



Manuscript Evaluations | Substantive Editing

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## 105 DAYS ON THE SOUTH ATLANTIC PATH

Hi Tom! Thank you for allowing me to read your manuscript, and hat's off to you for reducing this manuscript from 233,000 to 139,000 words. That's huge and was no doubt a lot of work. I enjoyed reading about your adventures, but I will be honest – you have some work ahead of you to turn this into a manuscript that readers will really enjoy. That's okay. Challenges are good. And you have already done so much to bring this forward from where it was.

Here's the current status of your manuscript: It is a journal with a lot of details. And more details. And some details. It's very blow-by-blow, where you stayed and your mileage each day. What you ate, some of the sights you saw – but it's written like a journal. Now, if this was the lost journal of someone who ultimately disappeared from the path forever, you'd think, OMG look at these details – wow, these are the last words of a person who got enveloped in a mystery. But it's not.

**So my question is: who is this book for?** What can I learn from this book if I am considering hiking the AP? You could take 139K words and boil them down to a list of 100 bullet points of things people should know. So it's not a guide, exactly. What would I learn if I had already hiked the AP and read this book? Oh, his day 50, on April 19th, was similar to MY day 22 on May 23rd! Or – yes, I too saw the H. Filler Path!

Additionally, something throws quite a shadow over your book due to the topic: A Walk in the Woods. Now, Bill Bryson is one helluva writer; one of my favorites. He managed to make his book extremely entertaining and, often, very funny. Unfortunately, you are not Bill Bryson and neither am I, much to my disappointment. I'd love to write like him. But his book is your competition. He set a high standard for a book about the South Atlantic Path. Let us not dwell on that but rather acknowledge that in the world of books, topics are connected to other books, and comparisons will be made.

**So we return to THE most important question: Who is this book for?** What's it supposed to do? Is it a guide of do's and don'ts? Is it a review of the hiking gear one should use?

**A good piece of narrative nonfiction asks and answers questions.** Who are YOU? How did this hike change you? What were your observations along the way that were internal and introspective? Did this hike take your mind off of other worries? What did being in nature do for you? What were you trying to prove? It isn't until page 20 that you mention – very fleetingly – that you were in the Marines. That's a huge detail to know about you.

You mention the path names of the hikers you met and that you interviewed them. But you never sum that up – who are these people? Why do they do it? What would someone reading your book discover about people who do something relatively extreme like this? Did you find, among the people you met, dreamers? Losers? Crazy people? Wealthy people? Disillusioned people? You never dig down into why you did this or why other people do it.

Interestingly, there is a very small, niche subculture of people who do extreme sports or adventures, the AP being but one of them. What does this say about our culture today? More and more people hike the AP – it has become popularized in the past ten years or so. Why? What damage has been done to the path? What do these hikers do for the local businesses that support them in one way or another? Is it a mini-economy, these hikers? How do the locals feel about them? Especially these days, with such strife in the United States and such division between rural and urban dwellers – what is the economy for the small towns in the periphery of the AP? Coal mining? Timber? Tourism? How are hikers a part of that ecosystem?

**This might not be the book you wanted to write** – a deeper dive into what the South Atlantic Path (small yet huge note that I made in the manuscript – PLEASE lose all of the abbreviations and spell things out, e.g., GA, NOBO, etc. It really gums up the read). Phillips really did that; he talked about the history of the path, forestry, and flora and fauna on the path while contrasting that with his day-to-day adventures, who he met, etc. He had a very specific point of view in his book. You may have never, not once, had such a task in mind. That's okay.

**So - is this for your family** so they can read a diary of your 214 days for posterity? If that's what you want, that is what you have done. But if you have larger goals – to provide a guide, to provide some introspection and inspection of this whole experience – you have a way to go.

### **Narrative Flow in NonFiction**

There is no "narrative flow" to this manuscript. It's consecutive journal entries. There are no surprises, no dramatic tension set up, i.e., *will he make it?* In Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* – we know the danger is a given; Everest is famously perilous. Further, we know what happens to the climbers in this tale. So Krakauer has the advantage of a tremendous amount of peril baked right into his book.

