

The Public Square for February 2025

Attention Citizens!

By far the most common question that I get is **“what programs do you use to make your videos?”** Implicit in this question, I believe, is the question **“is it difficult to make your videos?”** Or, to put it another way, **“would I be able to make videos?”**

I’m always happy to answer this question, and I always go out of my way to answer the implicit question that I sense underneath the surface. Yes, it is possible for you to make your own videos. It’s actually not that complicated.

First, let me answer the surface level question. I use the [Adobe Creative Cloud](#) for all of my videos, which means that I use Adobe Audition for the audio, Adobe Illustrator (or Inkscape) for making the images, and Adobe After Effects to make the animations. And then Adobe Premiere to stitch the whole thing together.

Adobe can be kinda expensive, but I don’t want that to put anybody off. I pay full price because for me it’s a business expense and I can afford it, but as Herzog says in **Werner Herzog Eats his Shoe**, [“If you want to do a film, steal a camera.”](#) If price is a limiting factor for you, free alternatives can be found online.

I want to demystify the process a bit. When people are emailing me questions like this, I can tell that they have no idea where to even begin.

I break my process down into 4 steps.

1. **Research**
2. **Writing**
3. **Audio**
4. **Animation**

1. Research

At the beginning the research stage, I find every book that I have on the subject and make a giant stack on my table. I arrange the books from the least detailed to the most detailed, with the least detailed at the top and the most detailed on the bottom. The books on the top will be giant survey books, where only 2 or 3 pages are about the subject that I’m covering. The books in the middle might have a relevant chapter or two. The books on the bottom will be 100% about the subject that I’m trying to cover.

Then, I make my way down the stack, making notes as I go.

Parenthetically, public libraries are extremely useful when doing this. It's not as daunting as it might seem. I might start by grabbing 8-12 books, but since the relevant sections tend to be quite short and many of the books end up repeating themselves, it's pretty easy to quickly figure out which books are useful and which ones are not. Then just take the 2 or 3 useful ones home and add them to the stack.

It's important to do this for a few reasons.

First, it's good to start with the short summaries to give yourself a strong foundational knowledge on the subject.

Second, it's important to sample widely so that you can get a sense of the diversity of opinion in a subject. Towards the end you will find yourself thinking "wow, I really disagree with this guy," or "wow, I can't believe they left out X," or "I don't understand why they skipped over this interesting bit." That's how you know you're really getting somewhere!

Third, knowing the subject really well makes approaching the difficult books at the bottom of the stack much easier. Once I've read versions of the same story 10+ times, it's quite easy to open a book be like "I can skip chapters 1-6, none of that is going in the video." If I had started with the most difficult books, I would be stuck reading the entire thing, including the irrelevant parts.

If I've hit the bottom of the stack and I'm still being surprised by new information, that means I'm not done researching. It means that I have to make another trip to the library or order some more books online. If, on the other hand, I've made it to the bottom of the stack and I feel like I've kinda heard it all before, like I'm almost bored by the repetitive nature of the stuff I've been reading, that means I'm done researching.

2. Writing

I really enjoy the writing part of the process, and so I take my time on this step.

It's hard to give writing advice, because everybody is different. But I will give you a few observations that I've made that are specifically pertinent to online videos.

I have watched my fair share of YouTube videos, and what I've noticed over the years is that most YouTube videos are under-written. Or maybe I should say under-edited. I often notice that

we're 2 or 3 minutes into the video and the actual content of the video has not even begun yet, we're just circling the drain in some endless introduction.

It's important to revise a lot. I find that my first drafts come out very long-winded and sloppy. My first drafts (and second, third, and fourth!) include bits that are like [NEED A PARAGRAPH INTRODUCING THIS NEW CONCEPT,] or [THIS PERSON NEEDS TO BE MENTIONED MORE OFTEN,] or [TOO LONG, TURN THIS PAGE INTO 1 OR 2 PARAGRAPHS.] I also do the annoying thing where I circle the drain for 3 minutes before I arrive at the damn point, but my secret is that I go back and fix those sections later.

Some people are able to spit out a relatively clean first drafts, and those people are called Stephen King. My first drafts do not look anything like the finished product. I've never gone back and actually tracked this, but very few of the sentences in my first draft actually survive all the way to my final draft. The entire thing is rewritten top to bottom.

The secret is to revise again and again and again until all of that annoying crap is gone! Average for me is something like 8 drafts, but I have gone up to 15 before. And they're not quick revisions, each pass might involve huge rewrites. Once I can make it through my own script without without making any significant changes, that's when I know I'm done.

3. Audio

This is when we need to break out Adobe Audition. Obviously step 1 is recording the voiceover. I always record 2 or 3 versions of each paragraph with different vocal emphasis, just to give me options later. This takes me 2 or 3 hours.

Then I go over the audio a few times and make edits. Deciding which version of each paragraph is kinda exhausting, but once that's done I stitch it all together and make it sound properly structured.

