportunities that involve a reasonable risk.

To me, Peters' analysis suggests the image of three men on a beach. At one end of the beach is a fellow who is building a sandcastle. It's a wonderful sandcastle, with incredibly ornate details, patiently added one by one. It's absolutely beautiful—until the tide comes in.

At the other end of the beach is a fellow who leaps out of his car, throws off his clothes and rushes into the ocean, regardless of sharks, riptides, and storms. He will be lucky to survive.

And, finally, right in the middle is a fit, tanned fellow with a surfboard. You can see that he's practiced a lot. You can watch him study the weather and the waves. When he sees a wave he likes, he paddles out and rides it in.

Is he always successful? No one ever is.

But he knows what he's doing, he has never stopped learning, and when he catches a great wave, he enjoys a great ride. I don't know about you. But if I were planning another career, I'd want to be that guy in the middle. That's where I'd want to be.

Afterword

It has been called to my attention that Japanese academics may find the advice offered in this essay especially difficult to follow. The reasons are two-fold: the security of academic careers and the ease of academic publishing in Japan. On the one hand, academic careers in Japan resemble those in Germany. Once a young researcher is taken under a professor's wing, they may have to spend long years in a highly subordinate role; but tenure is, in effect, automatic. On the other, as Professor Jerry Eades pointed out in his contribution to the Research Writing Conference (see Chapter One, this volume), academic publishing in Japan is, by Western standards, easy. If Eades is right, most Japanese academics publish in their own universities' in-house journals and what they publish usually takes the form of research notes, straightforward descriptions of data derived from work in progress. Thus, the pressures that have made the words "publish or perish" infamous in North America and other parts of "the West" that imitate the North American model of academic competition have been largely missing in Japan.

But I use the words "have been" deliberately. Our daily newspapers tell us that a number of private Japanese universities have already gone out of business or are on the point of doing so. The comfortable, if somewhat austere, greenhouses in which Japanese researchers have worked may be swept away by economic typhoons. When that happens Japanese researchers will find themselves in the situation in which I found myself, back in the 1970s, when my own academic career collapsed. What will they do then?

Just recently, I met someone whom I would suggest as a role model. Miura Atsushi is a sociologist, market researcher and author whose resume includes being editor-in-chief of *ACROS* magazine, a researcher at the Mitsubishi Research Institute, and now the sole proprietor of *Culture Studies*, his own independent research firm. His publication list would make any academic proud (to learn more see his web site www.culturestudies.com).

Miura is proud to call himself a researcher. He could, he says, call himself a consultant and make more money; but research is what he loves, digging into the realities of contemporary life. When we talked about his academic interests in sociology and the market research he does for a living, he compared them to classical music and jazz; one gives you the discipline and the musical vocabulary, while the other plunges you into performance and demands improvisation. Together they provide a fuller musical life than either does alone. A provocative thought, I think, for anyone contemplating how to use academic skills to make a living outside the academy.

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