In our earlier conversations, you said that you wanted to encourage older people to get out and do such an adventure as you did. But the manuscript doesn't talk about your age, or aging, or special considerations for aging hikers, nor does it speak about WHY an older person should do something crazy like this. I can imagine several reasons an older person might do this that could be really inspiring – *because it turns aging on its head, this is aging well, this is not giving up, this is pushing yourself at any age to try new things*. Etc. But you write of none of those things.

**To give this book a narrative, you need the connective tissue of questions, introspection, and philosophizing.** That introspection and philosophizing could be on any *number* of subjects, from aging to nature/hiking, to socio-economic realities among the communities that are near the path, to the worries of the world today and how the path served to "center" you spiritually (which opens up to other themes like optimism, resiliency, what adventure can do for a person, etc.)

Maybe you don't want to philosophize about any of those topics, or you don't feel qualified to do so – yes, something about the socio-economics of the surrounding communities would require a more journalistic bent. So say this book is not a hiking guide, nor a deep dive into some ancillary topic, but rather, a memoir. A book about YOU.

## **Memoir**

A memoir is a book about the writer in a particular moment in their life. It is bracketed by something that is the "organizing event," i.e., the South Atlantic Path hike, the trip to Las Vegas, becoming a father, or overcoming cancer. So your "organizing event" is the AP hike. Good. That's huge, and that's interesting. A memoir then uses this "organizing" or central event to show a kind of before/after of the author. How this event changed them, in other words. What new insights were gained, and what previous hardships, traumas, or long-held beliefs changed because of this experience? And this is the art and crafting of writing, obviously.

I could easily write a book about when I went to Bosnia and tell you what I did every day. But that, in itself, isn't that interesting unless I am writing for a travel magazine that just wants tips on where to stay or what foods not to miss. But if I wanted to write a good book about my trip to Bosnia (I went in 2017), then I could say tons of stuff about what I imagined it to be like there versus how it was; I could talk about the war there, I could talk about how media formed my ideas about that war and what the reality was like. I could talk about how that trip changed me from a curious tourist to someone who is ardent about Holocaust education today – because I have now seen the site of genocide not just in the Holocaust but in the much more recent past. My book would have a lesson I learned and one I am now passing down to YOU, the reader.

So what does a reader learn about you in this book? What is revealed in these pages, aside from where you slept this night or that night, or how you did laundry somewhere, or how you saw this or that mountain or path? How did you feel about these things? We read on page 224 that you have a stepson who lives in Greece. OKAY, so here we have something personal. You have been married more once. Sherry is your second wife. You have stepchildren who are Greek (or who at least came from Greece in this part of your book) – that is interesting and unique –but you don't

reflect on it or expand on it. What is your relationship with Mantas like? Was it hard to step into his life? What does Nichole think of him? Describe your blended family. **Who was you before the hike – and who were you after?** And within that, the specificity of learning about you, what else is tucked into that thematically? What did you learn about aging, adventure, nature – all sorts of things that are a "takeaway" for the reader too?

This idea of a "takeaway" for the reader is crucial. If you are Keith Richards and you write a memoir about your life, you can write anything you want, and readers will be fascinated. Because your life is well known and you are a massive figure in pop culture. But if you are just a regular person like you or me, we need to make sure we pack a "takeaway" in there for our readers. Some lesson or set of lessons that Joe Reader can benefit from too. Things that they can apply to their own lives. You want someone to put down your book and say, I'm going to go have an adventure. I'm going to try something new. I'm going to push my limits. Or whatever. But you need the specifics of your life and your particular adventure here, PLUS the universal lessons that other people can then be inspired by.

## **Chapters & Outlines**

If you look at a list of chapters, you are basically looking at an outline for a book. That makes sense, right? The writer may not have written the chapters in the order they are presented, but they are given and organized in such a way so that there is a beginning, a middle, and an end. Even in nonfiction. Tom's life -> Tom hikes the South Atlantic Path -> Tom is changed. Beginning. Middle. End. But the chapters don't have to be set up in this strictly ordered way; the logic has to be there, but how the chapters are presented is where it gets fun and creative.

Say we were to toss out the chronological order/structure of your chapters and instead have chapters center on *themes*. For example, chapters could be titled as seasons, or they could be titled as emotions, or they could be titled as personal/emotional revelations.

