



Episode 49

Tucker Max



Tucker Max received his BA from the University of Chicago in 1998, and his JD from Duke Law School in 2001. He even attended Duke Law School on an academic scholarship, where he neglected to buy any of his textbooks for his final two years and spent part of one semester—while still enrolled in classes—living in Cancun. His first book, *I Hope They Serve Beer In Hell*, is a #1 *New York Times* Best Seller, spent five years on the list, and has over 2 million copies in print. He is only the third writer (after Malcolm Gladwell and Michael Lewis) to ever have three books on the *NY Times* Nonfiction Best Seller List at one time, and was nominated to the *Time Magazine* 100 Most Influential List in 2009. He currently lives in Austin, Texas.

Announcer ***This is Business Reimagined. Every week we talk with thought leaders and revolutionaries who are changing the way business is done in their industries like today's guest, Tucker Max.***

Tucker M Think about the greatest minds in Western history, the people I went to school to study, Socrates, Buddha, Jesus, Malcolm X, Winston Churchill, Marco Polo, they were the thinkers and the sayers and someone else just recorded their wisdom and their ideas into a book.



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Announcer ***This is Business Reimagined with Dan Iny.***

Danny I

Tucker Max is a Duke Law school graduate, New York Times best-selling author three times over, has had a movie made based on his first book "I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell" and now runs a multimillion dollar business called Book in a Box. But Tucker did not achieve any of that by following the rules or playing nice. From his time at Duke where he spent have a semester in Cancun and still passed, to his first job as a lawyer where he was fired three weeks after getting started and even being kicked out of the family business by his own father, Tucker established himself as a rule breaker. In fact, he took those stories of his life that most people would want to keep quiet and put them on display for the world to see or rather to read.

Tucker M

I would write emails to my friends about how ridiculous my life is because I hated my life. I hated my job. I hated all of it, so I would just go out and drink and act stupid and hook up with girls and do all the things that most guys do in their mid-20s. I would just take them to extreme and I wrote emails about them to make my friends from law school laugh. There were 10 of us who were a tight group. One of my friends called me after I got fired and he was like, "Look dude, you are obviously not very good at law and you are not very good at business, at least in terms of navigating corporate environments and office politics, but these emails you are writing are the funniest things I have ever read in my life." He is like, "You need to go do this."

Danny I

Tucker did not immediately jump on the idea. In fact, he had strong opinions about writers and several colorful adjectives to describe them. But when he started receiving his own emails that had been forwarded again and again until they made their way back to him, Tucker realized he might actually have something. This was before the days of popular self-publishing. He gathered all the stories he had written and sent nearly a thousand query letters to agents and publishers. The response from them was unanimous.

Tucker M

I got 100% rejection, literally 100% and there were actually even four or five people who went out of their way to write me a personalized rejection, talking about how awful my stories were and how I should never write anything down again, not even a to-do list, things like that. I got three or four of those. I knew those people were idiots because I knew people liked this stuff. I was getting forwarded my own stories back, so I knew I was right.

Danny I

He ended up putting his stories on the Internet and it blew up. Tucker even appeared on MTV and Go Figure. That's when the publishers came crawling back to him. Three bestsellers and a movie later, Tucker had made it by breaking the rules. But when someone asked him to help her break the rules by changing the way books were written, Tucker balked and the elitist writer in him demanded she do all the hard work. She promptly set him straight.



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Tucker M

She stops me and she is like, "Isn't this an entrepreneur ...?" I said, "Yes." She is like, "Are you an entrepreneur?" I said, "Yes." She said, "Well, I am not sure about that because I am an entrepreneur. I spend all day helping people solve their problems. Are you going to help me solve my problem or are you just going to lecture me about hard work?" I was like, "Oh dude, okay."

Danny I

In working with his new client who wanted to write a book without writing it, Tucker developed an incredible process that allows brilliant minds, who might not be great at writing, become authors. In case you are wondering, this is a rule that has been broken before.

