



**The Paragraph Gets A Makeover
Interview with Michael Greer**

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KENNEALLY: While writing for a so-called responsive mobile publishing platform, an author discovers that a basic building block of books needs a makeover. The paragraph is dead, declares Michael Greer one minute. Long live the paragraph, he says the next.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. Once upon a time, authors and readers alike lived in a world of certainty. Books were produced and consumed in more or less linear fashion. As grade school grammar teachers have long taught about essays, books in this earlier era had a beginning, a middle, and an end. No longer. On a variety of digital handheld devices, the reader has taken charge and scrambled the established order. In 2017, the reader determines where she reads, what she reads, and when she reads.

Michael Greer, an educator and editor who has worked in higher education for over 20 years and who teaches online courses in editing and publishing at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, is currently working on a digital textbook project, *The Technology of the Book*. Greer has conducted numerous usability studies on college textbooks, published research on textbook design and usability, and studied the ways in which students read and use their textbooks. But his latest writing assignment has forced him to throw out much of what he knows or thought he knew about writing for textbooks, right down to the justification for composing a paragraph. He joins me now from his office in Boulder, Colorado. Welcome back to Beyond the Book, Michael Greer.

GREER: Thanks, Chris. I'm really happy to be back with you podcasting again today.

KENNEALLY: Yeah, indeed. We're always looking forward to chatting with you, because you bring to the table some insights that we don't normally hear about textbook writing. It's important, because I think it'll filter through to so much else of what we read and publish online. So I guess my question for you is – and you can tell us more what's behind all this – but essentially how does it feel to write and



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design content when you're not in control of the order in which the reader engages with it? It must be a disorienting feeling.

GREER: It can certainly be disorienting. I think I first got some insight into that disorientation when I was reviewing some of the work that I had been doing on the phone. The way this technology works now is that Gadget Software has a mobile publishing platform. They called it the vPub, Virtual Publication. And I'm uploading content and I can view it on my phone and read it in real time. I began reading some of these paragraphs, and I realized how often I began a paragraph with something like on the other hand, or in contrast, and I realized that if a student had not read the preceding paragraph in the order in which I wrote it, he or she would be lost.

So I had this moment of oh no, (laughter) I have to rethink the way I write, because this new medium is new. So the answer to how it feels is it feels exciting and invigorating and sometimes terrifying, because the conventions of this new medium don't exist yet. We're inventing the conventions as we go along.

KENNEALLY: And what's important is that the conventions that we've all grown accustomed to, they're so thoroughly ingrained in our minds, in our culture, precisely because the technology of the book is one that hasn't changed since it appeared in the early days of the Renaissance. You have looked a lot at the history of the book, and it must be particularly disorienting to find yourself at that moment where all bets are off.

GREER: It is, but it's also really exciting, because in a way, it's like we are today in the moment that some of the originators of print would have been in in the 15th and 16th century when they had this new technology of movable type and printed books. Part of the content of this mobile textbook, the technology of the book, is print history. In a way, we are looking at the history of book publishing and the history of printing technology and the history of reading through the lens of this new device. So the students are being encouraged to reflect on what is it like to read on this new device in the context of the history of the form factor of the book.

And I think because the form factor of the book has really not changed in about 500 years – a book is a book. You could go back to the First Folio and open it up and read it just like you could open up and read a book that was published yesterday. You would not need a tutorial. (laughter) You would know how to do that. But the rules have changed in this new technology, and so partly what we're thinking about



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is where the rules come from. I encourage students to think about – people didn't always know how to read print books, either. Print books was a revolutionary technology in its own right and has been in many ways a revolutionary technology for 500 years.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. Let's talk about some terms that maybe not everybody listening is familiar with. I used one that I realize needs a quick definition. What we're speaking about here is so-called responsive mobile publishing platforms. Briefly, responsive means what, precisely?

GREER: Well, responsive – when people talk about a responsive website or responsive text, they mean that the text reflows to fit the size of the screen or the size of the page you are looking at. So a PDF is not responsive, because a PDF file is fixed. Many ebooks are PDFs that are designed to mimic the appearance of the print book. When you move that onto a phone, you're looking at a tiny book page with tiny type. Responsive type, on the other hand, reflows to fit the size of the screen. That's the way the word responsive is used when people talk about responsive design or mobile-first design, is simply that the text resizes and reflows to fit the screen.

But what we're talking about here is responsive in a broader sense, that the entire medium is responsive to the user in the moment of reading. We talk a lot about the pathways, that a traditional book in many ways can be seen as linear. Of course, it's not truly linear, because as a reader, you have the right to skip pages. You can jump around. The author doesn't have complete control even in the print medium. But a mobile phone and a mobile reading device is far more responsive, in that people can choose to skip to this next section very easily. With a tap of their thumb, they can move from one part of the book to the next.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. And in a couple of blog posts for Gadget Software, where you are a technology and publishing advisor, and for the Textbook and Academic Authors Association, you've looked at this with a particular focus on the paragraph and how this technology has forced you to rethink the paragraph, going back to the responsive publishing platforms. So these paragraphs as they appear on a phone, on a tablet, or whatever – they are going to be, frankly, different than a paragraph published in a book. It's about the length of the paragraph first, but then as you mentioned, it also includes this connective tissue. Now, you have reimagined the paragraph in your own mind as something else. Tell us how you got there. How'd you get to this new way of looking at the paragraph?