So an example would be that you might have a chapter entitled Missing Home, and in that chapter, you say which point you are on the path but then write an essay about feeling lonely or missing the comforts of home. You might have a chapter that questions why you are doing this.

You might have a chapter about your past – remembering how hard it was in the Marines. You might have a chapter about your body – the aches and pains you feel now, your limitations, and what it feels like to be aging.

Chapters should have something like 1,500 to 2,000 words each. That's a rough estimation. Why do we think of the word counts per chapter (in addition to in the entire book)? Because you must remember how people consume books. Think of how you read a book, Tom. Some books we tear through in two or three sittings, other books we read over time. But the ideal for both reader and writer is to not be able to put the book down. We read a chapter and the last line of that chapter makes us want to turn the page and read one more chapter before bed, or before we make dinner, or whatever. A writer needs to know that a reader's attention span, or the intention of that reader, is to read one chapter today. Or two. But then they want to put your book down and move on. So we need to write compelling chapters, in which one leads inevitably to the next, and we want the lengths of those chapters to approximate the reader's attention span. We can complain that people should have longer attention spans, but that is shouting into the void. Why should someone stick with your book when they need to check their email, look at Tiktok, look at Facebook, or watch something on Netflix? There is a ton of other content yammering for our attention daily. That's what a writer is up against. So ya gotta fight dirty. You have to write chapters that are so compelling and thoughtful that the reader has a hard time putting the book down. That is the sweet spot.

So let's go back to talking about chapters and what they do: A list of chapters is essentially an outline for the story. So let's just make this simple for the sake of a thought experiment and use a small example with a 5 chapter outline:

**Chapter One | The Marines:** Your backstory. You jump in with a memory of a pivotal moment in your life and expand on that, introducing yourself to the reader. Who is Tom Nightinger?

**Chapter Two: | The Head of the Path:** You jump forward in time. You are standing at stage one of your hiking adventures. You begin your adventure. Your expectations, excitement, anxieties.

**Chapter Three | Fatherhood:** You go back in time to when your first child was born and how that changed you. You talk about your perspective at that time, parenthood, career, and how you see yourself in the world. How your 1st marriage ended.

**Chapter Four | Bad Night:** Back on the path in a tough moment. When you break your finger or are particularly cold or hungry. Your thoughts here about your age, life, relationship with masculinity, your lifestyle when you aren't on this path, and your relationship to nature now.

**Chapter Five | California to Alaska:** How this hike is changing you and your perspective on the American landscape, internally and externally.

In the above experimental chapter, you take a train ride from California to Alaska— talk about two totally different places, huh? And these days, you can make that journey in only a few hours. But the cultures between these two places could not be more different. So what thoughts did you have on that few-hour journey? What can readers absorb from this and every chapter that will make them think about their lives?

I split each chapter into discrete periods in the five-chapter example I gave above. But you can actually do this within a chapter. For example, you can toggle back and forth between the present and the past by using something called the "half scene."

Let me explain further. Half-scenes are used all the time in fiction and narrative nonfiction. Think of a half-scene as an aside in writing. Here's a before and after sample from page 28:

**BEFORE:**

After dinner, we both got into the bags early. At 3 am, I was awakened by an animal howling loudly. It sounded like it was just outside on the side of the shelter, and it scared the crap out of me! My heart thumped! *Whatever this beast is, if it comes into the shelter, it will get me first as I am on the bottom level!* The animal eventually left, and I fell back asleep. I was glad I was not alone!

**AFTER:**

Sometime around 3 am, I was awakened by an animal howling loudly. It sounded like it was just outside on the side of the shelter, and it scared the crap out of me! My heart thumped! *Whatever*

*this beast is, if it comes into the shelter, it will get me first as I am on the bottom level!* It might have been a coyote. Or was it a wolf? Were there wolves on the South Atlantic Path? I thought about the Jack London, the books I read as a kid. I genuinely feared wolves and other wild animals because I'd grown up in a suburb and never encountered them. I listened to the howling for what seemed like forever, and gradually it receded, as did my fears. I felt honored to have heard the song of this night creature.

See how this (very) short half-scene is asking and answering questions? See how it transitions to thinking about how and where you grew up? Now, this is a quick example and not a very good one. But, this section might make you think back to an incident when your father took you camping, and you got scared of an animal sound, and he taught you something profound. Or maybe you taught your son something deep in a similar situation.