Tucker M

Think about the greatest minds in Western history, the people I went to school to study, Socrates, Buddha, Jesus, Malcolm X, Winston Churchill, Marco Polo, not one of them wrote anything down. Marco Polo was actually illiterate. How did we get to their knowledge and wisdom? Obviously, someone else wrote it down. Scribes wrote it down, right? They were the thinkers and the sayers and someone else just recorded their wisdom and their ideas into a book.

It was like, "Oh, of course, obviously we can get her to talk," but here is the thing. Just talking is not a book. You can interview somebody ... If this podcast gets transcribed, it's not a book. A book has to be structured a certain way. It has to be positioned a certain way. It has to have a certain flow to it, etc. What we did was we came up with a process to first refine and position her ideas, then structure them, they create an outline, then interview her to get everything out of her head, all of her knowledge and wisdom and then we recorded it. We transcribed it. Then we figured out an editing process to essentially translate the spoken word into the written word. What we ended up with was a manuscript that was her ideas in her words and her voice even and it was a really good book.

I will be honest, Amy. I did not think this was going to work. I thought this would be some crappy nonsense and it ended up working really well. We did the rest of the publishing process. We published the book and distributed it, so we have a great cover, interior design, layout, author bio, description, all of that stuff that makes up a professional book. She loved it. It was amazing. It ended up tripling leads to her business. She ended up signing a couple seven-figure contracts. She was already an expert, but not enough people knew. She did not have the visibility and this blew her up. She was already working with Chanel and Mark Jacobs and all that stuff and now she is working with the biggest retailing companies in the world because of this book.

Danny I

This is fascinating and I want to dig into this deep because there is a lot about this I find very interesting. Let's start with the obvious objections. Your own elitist writer, you have to do the work, it has to be your voice, etc. If someone comes to you and says that now, what is your response to that?



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Tucker M

My response is you do have to do the work at it does have to be your voice. In fact, our process is about getting the work you have done thinking and your experiences into your voice in a book. The disconnect there is people are connecting two things that do not go together. The skill of writing and the skill of thinking are totally different things. We eliminate the need to have the skill of writing in order to turn good thinking into good books. If you deny that, then what you are doing is you are calling dyslexic people retards because literally, dyslexia is the inability of the brain to properly see words on the page. Obviously, we all know a ton of dyslexic people who are brilliant.

Writing is a very distinct, cognitive, neurological skill, totally separate from thinking and totally separate from having ideas. Also, if you want to say there is no way that's legitimate, then how do you explain all the people I said at the beginning? How do you explain Socrates and Buddha and all of the other great minds of history not writing anything down?

Danny I

Help me understand the process? When I hear this and I agree with you completely. In a previous chapter of my life, I was very involved in alternative and education situations for people who were dyslexic and had other challenges, so I understand that space very well and I agree completely that writing is its own unique skill. It's very distinct and different from having good ideas and having ideas worth sharing. At the same time, just my gut reflex is the books cannot be that good. I know people, I don't know if they used your service specifically, but they have used ghost writing services ...

Tucker M

Yes, we are not ghost writing. It's a very distinct thing.

Danny I

Help me understand that. I read their book and I am like, "Yes, it articulates their ideas. The book might be useful, but it's not really good."

Tucker M

Yes, just on that note we work with at this point big people, Fortune 500 CEOs. We work with people whose books have to be good. We are 250 books in. Our process works extremely well and it produces usually actually better books than most people write on their own. Here's the distinction between our process and ghost writing. Ghost writing is when you pay someone to write their idea of what your book is and then you get to put your name on it. If you want to think about a critique of a process, you are not doing the work. It's not that good. I think those critiques definitely apply to ghost writing.

Our service, I think our process in a weird way disrupts ghost writing, not conventional writing. If you are a writer, you like to sit down and actually type your own words out, then you don't want to use our process. Our process is for people who have great ideas, great thoughts, who don't want to



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actually sit down and spend the time to figure out how to be a writer and structure their ideas in a book and do all those sorts of things that don't have anything to do with their ideas. Melissa is an expert in retail. She is not an expert in writing a book, so why should she have to learn how to write a book to get her ideas into a book? Even beyond that, there's two points here: how good is the book and how is it different from ghost writing?

