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The Sidney Awards, Part 2

By **DAVID BROOKS**

I tell college students that by the time they sit down at the keyboard to write their essays, they should be at least 80 percent done. That's because "writing" is mostly gathering and structuring ideas.

For what it's worth, I structure geographically. I organize my notes into different piles on the rug in my living room. Each pile represents a different paragraph in my column. The piles can stretch on for 10 feet to 16 feet, even for a mere 806-word newspaper piece. When "writing," I just pick up a pile, synthesize the notes into a paragraph, set them aside and move on to the next pile. If the piece isn't working, I don't try to repair; I start from scratch with the same topic but an entirely new structure.

The longtime New Yorker writer John McPhee wonderfully described his process [in an essay](#) just called "Structure." For one long article, McPhee organized his notecards on a 32-square-foot piece of plywood. He also describes the common tension between chronology and theme (my advice: go with chronology). His structures are brilliant, but they far too complex for most of us. The key thing is he lets you see how a really fine writer thinks about the core problem of writing, which takes place before the actual writing.

Kevin Kelly set off a big debate with [a piece in Wired](#) called "Better Than Human: Why Robots Will — And Must — Take Our Jobs." He asserted that robots will soon be performing 70 percent of existing human jobs. They will do the driving, evaluate CAT scans, even write newspaper articles. We will all have our personal bot to get coffee. There's already an existing robot named Baxter, who is deliciously easy to train: "To train the bot you simply grab its arms and guide them in the correct motions and sequence. It's a kind of 'watch me do this' routine. Baxter learns the procedure and then repeats it. Any worker is capable of this show-and-tell."

Matt Labash took several sledgehammers to the Twitter culture [in a Weekly Standard piece](#) called "The Twidiocracy." Labash acknowledges that some tweets can be witty. For example, @GSElevator writes: "If you can only be good at one thing, be good at lying. ... Because if you're good at lying, you're good at everything."

And Labash will never persuade most of us to actually give up Twitter.

But he is rollicking in his assault. One of his sources describes Twitter this way: “It’s the constant mirror in front of your face. The only problem is that it’s not just you and the mirror. You’re waiting for the mirror to tell you what it thinks. The more you check for a response, the more habituated you become to craving one. It’s pathetic, because at the end of the day, a Twitter user is asking, ‘Am I really here, and do you love me?’ ”

Steven M. Teles had a [mind-altering essay in National Affairs](#) called “Kludgeocracy in America.” While we’ve been having a huge debate about the size of government, the real problem, he writes, is that the growing complexity of government has made it incoherent. The Social Security system was simple. But now we have a maze of saving mechanisms — 401(k)’s, I.R.A.’s, 529 plans and on and on. Health insurance is now so complicated that only 14 percent of beneficiaries could answer basic questions about deductibles and co-pays.

This complexity stymies rational thinking, imposes huge compliance costs, and aids special interests who are capable of manipulating the intricacies. One of the reasons we have such complex structures, Teles argues, is that Americans dislike government philosophically, but like government programs operationally. Rather than supporting straightforward government programs, they support programs in which public action is hidden behind a morass of tax preferences, obscure regulations and intricate litigation.

Scott Stossel is already getting a lot of attention for his book excerpt “Surviving Anxiety” [in The Atlantic](#), but it is hard not to give it a Sidney. Stossel suffers from a wide range of phobias, “to name a few: enclosed spaces (claustrophobia); heights (acrophobia); fainting (asthenophobia); being trapped far from home (a species of agoraphobia); germs (bacillophobia); cheese (turophobia); flying (aerophobia); vomiting (emetophobia); and, naturally, vomiting while flying (aeronausiphobia).”

But he is extremely high-functioning and now edits The Atlantic. How many people are genial and supercompetent on the surface while a cataclysmically intense world churns just inside their skulls?

Finally, and this is totally bending the rules, but I can’t resist honoring Douglas Coupland’s “Notes on 21st Century Relationships” [in FT Magazine](#). He cites survey data suggesting that the average person falls in love 2.5 times in a lifetime; and that some psychologists believe that human beings are only capable of five or six loves in a lifetime. One lesson is, don’t use them up too quickly.

Discuss.



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