

Interview with a Barefoot Writer: Alex Green

By Mindy McHorse

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—New York Times Bestselling Author Alex Green



Alex Green

It's impossible to speak with Alex Green and leave unmoved. Listening to his clear articulation is like watching hot fudge pour into a pan — a steady flow of rich content that fills the space around it and leaves no air pockets of doubt or confusion.

He credits his [copywriting skills](#) for his smooth ability to speak. "I always say that you end up writing the way you speak. So it's important to be direct and give as many examples as possible. You'll be more successful." He's right. Good copywriting is classically based in clear communication.

Alex Green has authored three national bestsellers. He's been featured on *Oprah & Friends*, *CNBC*, and *National Public Radio*. He's been profiled by *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, and *Kiplinger's Personal Finance*.

Yet despite his many successes and far-reaching influence, Green still champions the old-fashioned idea that a writer, quite simply, writes. He acknowledges the scores of people in love with the romantic notion of being a writer. The ones who spend their time doing as they please, staying in their pajamas until 2:00 in the afternoon. "Well, great," says Alex. "But if you're not writing in those pajamas, you're not a writer. You're just a person who hangs out in their pajamas."

We spoke on a chilly December morning. Green was at his residence in Charlottesville, Virginia. He explained how nothing in his background pointed him toward being a writer, let alone such a prolific one. A school guidance counselor told him he had a better chance playing third-base for the Yankees than earning a living as a writer. So he went into sales. "I wasn't terribly good with numbers, or foreign languages, or science. I thought I might want to practice law for a while but the idea of getting immersed in a case that I really don't care about, except winning it for my client, just didn't have any appeal."

He was also well aware of the familiar idea that life as a poet or playwright, or even a novelist, usually means a meager existence. "Wallace Stevens is one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, though he worked his whole life as the vice president at an insurance company. Yet he wrote immortal poetry that people will be reading hundreds of years from now. So people shouldn't turn up their noses at the idea of doing something else besides being a writer."

Although, Green conceded, [copywriting](#) is on a whole other playing field. "When I joined Agora writing editorials, I didn't even know what a copywriter was. In my first meeting, someone mentioned the term copywriter, and I thought they were talking

about people who secure copyrights for the things that we write. I knew nothing about it. Though I assumed the really valuable people at Agora were the people who wrote the editorial copy."

Agora, of course, is Agora Inc., one of the largest and most successful consumer newsletter publishers in the world. Green is now editor for three separate newsletters for Agora — *The Momentum Alert*, *The Insider Alert*, and *The New Frontier Trader*. He also lends the 25 years of experience he acquired on Wall Street to his role as Investment Director of The Oxford Club and directs the portfolio of *The Oxford Club Communiqué*, ranked among the top five investment letters in the nation for the past decade by independent *Hulbert Financial Digest*.

It didn't take Green long to realize copywriting was the best way to hone his writing skills and support himself at the same time. "Being a copywriter allows you to actually write for a living and earn a very good six-figure living at that. So I think it is a natural starting point for people who want to write. If you want to do something more artistic, like poetry, you can do that kind of writing on the side."

The discussion naturally leads into the sales aspect of copywriting. The fact that so many would-be writers are worried about becoming sales people because they have a negative idea of selling. Green quietly laughs at the idea of any separation between writing and selling. "To get right down to the nut of it, I think people that look down on sales need to get over themselves. Number one, everybody sells themselves in some way or another. If you're working for an employer, you sold yourself as the one to hire for that position. Maybe other applicants were considered, but you successfully sold yourself. If you're married or in any kind of committed relationship, you sold yourself to your spouse or partner. Selling is nothing more than making a persuasive argument. Things have to be sold, that's how the economy works."

He says too many people tangle the idea of selling with lying and cheating. "I can't cheat people. That's such a diminished view of what the business world is about," says Green.

He said there wasn't time to go into all the reasons that perception is wrong, but added, "Here's what copywriters and aspiring copywriters should understand. Number one, everybody survives by selling something. Every company survives by selling a product or service, and there's a huge unmet demand for capable copywriters who will help companies sell their products and services. So if they're looking for a way to write and make a pretty good living, then yes, absolutely. Copywriting is selling in print form rather than spoken form. But it's an art as well as a craft. And in an economy like this with people going, 'What in the heck can I do to make a living?' people need successful copy more than ever. It's not something everybody can do, but if you demonstrate a knack for it or learn the craft of copywriting, there is a huge potential."