It's fundamentally different from ghost writing because also, our process does not work if you don't know what you are talking about. Whereas ghost writing, you could hire me to write a book on sales let's say. If you don't know anything about sales, I can go read a bunch of books on sales and I can put together a half-ass book on sales. It probably won't be very good. In fact, I know it won't be very good, but it will be a book and you can put your name on it and it will be fine I guess, right?

Our process does not add content. We translate your thoughts into a book. We don't add ideas. If you want to do a book on sales and you don't know anything about sales or you don't know enough, we actually cannot work with you. Our sales process is actually a qualification process. The first part of it is we have to figure out does this person have a general idea of what they want their book to be about? They don't have to be super precise because that's part of our process. We help people figure out exactly what the book should be about, but do they know what they are talking about? Do they have enough ideas and thoughts in their head to actually fill a book?

You can't hide with our process. If you don't know what you are talking about, the process, it is a precise algorithm. It's a series of questions that are expertly applied by people who have spent decades as book editors or book agents or freelance writers. The way we ask questions, if you don't know what you are talking about, you are going to get exposed. Ghost writing does not work like that.

Danny I

I want to push back on two fronts. The first is you mentioned if you don't have the skill of writing, you should not have to figure out that skill and I agree. Writing is absolutely a skill, but it's not just about aptitude. There is also the challenge of affinity and I think this is what a lot of writers, a lot of their resistance comes from that is a lot of writers who are great writers do not necessarily loved writing. They love having written and they are very talented at it, but it feels like it would shortcut the process.

Tucker M

Why?

Danny I

There is part of my mind that because I ...

Tucker M

It feels like, what does it feel? What do you mean?



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Danny I

What if you have someone but let's say it's a Malcolm Gladwell, a fantastically talented writer for whom writing is still challenging. Writing is a challenge for any writer. You are a writer. There are a lot of writers listening to this. Even when you are very good at it, that doesn't make it easy. What if these great writers were to say, "I don't need to write my next book. Why slave away? I would just get somebody else to do it?" That's the first concern. I want to hear ... It's a bit of a straw man. I get that, but I do want to hear your ...

Tucker M

It's not a bit of a straw man. It is. Your assumption is, again, you are conflating writing and thinking, dude. They are totally different. If you have the thoughts in your head, getting them on the page then becomes our job. You are thinking of writing as an act of creation. We don't think of writing as an act of creation. We think of writing as an act of translation. That's where the problem is.

Danny I

Hang on, let's explore that. I think you hit the nail on the head right there. I think you are right that there are two parts to the writing process. There is the act of creation, which I would elaborate and say it's not just creation. It's also refinement. Then there is the translation of that into words. I agree the translation of that into words, it's a fairly mechanical task. It's a skill. It's something that great people can be great at, but it's very separate.

The underlying feeling a lot of people have is there is a creative component to the writing process, even when you know your stuff. I know for myself when I sit down to write, it helps me realize that I have to think through what I want to say a lot more than I already had. We have all had the experience where it's like, "Can you do a presentation about whatever, something you know very well?" "Yes, sure, no problem." Then you create three slides off the top of your head and you are like, "Ah shit, I need 47 more." You actually start fleshing out your thinking.

How does your process work in a way that doesn't shortcut ... And I wonder what the label would be? I was going to say the author, meaning the person who originated the idea. I don't know if they are the author or the ...

Tucker M

Of course, they are the author.

Danny I

How does the process work so that the author's thought process of refinement does not get shortcut?

Tucker M

The process we have put the author through, it's very similar to the process you go through when you sit down to type it out, except it's actually better because your process is internalized and learned, just like mine. I am a writer. I think through my fingers. I am, literally, a three-time number one New York Times best-selling author, invented a literary genre and sold millions of



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books. I learned how to do this. I learned how to think through my fingers as I type. That makes me a writer. But before, I had the same ideas, I just didn't have those skills.

What we did is we created essentially an algorithmic process to get that same process into the head of someone who has not learned how to write, but yet pulls out the same things. I don't know if you understand how deeply algorithms work, but it's like a recursive formula of questions that in order to move the next step, you just keep going in circles with different variations of questions until you pull the information out that's necessary to then ratchet up and then go to the next step.