By "structured," I mean that I decide which parts of the video should be fast and which parts should be slow. If I'm just getting through a lot of facts, those bits can be fast. But if I'm trying to emphasize the main thesis of the video, those bits should be slow. If I'm closing the book on one idea and transitioning to a different one, there should be a pregnant pause. Stuff like that. There is a style of YouTube video where the person just tries to talk as fast as possible, but I find that style off-putting. I think that people remember information better if there's an ebb and flow to the storytelling. I usually go through the audio 5 or so times before I'm happy with the "structure."

One that's done, I add music. This *could* be done at the very end of the process, after the animation is done, but for my own peace of mind I like to be 100% done with the audio before I move on.

4. Animation

This is where people get really confused, nobody really knows where to start when it comes to animation.

You need two programs to animate. A program to make the images (Adobe Illustrator,) and then a separate program to move them around the screen (Adobe After Effects.) I actually prefer the free alternative to Adobe Illustrator, which is called Inkscape, so I often switch over to use that instead.

Animating is easier than it looks. Seriously. Anybody can do it.

Here's all you need to learn the basics.

1. Make a basic object in Adobe Illustrator or Inkscape
2. Import the object into Adobe After Effects
3. Move it up/down, left/right
4. Make it grow/shrink
5. Make it rotate
6. Make a "Camera" in After Effects, move it around just like the object

That's literally all you need to get started. There are great 5 minute YouTube tutorials that will teach you how to do each of these things. After you can move an object around the screen and operate the camera, just add a background, add your audio track, and you're animating. 95% of what you see in my videos is just a version of what I listed above.

I should note here that I prefer to animate along to the audio, meaning that the action on screen is driven by audio cues, which for me was finalized in the previous step. You can do it the opposite way too, where you make the animation first and then speak overtop of it. I tried this once years ago as an experiment, and I found the process to be a nightmare. As I was speaking I would realize that I should rephrase the sentence, but then the animation was already done so I'd also have to go back and change that too...lots of bouncing back and forth...I found it very stressful. Now I'm very strict about having a 100% locked audio file before begin my first bit of animation.

Animating honestly not difficult. But it is very time consuming. When I'm in the thick of it, a really good, productive day for me is like 2 or 3 minutes of animation. If it's something annoying like a crowd scene, I might get 30 seconds. If something easy, I might get 5 minutes. That's something to keep in mind. The difference between a 12 minute video and a 24 minute video is like a week of intense animation. In the past I may have said things like "unfortunately, the next video is

45 minutes long,” and when I say “unfortunately,” I’m thinking solely about the extra work it’s going to take to animate.

That’s honestly all you need to know. Everything else can be learned through repetition.

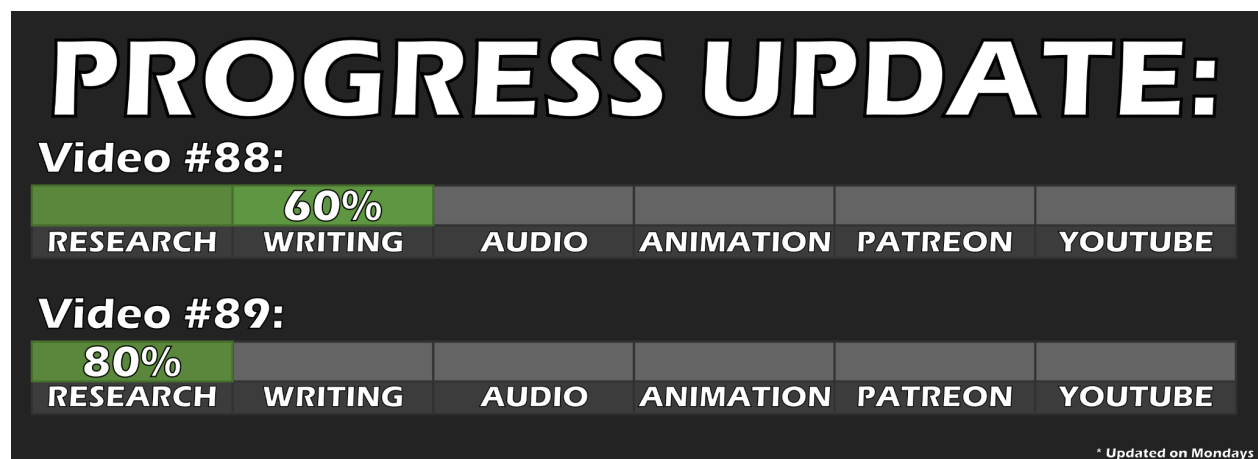
Now you know where to start.

