

Sticky Situations and Becoming a Graded Reader Author



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Recognized by the Extensive Reading Foundation as a Language Learner Literature Award Finalist in 2016, the author's work was his first venture into the world of graded readers. Creating it, just like raising its titular character, was hard work punctuated by a series of challenges, mishaps, and hard choices. Some challenges are certainly ubiquitous for new writers in the world of graded readers—finding a publisher, choosing words and grammar to meet level requirements, and coming to a consensus with one's editor. Other challenges are perhaps more unique, such as rewrites caused by illustration errors borne of the Japanese-English language barrier. Through the help of a veteran editor, a supportive community of educators, and a fair bit of luck, the author succeeded with lessons learned. This paper focuses on those lessons and on many of the unique aspects of graded reader authorship.

Many aspiring authors have a book or two floating around in their minds, perhaps a page or two written, an outline for an amazing novel tucked between papers on their desk. I was one such aspiring author, and I took it upon myself to make my dream a reality by setting a realistic and achievable goal, as we are often taught to do in goal-setting seminars. I decided to jump at the opportunity to write a short graded reader, a work that I perceived to be a relatively simple first step on the road to one day writing a novel. I was, it turns out, completely wrong in my estimation of the difficulty of the task, but I have never been happier to be wrong. In throwing myself into the world of graded readers, I successfully published my book with the guidance and fellowship of a seasoned editor, learned of the struggles and challenges that authors of graded readers face, realized the

intuitive skills I had developed after years as an English as a Second Language (ESL) educator, and opened my eyes to a process of learning that I have since embraced as vital to English language education.

The experience of writing one's first graded reader is unique to each author. This paper will address three major stages of the process: preparation, getting picked up by a publisher, and the writing process as it occurs between the author and editor up until the completion of the book. Though speaking from very limited experience, some of the major steps and habits that I view as vital to positioning oneself as a new author will be covered in 'the four I's'. The unique experience of writing a graded reader for second language learners while working within the frameworks established in the realm of graded readers as well as those established by a particular publisher will also be covered, including many of the hurdles that must be overcome when working within such a structured

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environment. As these topics are covered, this paper will also touch on several points that are central to the challenge of graded reader writing, such as the challenge of preserving what is often referred to as the “authenticity” of English.

My first graded reader, *The Ooze*, was published in October of 2015 by Atama-ii Books. It is a multi-path adventure wherein the reader comes into possession of a sentient ooze, and must make decisions that affect the outcome for both the ooze and the reader. Though my experience writing this book was a singular one, when asked to give advice to new authors I would encourage them to follow several positive steps summarized by what I call the four *I*'s—*Inspiration*, *Introspection*, *Iteration*, and *Insanely good luck*. Looking closely at each of these should help the aspiring writer to become stronger and position themselves better for success.

Inspiration came to me in two forms. The first granted me the inspiration to become a writer, and the second granted me the specific inspiration for my book. My inspiration to become a writer came from the authors I idolized growing up, particularly from Orson Scott Card and his book *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1990). Mostly, however, my inspiration came from a very dear friend who spent his life encouraging people to turn their dreams into concrete possibilities, both in their actions and in the way they perceive themselves. Though I rarely subscribed to ideas like psychological framing and self-motivation, being more of a nose-to-the-grindstone kind of thinker myself, I found that his advice resonated with me. He made me realize that until I believed that I could be a writer, I would never become one. I was holding myself back with doubts and fears and my own sense of reality. His words inspired me to give myself a chance, and

I started to think like a writer. I kept my eyes and ears open for opportunities, and I decided to act when I found one.

The second form of *inspiration* came when I learned of the publishing company Atama-ii Books. In 2013, Marcos Benevides, an experienced graded reader series editor, had set out to create his own publishing company focusing on multi-path graded readers. This information became known to me by way of my professional network. Multi-path adventure books were popular during my childhood, and I remember how they helped me learn to love reading. I was struck by how wonderful and fulfilling a challenge it would be to write a multi-path adventure myself. Here again, the first and most important ingredient in a successful book was suddenly shining brightly in front of me—*inspiration*.