Our process is divided into discrete steps. First is positioning, then structuring and then outlining. Positioning is a list of questions for each thing and each question is geared around getting an objective out of the author. What it does is it pulls all the ideas out of them, organizes and structures them, insures they are valid enough to go to the next stage and if they are not, then the process has to stop. Like I said, our process does not work if you don't actually have the knowledge in your head. If they do, it just keeps going and building on each other until you finish and come out the other stage.

Danny I

How often does it happen or does it happen that someone ... You do your initial screening questions. It's like, "Do you know enough to contribute a book?" People are like, "Yes, I do and I have this experience and so on and so forth." Then when they go to the process it's like ...

Tucker M

It's a little more complicated than that.

Danny I

Of course, of course. I don't mean to oversimplify it, but I am saying there are a lot of people that I could see going into the idea of "I want to write a book about X. I have been doing it for 20 years. I know my stuff. I have my own unique approach," and then in the process of the ideas being pulled out of them, it turns out it's like, "I have to think this through. I'm not sure. I don't have a good answer." Do people ever get stuck?

Tucker M

All the time. Out of 250 authors, I think we have only had three or four who we did not vet properly, who in the middle of the process realized they did not actually know what they thought they knew or they did not know enough and they had to stop. That has maybe happened three times I think. We have had quite a few who realized that they did not know things as deeply as they thought and they had to go back and look at their own notes or look at their own speeches or go ask people about themselves to understand a little bit more about what they were doing. That happens all the time.

What happens almost for almost every single author what they tell us is they learn a lot about themselves that they understood implicitly, but they did not understand explicitly. You actually



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nailed it, dude. The way to learn something is to teach it. Essentially what the authors are doing is teaching our freelancers through our structured process what they know about the topic. It often forces them to make explicit what is implicit and they end up having a better understanding of themselves, of what they know and how it is structured. It is extremely rare for an author to come out of the process and not have learned anything.

Danny I

That's cool. It sounds like it is doing exactly the same kind of circuitous back and forth. You write a draft. You throw it out and you realize you need to rethink your thoughts, all the stuff that would happen if they were taking the time to learn the skill of writing, it's happening through your process. That's cool.

Tucker M

Yes. Let me explain how positioning works. That's only one step of the process and I think you'll understand how it gets to what you are talking about. The way positioning works is it's three questions. A lot of times we have to go back and forth between the three questions. This is how we start to all our authors. This is how we figure out if they have a book in them and what that book is.

We start with what result the author wants. That's question one. What result must you get for this book to be worth it to you? It's not your fantasy goal. Everyone wants to be a best-selling author and sell a million copies and that would be nice, but that's not what you must have. We try and narrow the author down. Do they want to be a keynote speaker? Do they want to drive leads to their coaching business? Do they want to raise their authority and visibility for their consulting or for their executives? Do they want to help build their career? We would get them nailed down on one or two tightly coupled results that they must have.

Once we understand that, what results they must have, then we go to the next question, question two: what audience must you reach in order to get those results? If you want to be a keynote speaker, then there is only two audiences you must reach. The people who book speeches for those events and the people who go to those speeches and that's it. That's your only audience. There might be other people who like the book, but your only audience you are thinking about are those two people. If you are trying to drive leads to your consulting business, it's people who can use your consulting services. That's it. That's your only audience.

Once you understand exactly who your audience is that you have to reach in order to get your results, it leads to the third question, which is what do you know that is both interesting and valuable to that audience and when you can articulate that, that actually becomes the topic of the book. Once you articulate what's interesting and valuable to a specific audience, you can then write that book and deliver it to them and then you get what you want out of them. Do you see how it's like a recursive algorithmic process? A lot of times people go back and forth. They will start with one result and as they work through the process, they will realize, "Oh crap, I don't know



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anything that can get to that audience that size. I have to narrow down the audience and maybe adjust my results to get to something that I actually know enough to write a book about." You see?