Progress Update:

I’ve been writing Video #88 this month, which is mainly focused on Britain in the 1830s. It’s still big and bloated and growing. As I’m writing this I’m about to begin my third draft. Draft 1 was a “I don’t know if all of this belongs in here but I’ll write it and see” draft, and it came in at 63 minutes. Obviously too long. For draft 2 I wanted to fill in some of the missing pieces that emerged in the writing process, which required a bit of extra research. I also made some big structural changes and rewrote a large percentage of the script. Draft 2 came in at 73 minutes. Oops! Wrong direction!

With draft 2 I finally nailed down the structure I’m aiming for. For draft 3 the mission is to start cutting out all of my “spend three minutes spinning in circles making the same point over and over again” sections, and also start cutting out parts that are not relevant to the central thesis. Also now that I’ve decided which politicians I want to emphasize, I need to spend the time to properly draw attention to them throughout the video. That’s the mission going forward.

Truthfully I have no idea how close I am to being done writing, but after the big rewrites in draft 2 I feel like I’m more than half way there. So I’m putting 60%. Who knows. As the script gets into better shape, revisions for each subsequent draft gets faster and faster.



Books I’ve Recently Enjoyed:

- **Rome is Burning, by Anthony A. Barrett**

- This is a book about the Great Fire of Rome in 64 C.E, where at least 2/3rds of Rome was burned (or at least damaged) in a 9-day fire. There's been some really interesting revisionist stuff going on recently with Nero and Caligula, trying to clean up their images a bit. Rehabilitation. Obviously both Emperors were removed through elite-led conspiracies or insurrections, but the argument over the last 20 years has been "listen, the elite weren't great either, don't take their criticisms too seriously." Caligula in particular has been re-framed as a reformer who was done dirty by the Senatorial elite.

One thing I didn't know before is that despite all of the "Nero fiddled while Rome burned" stuff, and the rumours at the time that he was somehow personally responsible for starting the fire, he was actually out there on the front line fighting the fire himself! And as they rebuilt, he was pretty good about introducing a bunch of reforms to prevent future fires. When you ignore everything else and just concentrate Nero and his response to fires, he was doing everything right! But his reputation is exactly the opposite. Weird.

Here's another thing that I learned that really stood out to me. It was considered good and "manly" behaviour in Rome to drop everything and run towards a fire and help put it out. Obviously this was in everybody's best interest, and it's exactly what Nero did when it became necessary. Augustus's wife Livia was criticized in her lifetime for "mannish" behaviour because at one point she broke social norms and helped the men put out a fire. I never knew this, what a neat little detail. She just got 1% cooler in my book.

- **The Uninhabitable Earth, by David Wallace-Wells**

- I've been feeling way too optimistic lately, so I felt the need to read something outlining several worst case scenarios for climate change.

Truthfully I've been thinking about expanding desertification and how that might impact global food supply, and I wanted to read something so that I could get my facts straight. Fun stuff, I know.

The "**Uninhabitable**" part of the title is related to desertification. The author talks about an expanding strip of land around the equator that will become uninhabitable to people without air conditioning. It got me imagining things in a different way. Since I was thinking about growing food, I was thinking about people slowly being pushed north. But this book got me thinking about cities staying exactly where they are, but

under different circumstances. Every city in the south becomes significantly more like Las Vegas. Nobody goes outside anymore. Bleak stuff.

Films I've Recently Enjoyed:

- **The Northman**

- I rewatched **The Northman**, and it totally rules. He has a magic sword named Night-Blade. There's a chapter called The Night-Blade Feeds. Hell yes. Obviously it's a masterpiece. I would not like to be a Northman, seems like hard work.

- **Thief**

- I am *not* a Michael Mann guy, for some reason most of his movies leave me cold. But I watched **Thief** for the first time and I was completely shocked to fall in love with it. It kinda pulls you into its world and forces you to operate on its wavelength and teaches you how to watch the movie. Such a great experience.

I sometimes have difficulty engaging with films that are aggressively set in California. It's just not that interesting to me. But **Thief** is set in Chicago, baby! Deep dish pizza! Welding! Denim! That's a real movie!

Albums I've Recently Enjoyed:

- **The Next Day, by David Bowie**

- I listened to this album every day while I was writing, probably for like 12 days straight. Obviously everybody is well-versed on 2013 Bowie, I hardly need to explain. Obviously the song **The Next Day** is an insane banger. Obviously **The Stars (Are Out Tonight)** is great. **Where Are We Now?** is beautiful, a bittersweet and nostalgic look back at Berlin in the '70s.

One of the interesting things about going deep on an album like this is that some songs that just pass you by on the first several listens will suddenly emerge in your mind as great. I totally ignored **Valentine's Day** when this album came out, and then this week when I was listening on repeat it suddenly clicked and I was like "wait, this might be a perfect song." Similarly, I remember liking **Love is Lost**, but not really paying that much attention to it. Now, not only is it my favourite song on the album, but I honestly think it's up there among Bowie's best.

- **OK Computer, by Radiohead**

- Listen, I am a **No Surprises** enjoyer, and I won't apologize for it.

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