The success of my pitch to Marcos at Atama-ii was the product of *introspection* and *iteration*. Upon approaching Marcos for his project, I was acutely aware of my anonymity as an author. I believed that the wisest route would be to approach an equally new company (though Marcos himself was a seasoned veteran). By knowing myself and my shortcomings, I was more capable of seeking out a niche for myself that I could successfully occupy. I would recommend that aspiring writers with a young career should seek out young companies. It is perhaps more likely that such a company would be willing to ‘take a shot’ on an unknown author, as was my case. It was also through an understanding of my own voice as a writer and my own interests in literature that I felt sure that I would be comfortable with my publisher. I did my best to make sure I understood the people and the company I was hoping to join. This was immeasurably vital to my success in applying to the publisher and to

the success of all future interactions I had with my editor as we transformed my initial vision of my book into the finished work that we all felt satisfied with. All of this was the result of long periods of introspection. I had written blogs and other articles to help me find a voice and style I was comfortable using, and I had paid attention to the kinds of books and genres that I enjoyed. Understanding myself was the key to aiming myself in the proper direction.

Prior to my decision to approach Atama-ii, I took the time to read through the company's entire website. I read the sample stories they made available. I paid careful attention to the template they had chosen to follow for the series, and followed it faithfully as I wrote the *iteration* of my own story that became my submission. At the time I had only a hope that this kind of approach would appeal to the editor by showing how well the story would fit in with his established plan, but Marcos later informed me that it was a critical part of the appeal of my submission. Waring (n.d.) stated that this is the case across the board with graded reader publishers, remarking:

Graded readers have to work together as a team to build EFL reading skills and have to fit a pre-determined [sic] plan decided by a publisher or a series editor. The series editor will therefore be looking for titles of a certain type and even if a particular work is excellent, if it does not fit the publisher's series then it will be rejected. (para. 34)

Marcos had a very specific format and vision for his new series, and it was fortunate that I could demonstrate a capability and desire to conform to it. I had succeeded in meeting the needs of the publisher, which the writer must remember is the key to this stage of the process. When trying to

find a publisher, the author and the book are the commodity, and the publisher is the client. The more flexible the author and the more willing they are to support the publisher's vision of the end product, the more likely they are to be hired on to the project. Authors should be conscious of the need for *iteration*, not only as a means of polishing and improving with every new draft, but also as a vital part of the publication process, perhaps exponentially more so for graded readers. The deep personal connection an author has with their story cannot be allowed to stand in the way of the dialogue the author and editor must necessarily have, and the author must understand that the final product that is borne of this gauntlet will not be the book that sprung from the author's fingers originally. The constraints of graded readers and the rules of series publishers require flexibility on the part of the author, and so the author must be prepared from the outset to iterate their work again and again. Therefore, it would be wise of an author to submit a draft that from the outset demonstrates flexibility and a willingness to conform to the style of the series or publisher the author has set their sights on.

There is a famous saying, "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity," which is often attributed to Seneca (Wikiquote/Seneca the Younger, n.d.). Considering this maxim to be true, *insanely good luck* is simply a substantial amount of preparation combined with an acute eye for opportunity. I harnessed both by deciding to take tangible steps toward becoming a writer. I wrote a travel blog to become more comfortable with writing, storytelling, and wording. I took notes on any good ideas I had, even if it meant getting up out of bed in the middle of the night. I took small, one-off writing jobs to help me build experience and confidence. Also,

I began to look around me for any opportunities I could find. All of this helped me to recognize a single blog post about a new publisher for what it was—a chance. That is not to say that there was none of the traditional luck involved in my getting published. Years later, I spoke with Marcos about his thoughts on my application, and he informed me that I was “extremely lucky” to have sent my draft to him just as he was looking for a final book to round out his ten volume series. The book went on to become an award-winning graded reader, but the quality of the content would not have mattered if the timing had been any different. This is something to be remembered by all authors who face the inevitable prospect of rejection—intangible factors such as timing, the popularity of certain styles or themes, market saturation, and a publisher’s taste and mood will all play the devil with your plans. Do not mistake bad luck for a measure of your story’s caliber. Allow luck to work in your favor by re-rolling the dice as many times as it takes.