Danny I

I think it makes a lot of sense. I think a lot of people go into the idea of building a book or writing a book because they see it as it's the panacea that is going to make everything better in their business and in their life. These are questions everybody should ask before they write a book, whether they are using Book in a Box or they are going to sit down and put fingers to keyboard, but most people don't. I think it's valuable that you force that. That's really cool.

Tucker M

I will tell you, Danny, we have had a lot of writers tell us that at the very beginning of our process, the positioning and the structuring is also similar. They say they love that and they use that themselves, even though they like to speak through their fingers so to speak and they don't use our process because we have a book out that describes our exact process. You are exactly right. We have made explicit a process that's implicit for a lot of writers, especially non-fiction writers. Obviously, our process does not work for fiction and so they use it now.

Danny I

I have a different direction question and I don't mean this to be, maybe it is provocative. I want to know what you think.

Tucker M

Provocative is easy, man. I am happy to go that way.

Danny I

The name Book in a Box, it's super clear what the promise is to someone who wants to have a book and does not want to sit down and write the book. It also feels like the McDonald's of book creation. On the one hand I could see a lot of people saying, "I love the idea of having my book written for me in this way." Would they want their market to know that the book was written for them in that way?

Tucker M

Listen, we have gone back and forth on the name of the company. You are 100% right. Everything in life is a trade-off. The trade-off we picked early on ... I told you how we got the name. It was very much an accident. The trade-off that we took early on was clarity over prestige, let's say.

Danny I

Oh, I am not asking specifically about the name. I'm thinking more in general as people contemplate the service.

Tucker M

Most people don't ever want anyone to know their book is ghostwritten and I get why because ghost writing ... All the critiques that people can make about ghostwriting I think are at least have



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some validity to them. That it's cheating the process. That it's not your ideas. It's not a good book, all that sort of stuff.

Our process is genuinely, materially different and I think actually improves the process. It doesn't just refute the critiques of ghostwriting. It fundamentally either eliminates them or addresses them. Part of our job because we have created a new service that is genuinely different is education and explaining to people what it's like and why it's different. As you well know, if you have to educate a market that's difficult and expensive and that takes time.

Danny I

Especially difficult and expensive because let's say I am prospect. You don't just have to educate me. I have to be confident that my market will be educated enough that if they find out, they won't feel like I cheated.

Tucker M

Right, exactly. We have gone about that two different ways, a couple different ways I should say. One is our service is fee-based. It costs \$20,000 for the normal package and the author owns the rights and royalties, so they can even pick who they want to publish it. If they want to come up with their own publishing company or just have it be the name of their company they can. They don't have to talk about us at all. We are in no way directly associated with the book.

What we have actually found is we have a lot of people who start the process expressing some version of skepticism you are talking about. By the time they are finished, they are actually actively promoting us to their friends and they love not just the customer service because we are good with customer service, but I'm sure there are people who are way better, it's more about they love the process because the process does what you are pushing back on me earlier. They realize the process has made them understand themselves better and it's given them a way to express their ideas that they never could have before. They want to tell their friends about this, especially the ones should write books and haven't. Dude, half of our business, I think more is actually from direct client referral word of mouth right now.

Announcer *That was Tucker Max, providing hope to all the brilliant minds out there who have a wonderful message to share, but are not "writers." One of the best points Tucker made was on positioning and the three questions you should ask yourself: one, what is the outcome you hope to achieve? Two, who is the audience you need to achieve it and three, what do you know that is interesting and helpful to that audience? This will help you not only decide what your book should be about, but also in just about every marketing and business project you take on.*



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You can get a free copy of Tucker's book, [Book in a Box Method](http://Bookinabox.com/book), and learn more about Tucker's work at Bookinabox.com/book. This has been Business Reimagined with Danny Iny. Join us next time as we talk with Nick Cerullo.

Nick C

What we did is actually once we made that change, it was our purpose. We actually rolled that out to the rest of the company. We put it on a big phone board. It was 2 foot wide by 3 foot wide, put it up on an easel and when we rolled it out to the company, we asked everybody to stand up and physically get behind our purpose because we are going to create a culture of choice. If you did not feel like you could get behind this purpose that's okay. We're not going to judge you. There's nothing wrong with that. It just means this is not the company you want to be a part of.

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