**OR that can read a *thousand other ways, right?*** Maybe you grew up in Alaska, and this sound was not unusual. Maybe you never read Jack London. But the point is adding a mini half-scene, some embroidery around your experience, putting it into context with your whole life and memories. The sound of a wild canine at night is terrifying. It's such a primal sound, and it can make you feel so vulnerable in this world and bring with it many associations and other memories.

So it's definitely more sophisticated and artful to use half-scenes throughout the book rather than to have chapters that alternate between "then" and "now" – although you can do that too. Whatever is most effective for what you want to get across is the way to go. Remember, above, when we talked about reader attention span – having entire chapters toggle back and forth between "then" and "now" can make it hard for your reader to pick back up.

However you decide to approach this recommendation of mine to come up with new chapters and rethink how you present your story, there are many ways to skin this cat. What you want is the most effective, creative way forward. As this manuscript is currently written, unless you mean this only for your friends and family, I recommend a significant rewrite, starting with a new outline or chapter list. I know that this is not the news you wanted to hear or what any writer



wants to hear, but I'll tell you what; I know how much work you have put into this, and I want it to add up to something. This is a new way of thinking; you aren't an experienced creative writer. I want you to learn and grow from this experience; I see that as my job in giving you this manuscript evaluation. To be honest and encouraging and give you a sense of direction.

### **The Good News**

Your manuscript is FULL of detail and opportunities to expand on that detail with an outlined narrative flow and some kind of unifying theme or themes as mentioned above. You have 139K words and should wind up with something more like 85K words. Yes, that's a lot to lose, but if you were to restructure this entirely into a memoir, which is what I suggest, most of your "source" material here would have to go into the wood chipper. If you were to identify only the most KEY moments in what you now have, moments that you will expand upon using the essay-writing/half-scene method, then... yeah... well, that will be a big job to identify those moments. But you can do it. I would definitely, obviously, save this manuscript as it is because it is meticulously documented and offers a chronological overview. But a book it is not.

### **Recommended next steps:**

- Pluck out the most pivotal moments of your experience from the original manuscript and add them to a new outline, a numbered list, even.
- Bear in mind the Beginning, Middle, and End principle. (You before the hike, you during the hike, the changed you after the hike.)
- Re-outline the chapter list. Do it again. Do it again. Do it until you have a narrative flow.
- Write 1,500-word essays for each chapter. (Use half-scenes in each chapter)
- Put the manuscript back together again in its new, shorter, more emotional, specific, yet universal form, with lessons, insights, and "takeaways" for the reader.

It is easiest to think of the book as a series of connected essays. I find it helpful sometimes to the way that the Winnie the Pooh book chapters were titled: In Which....

Examples:

**Chapter one:** In Which Tom finds himself considering hiking the South Atlantic Path. Here we learn where you grew up, what your family was like, and then we can also toggle forward to you discussing this hike with Ija. Should you, shouldn't you?

**Chapter two:** In Which Tom experiences his first few days on the path, meeting some interesting people, getting blisters, and toggling that into – here's the history of this path, here's how long it is, here is who keeps it up – then toggle to – a particular night on the path.

**Chapter three:** In Which Tom reflects on his age and stage of life as he embarks on this hike. His younger self, his middle-aged self – what the toll on his body is and has been before the hike and after. How Tom sees aging.

So I've given, throughout these notes, several different ways you could arrange your chapters and encapsulate each chapter with an essay that might include some of the details from your current manuscript but that expand way, way beyond those details to include other, more significant musings about life. You get to decide what those musings are, but they need to amount to a beginning, middle and end. You have a jumping-off point, you walk us through your hike and your life before then, and you wind up the book with the big lessons learned and how a reader can benefit from them too.

Alternatively, Tom, you can get this manuscript as is, copy edited, corrected, and printed and share it with friends and family. There is nothing wrong with that choice. I like that you included a lot of data with mileage and things like that. But my job is to evaluate this manuscript and let you know what my impressions are. My impressions are that you have much more work to do, but it should ideally be fun and inspiring. This is a big opportunity to share with us who you are and what this hike meant in your life – and what it could mean in other people's lives. This book needs personal context. Yours.