Once fortune and effort have combined to yield a contract, the real challenge begins. Luckily, it is at this point that you have gained a partner to help you, in the form of your editor. It is here that I want to reiterate how essential it is that the author be open to *iteration* of their work. The final book will ultimately be a product of both the author’s and the editor’s input. The author will by nature feel invested and possessive of the work, but should remember that the editor is equally invested in the success of the work and equally dedicated to creating the best work possible. In my case, I worked with an editor who had an abundance of experience specifically with multi-path graded readers, and so I relied heavily on his expertise for both stylistic and linguistic challenges as they presented themselves throughout the editing process. There were

times of disagreement, but I protested only when I felt very strongly about a specific item, and the fact that Marcos recognized as much made me feel respected and all the more appreciative of his advice. One quite fascinating and telling difference of opinion we had concerned one of the story paths wherein the reader chooses to bring the ooze to the university. The ooze is brought to the laboratory for testing, and it becomes clear that the testing is harming the ooze. I created two choices for the reader—let the testing continue, or rescue the ooze. One of the main goals of the series was to create choices that were equally viable and equally worthy to readers. I was worried that I had not made the choices balanced enough, for it was quite clear to me that anyone reading would choose to rescue the ooze. Marcos, on the other hand, felt that it was perhaps too obvious that the reader should choose to continue the testing in the best interest of humanity. Upon discussion, we decided to leave the text as it was, since it was apparently perfectly balanced.

Indeed, I was blessed with a wonderful editor, the most valuable tool at any author’s disposal. Another tool that I made use of was the vocabulary profiler, Lextutor (Cobb, n.d.). This online tool allowed me to see where each word I used landed in the lexical hierarchy, and whether or not it was appropriate for the level of graded reader that I was writing. According to Waring,

There are two ways to approach the writing of graded readers. The first is to write a good story without being too concerned about grading for a particular level in the belief that the grading can come later. The other is to find experienced people who understand what can be comprehended at various ability levels and ask them to write to

that audience using their EFL grading knowledge. (n.d., para. 38)

I would argue that tools such as Lextutor allow for a third approach, whereby the author can at any time check their writing to see if they are within required lexical target levels. I began writing my book by adhering to the target level as closely as I could manage, but eventually transitioned into a less grammar-concerned approach, as I felt that this freedom allowed for more energetic and less stifled writing. I was of course conscious of the content, and how I wished to convey it to the language-learning reader, but I left a lot of the grading for later in the process. This seems to have been a good decision, as whole parts of the book were reworked and several points in the narrative changed or dropped altogether, which would have meant a lot of wasted time and effort spent grading the language in sections of the story that would be removed later.

Lextutor also allows for the use of glossary words—words that fall outside the level of the graded reader and are not included in the text level analysis. These words are usually words unique to the story, and definitions are provided to the reader in a separate glossary at the beginning or end of the book. These words are the words that the author and editor find necessary to the story despite their being ranked above the level of the book itself. These are the trump cards of the graded reader world, and whether or not to employ them at all is a decision that must be made by each publisher or for each series. The number of glossary words is obviously limited, and so each slot is allocated to a word that, despite the best combined efforts of the author and editor, seems inextricably necessary to the story. In the case of *The Ooze*, obviously “ooze” itself made it onto the list.

Another useful word was “plop”. Once we had decided to invest ourselves in the word “plop”, we made use of it to solve a number of problems regarding the descriptions of the ooze’s movement, or interactions involving picking up or putting down the ooze. This served the purpose of conquering several awkward situations within the narrative while also achieving strong repetition of the new keyword. Some of these glossary words surprised me—“candy” seemed shockingly out of place when it was marked as too high a level for the text. I also found it interesting that “train” was outside the reading level, because it was used as a verb instead of a noun.