He proves his point by naming some of the world's most successful authors, all of whom started out as copywriters. There's author Helen Gurley Brown, who also served as editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan* magazine for 32 years. Satirical novelist Joseph Heller, who wrote *Catch-22*. Salman Rushdie, the British Indian novelist and essayist. F. Scott Fitzgerald, who started out writing advertising copy long before he authored *The Great Gatsby* and became known as one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century.

"If F. Scott Fitzgerald can start as a copywriter, there's no reason anyone should think they can't start this way, too."

"Listen," he responds. "Executives are a dime a dozen. Executives are just people who are organized and disciplined and motivated. That's all fine, there's a demand for that. But creative people who can sell your product more effectively than you're

able to sell it without them, they're worth their weight in gold. It's almost like asking who's more valuable playing for the Yankees — the guy playing third base, or the guy coaching the team? It's your all-stars."



The obvious question then, is why, if copywriting is an all-star position for a writer, does the demand remain so high? Why isn't the pool flooded with hopefuls?

"It's not easy to find people who understand the market and can communicate in a way that connects with readers. But they are tremendously valuable. I think in any organization where you're selling publications, like Agora, the real all-stars are the people who write the copy that sells the products. They're more valuable even than the people they're promoting. I can't emphasize enough how important copywriting is to any company trying to sell something, but particularly in an organization like ours which is promoting itself through direct-response mail and email. It's absolutely essential to have the best copywriters you can find."

[Copywriting skills](#) clearly make a difference for fiction and nonfiction authors as well. Green would know, as he's used his talent for persuasive writing to promote his three national bestsellers: *The Gone Fishin' Portfolio: Get Wise, Get Wealthy ... and Get On With Your Life* and *The Secret of Shelter Island: Money and What Matters*. His third and most recent bestseller is *Beyond Wealth: The Road Map to a Rich Life*.

But where the world of [novel-writing](#) is highly subjective, copywriting is a measurable science. "Someone can read a novel and they think it's the best thing they ever read, and someone else can read it and call it garbage. But in copywriting, you're trying to evoke a response from your prospects. It doesn't matter if you're old or young, experienced or inexperienced, black or white, male or female, educated or not. Either your copy gets a direct response or it does not. And if it gets a direct response, it's excellent copy. If it doesn't, it isn't. There's no prejudice or bias or any sort of favoritism in the copywriting world, it's entirely objective. You can say that about virtually no other form of writing. If somebody says that you're good, it's not that they're puffing you up. And if they say your copy is bad, you're not being discriminated against. The copy just doesn't work."

One thing that's clear if you look at Green's writing resume is that his copy works. And, he's impressively prolific. But his opinion is that the two go hand-in-hand.

"If you're going to be a great woodworker or a great baseball player or a great computer programmer, you're going to spend a lot of time doing those things. Writing is no different. I often find that people who are aspiring writers, because they learned to write about the second or third grade, think, 'Well, I CAN write,' but it's a skill that has to be developed. Copywriting is a great way to do that because it focuses your thoughts, helps you hone your argument, and allows you to work on your persuasive communication skills.

He goes on to point out the value of deadlines. With eight deadlines a week, minimum, Green turns in more than one finished piece a day for every five-day work week. That's more than three pieces every two days. "It focuses me," he says. Then he adds, "You can't be a writer because you like to read and you're not a writer because you're shopping for a laptop or sharpening pencils or doing 'research' on the Internet. You're a writer because you sit down and you fashion words into sentences, sentences into coherent paragraphs, and coherent paragraphs into strong arguments. That's what makes a writer. So you have to be disciplined in the practice of writing.

Green's writing habits mirror those of many other prolific writers, with most of his content drafted early in the day. "In my case, it's very simple: I'm a morning person. In the evening, I feel like having a glass of wine, spending time with my family, going out to a concert or a basketball game, or whatever. So I know my writing has to be done in the morning. When I get up, it's a cup of coffee, the paper, and then in to work. I work steadily til lunch, take an hour break, get back to work til 2 or 2:30 in the afternoon."

Writing, he points out, is like sprinting. No one writes eight or nine hours a day. That would be inhuman. It's too mentally exhausting. "But I can certainly write for two and a half, three hours in the morning and a couple more hours in the afternoon. That's what I do every day. That's what makes a person a writer. I would encourage everybody who wants to be a writer to sit there and turn in 500 or 1,000 words a day, minimum. I turn in probably 1,500 to 2,000 words of finished copy every day.

Green then touches on another fundamental tip for being a writer: Learn to type. "I work with people who still hunt-and-peck on the keyboard, looking at the keyboard and glancing up at the screen. I can write five times as much as those people because I type at a rate that an executive secretary types, I can really fly."

