

“I have writer’s block.”

I take a breath. Not an obviously impatient loud inhale—*Ahhh*—and breathy exhale—*Whooo*—but a quiet, controlled, professional breath intended to relax the pressure building in my chest, the tightness in my shoulders. A breath to give me time to think of something equally professional to say in response.

Something professional and useful. Something—anything—that will help get this last dagnabbed section written (*Breathe, Isabel, breathe.*). Written before we have to print this proposal and put it on a plane (*Tonight!*) to meet the client’s deadline.

Something professional and useful and polite. Something that won’t aggravate, alienate, antagonize, or otherwise annoy this internal customer with whom I will likely have to work again: the sales lead *cum* proposal manager sitting beside me in the silent office. Silent because everyone else went home hours ago. Silent because nothing is happening on my keyboard or on the shared printer.

Something professional and useful and polite and patient? No, that’s a bridge too far. Writer’s block? Is he kidding me?

I glance sideways, surreptitiously. Nope, he’s not kidding. I wonder what Buddy thinks we’re doing.

What are we doing?

In our business, a proposal is a technical sales document written in response to a Request for Proposals: R-F-P, in the acronymized lingo we L-U-V.

In their RFP, the client told us what services they want; for which locations, facilities, and equipment; to what standards; and for how long. They also told us what to put in our proposal: what questions to answer.

Doing a proposal isn’t brain surgery or rocket science: it isn’t even creative writing. It’s more like a meeting where we have to jointly write an exam with a bunch of people we hardly know, and where the slightest misstep could give us an F. That’s F for Fail, not for Fabulous.

*And the best we can hope for
is to die in our sleep.
- Don Schlitz*

No, no, although we have no country classic as a theme song, the best we can hope for is that someone—and just one someone—is actually chairing this dagnabbed never-ending meeting.

Breathe, Isabel, breathe.

Introducing Buddy & Me

As I sit, waiting for Buddy to speak, I realize that I sympathize a little bit with him, I really do.

Someone else has written all the relatively easy experience answers: *Where have we done this work before? For whom? For how long? How much? How often? How good?*

Someone else has written all the relatively straightforward technical answers: *How will we do the work and from what locations? How many staff will we assign, with what qualifications? What computer systems will we use? What tools and materials and vehicles will we need? What standards will we meet?*

Someone else has rewritten all the technical answers when the inevitable moment of truth came: *Oops, this costs way too much. How will we do it with and for less?*

All that's left now is the squishy management piece: the one piece that can require some creativity or at least some fancy footwork. *Day to day, how will we deliver services and maintain quality? Month by month, how will we manage the project and minimize risk? Year after year, how will we ensure good governance?*

*What is *governance* anyway?*

But writer's block? Give me a break. And Lord, give me patience. Right. Now. Or at least something to say.

*"This is technical writing.
We don't get writer's block."*

And so we write it together. I ask leading questions, Buddy replies, I craft written responses. Tip-tap-type. Some is what he says, some is what I know, and some is just what. For the next hour, we doggedly fill every slot, answer every question. When I finally put down my fingers, I look wearily at what we have.

Are the answers any good? No. They're better than good: They're done.

Buddy calls a taxi to take the completed proposal to the counter-to-counter counter, as it were, at the municipal airport.

That's another on-time departure, folks.

I drive my little blue Mazda home through the dark, empty streets, still muttering under my breath. Writer's block, indeed.

No moment of grudging sympathy goes unpunished. Life is always willing to show me how someone else really feels, to transmogrify my sympathy into empathy. There seems to be no statute of limitations: Years after that night, here I sit, feeling the anxiety that I associate with writer's block.

As I begin this book, I have no un-clear, inconsistent, off-putting, non-sensical, annoying RFP instructions that I have to follow. No, and no excuses either: The content and structure are mine alone to determine.

To determine how to take a quarter century of experience and make it resonate for Proposal Land's workers, both permanent residents and lucky holders of short-term work visas, as well as for their significant others who always wondered why they got that twitch when someone mentioned proposal work. To make it speak, maybe, to a few folks who've never crossed the border.

Introducing Buddy & Me

To determine how to make sense of a work environment that left me able to order restaurant meals for all of my never-before-met, never-to-see-again proposal colleagues with the confidence normally reserved for a *co-vivant*:

- You bet he'll have fries with that. Extra fries.
- He wants real tea, not any of that hippie tea.
- Diet Pepsi® but only if it's really Pepsi®. If it's Coke®, he'll have black coffee.
- Nothing sweet on his waffle: No fruit, no fruit sauce, no powdered sugar. I mean it. Nothing. Sweet.

To determine how to transform the experience into a coherent communication: something that looks like a straight line. Or even like a zigzag. Just not like the hairball it really was.

To determine how to disentangle a blur of impressions and experiences, where every event is unique yet also reminds me of seven just like it. How, in effect, to recount just one season's activities after a lifetime of summers spent at the lake. Somehow life, even work life, doesn't pull apart that neatly.

So what form does this take, in my head?

A how-to manual? Nope. Done that.

A short story? Guys. Twenty-five years.

A novel, then? Nothing so organized. There are loose bits from about 100 proposals dancing around in here. And nothing so clever, either. I've encountered characters, but I can't create them.

A memoir? Maybe sort of.

At least it's good to know that in Proposal Land there's no such thing as writer's block. It's just a question of where to start and how to proceed.

So, where to start? I dunno: I'm just going to jump in.

And how to proceed? Well, there'll be some incidents, some asides, and some bits thrown in as they occur to me. I might jump around as well as in, but that's no surprise.

*"Does the expression
'Spit on a hot stove'
mean anything to you?"*

But there I go, getting ahead of myself already.