Invaluable technological tools and a solid team will nonetheless never be enough to stop the occasional gremlin in the machine. In my case, it was a miscommunication that occurred with the illustrator regarding one of the endings. It is one of the darkest and most violent and personal endings, and the reader attempts to kill the ooze by sealing it in a pickle jar. At least, that is how I described the jar when writing the illustration notes to Hiroki Funayama, the talented illustrator who did the artwork for the book. I was quite surprised when I saw the final illustration—an image filled with pickles. There was of course the difficult and time-consuming option of having the illustration reworked. But here, *inspiration* combined with *iteration* to formulate what is now, in my view, one of the most interesting endings of the book. I reworked the story to include the pickles in a way that gave me tremendous satisfaction at the serendipity of the situation. Now, whenever I see that illustration it reminds me of the importance of flexibility, positivity, and thinking outside the box.

Aside from getting myself out of that pickle, the most complex and challenging

aspect of writing a graded reader, for me, was not the limitations that one must work within in terms of lexis and grammar, but the struggle to achieve 'authenticity' in the language used. Waring (n.d.) has addressed the concern of authenticity regarding the English employed in graded readers:

Supporters of [the objection to graded readers that they are not authentic] suggest that learners should read authentic literature because then they can appreciate the beauty of the language... [and] that simplified materials do not faithfully represent the language naturally and deny the learner the opportunity to meet 'natural language'. (para. 19)

He responded to these objections by stating, "the definition of 'authentic' means 'written for an intended audience' and by virtue of this definition graded readers, which are written especially for second language learners, are therefore 'authentic' in and of themselves." (para. 19) Widdowson said that authenticity is a result of the relationship between the reader and the text, not of the text itself (as cited in Waring, n.d.). This touches upon a point that should be in the front of any graded reader author's mind when writing. While the writer should understand and acknowledge the language level limitations of the intended audience, they should also ensure that the language used still feels comfortable and genuine to the writer. The graded reader structure should not strip the writer of their voice, nor contort the writing into something less than genuine. A good graded reader should be "a fully realized, complete-in-itself act of communication between author and audience" (Day & Bamford, 1998, p.64). I strove for this level of connection between reader and writer when I wrote, and worked very hard to choose language that satisfied

both myself and the restrictions that were in place for the graded reader. I believe that several years of teaching English to ESL learners made a world of difference in this endeavor. I remember quite clearly my early days as a teacher, often letting strange phrases escape my mouth in a heavy-handed attempt to communicate with my students, only to realize just moments later that what I had just said was not what I would consider good English. I believe this is a very common trap that all teachers fall into, and I was determined to avoid it in the writing of my book.

As mentioned above, I had only a vague idea of what a graded reader was when I began my journey to become a graded reader author. Just as vague was my understanding of how readers were "graded" in the first place, and how they were meant to be used in the overarching goal of English education. This was despite the fact that I had been teaching English in Japan for seven years. It is unfortunate that most Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) do not receive the in-depth training that those with a TESOL or other language education certification would receive, and must operate while learning on the job for the most part. I had attributed my lack of knowledge regarding graded readers to my ALT background, but Waring (n.d.) stated that the problem is more widespread, with some teachers ignoring graded readers altogether: neither recognizing their importance nor illustrating it to their students. He also noted that student textbooks and teacher training books place a clear emphasis on intensive reading, and may fail to mention graded readers and Extensive Reading at all.

So it seems that graded readers and extensive reading (ER) suffer from a far broader issue, and the lack of exposure to ER is not simply a product of working as an ALT or

not having gone through a teaching certification course. Thus, one of the most important things I have learned through my immersion into the world of ER is how imperative it is that these tools be placed in the hands of educators and learners. It has also become doubly clear to me that as authors, we accept a tremendous responsibility to create an engaging, educational product—one that may very well be the first graded reader that a learner or educator encounters. That book will in part dictate how that reader feels about extensive reading and English books in general, and may either kindle or extinguish inside them a passion for stories and language that can thrust them forward into a wonderful world of learning.

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