That brings up the important, though less romantic point of time management. Green says his deadlines are what keep him from fooling around. He knows he can't go play a round of golf or go grocery shopping (not that he does much grocery shopping, he laughs), until he's met his deadlines. The upshot is he's done by 2:30 in the afternoon. With his deadlines met, there's plenty of time for golf, or tennis, or even meeting a friend for happy hour. Most importantly, that leaves his evenings free to spend with his family.

Something all writers might model from Green is his balance between independent writing and social activities. Recognizing, even celebrating that need for independence (and quiet) is crucial to any writer's success.

"Writing is a very solitary job, but the good part about it is that you can set your own pace. You don't have other people distracting you. I would encourage other writers to take your cell phone and turn it off or leave it in your car. You can't be answering emails or tweets and phone calls and text messages and get any work done."

He stresses, multiple times, a writer's need for good, uninterrupted time to work. Really writing means you're thinking, writing, and revising over and over without interruption. "I can do it in an office in my house that is kind of offset from where all the activity is going on. Other people have to drive to an office somewhere. If you're not somewhere you can afford an office, go to the library where no one is going to be disturbing you. Find a little cubby hole in the back where you can plug in and start writing because you need that uninterrupted time. Then you have the time to spend with your family and your outside interests because you're going to get your work done first and everything else done later."

This points to the obvious fact that self-motivation is key. Green mentions the charm in not having a boss looking over your shoulder, but says the downside is there's no one to tell you to get to work.

"First of all, being a copywriter means being a business person so you have to conduct your day in a business-like manner. But even people like, one of my favorite historians, H. W. Brand, says 'If you write a 365-page book, you've got to write a page a day. That's how you write a book a year. And he makes sure that he knocks out what he has to knock out to get it done.'"

Green's final token of advice is to caution any aspiring writer not to get distracted by the bells and whistles of the digital world. "All you need, the only tools you need, are a word processing program, the Internet, and plenty of peace and quiet."

He recounts the advantages writers today have over someone like him who started out with an electric Smith and Corona typewriter. "Every time I made a mistake I had to back up, pull out a bottle of white out, then white out the letter before I went back and centered the typewriter and re-typed the letter. Nowadays, having an Internet connection is like going back to school where every exam is an open book test."

The payoff in Green's advice is considerable. He says it could easily land somebody with zero writing experience in a position with a big name like Agora, or one of the other big direct-response companies.



"Absolutely. In fact, when I was at the [AWAI Bootcamp](#) last October, I was having dinner the first night with a bunch of attendees. No one knew me at the time, and no one knew that I wrote for Agora. But in listening, I noticed there was quite a bit of skepticism about whether all this copywriting work really existed. I can assure you that it does exist. I can also say that since

copywriting is an entirely objective profession, you have to be able to show you can write copy that provokes a response from sales prospects. Furthermore, the demand for copywriting is so strong, that if you're a good copywriter, Agora would be happy or lucky or fortunate to be able to keep you because there will be other people demanding your services and trying to outbid Agora. Because again, you're someone who can make things happen, and in any business organization, nothing happens until someone sells something. You can have all the researchers and marketers or whatever you want, but until somebody sells something, nothing happens. Copywriters make things happen. They are the engine that pulls the train. Think about that — how many freight cars need an engine? The answer is, all of them do. So there's no organization that doesn't need somebody to help promote the business more effectively. That's why the demand for high-quality copywriting services is essentially limitless."

Limitless, and rich in opportunity. Green's writing has taken him all over the world. Europe, many times. Scandinavia and Russia just this year, plus two weeks in Italy. He's been to China and Hong Kong in particular a number of times, along with South America. Buenos Aires, Patagonia, and Vancouver are favorite destinations. "If you like travel, writing gives you that freedom. Your toolbox is simply your mind and your computer. So as long as you can find a quiet place to write, you can work from anywhere. Of course, if you're making a good living as a copywriter does, you can ditch the writing for two weeks and just do what you want to do. I love to travel and be outdoors and hike and go to the beach with my kids. My kids have taken up surfing, so we have a home in Florida we go to several weeks a year and surf."

Green lives the dream: He does what motivates him, lives in and travels to beautiful places, and wakes up every morning knowing he'll keep doing all of it. All thanks to writing.

This interview was previously published in the January, 2013 issue of *Barefoot Writer*. To read more interviews from fellow Barefoot Writers be sure to check out [The Barefoot Writer's Club](#).

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