GREER: How I got there was definitely through a process of collaboration. One of the advantages of being an early adopter and working in this brand-new platform is I'm literally working hand in hand with the product designers and the people who are writing the code for the platform. So they develop a new feature, I work with the new feature and give them feedback, and we've developed the content and the platform at the same time through this kind of iterative process of revising, rethinking, looking at it, thinking what's working, what's not working. It's been a fantastic experience, and I think a real learning experience for me to be able to work that way. Actually, it's like I'm sitting there in Gutenberg's shop saying no, add more lead. It's like I'm right there at the moment of the invention as the author who is breaking things many times along the way.

But what we evolved into was a model where we called it the new paragraph. The new paragraph essentially needs to stand entirely on its own. There is a defined pathway, and a reader is encouraged to follow the path that we define. But a reader may say, no, I'm really interested in jumping ahead and following along this different path. That's very easy to do.

So the new paragraph needs to be written in such a way that it can be read in any order. The on the other hand or in contrast or a paragraph that begins with thirdly simply will not work. Each paragraph, first and foremost, is a unit unto itself. We've actually been thinking of them in terms of a podcast. You think of each paragraph as a two-minute podcast that stands entirely on its own. And I actually do record them as audio files for accessibility so students can listen if they're in the car rather than reading the text. So there's a text file, there's an audio file, and each of those represents maybe 250 words and 1.5-2 minutes of audio that serves as its own little mini-lesson. As an author, it forces you to be very concise. You strip out a lot of the words. Really, what I have tried to do is to design each paragraph in a way that it has some kind of payoff or some kind of a moment of surprise so that it's a little mini-drama or a little mini-story.

We've also thought in terms of game design. Many video games today have what's called the main story quest, where you can plow through to get to the end of the story in sequence – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 as designed by the developers. There's also a million side quests in a big role-playing game, and you can go off and say, I'm not interested in the story right now. I'm just going to go over here and start a farm. We've used that metaphor to think about designing paragraphs that could be viewed as a side quest. If a student, for example, is really interested in Gutenberg



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and movable type, they could spend a couple of days going deeper into that particular moment and that particular story.

KENNEALLY: We are speaking today with Michael Greer. He is rethinking the paragraph for a book to be published on the Gadget Software publishing platform, *The Technology of the Book*. Michael, I'm sure there's at least a few people listening right now who think, oh my God, this is just going to be so fragmented. How am I ever going to follow it? How am I going to ever write that way? How am I ever going to read that way? So I have to ask you – does this lead to a more fragmented reading or writing experience?

GREER: Yes, it does, and by design. If you're thinking along the lines of somebody like Nicholas Carr, who wrote a book called *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr is really focused on what we lose as we move from longform, deep, focused reading in book format into a mobile environment like this that is by design modular, flexible, and you could describe it as fragmented. There is a loss. I won't kid you that we've known the form factor of the book for 500 years, and now we're on the precipice of something entirely different. So no, this is not designed to replicate the kind of deep, long reading in a chair that you would get from a novel or from other kinds of print book. It's designed to be a very different kind of experience.

But the question, then, is what do we gain? I argue that, number one, we gain a sense of continuity and dynamism. This is a dynamic experience. A virtual publication or a vPub, as Gadget Software calls it – it's a living learning environment in the shape of an app. It changes in real time. As an instructor, as the author, I can continue to update that content in real time, and I can push the publish button and it updates on the student's phone. They don't have to download it over again.

So there's something happening that we're moving from a fixed form factor to something that is dynamic and ongoing, and I think for higher education publishing – I have no idea how this would work for novels. That's a whole different question. But for higher ed publishing, I think it raises the energy level, and it gets the students involved, because they can contribute. They can become co-creators of the content and they can work through it in their own ways. So yes, it may be more fragmented. I think that it's fair to say that it is. But on the other hand, it's also more energetic, it's more dynamic, and it gives the students the ability to feel like they're participating in it in a way that's fundamentally different from a traditional printed textbook.



KENNEALLY: That's a strong and even stirring defense of this process, Michael Greer. So I have to ask you, how did you come to that acceptance of the reader having more control? In fact, you seem to be enjoying the prospect. You're inviting the students to collaborate with you. But really, it begins with you as the author accepting the situation. It's a kind of acceptance in sort of a zen-like way and sort of going with that.

GREER: I appreciate that description of it. I think I'm a little more terrified than that. (laughter) But the truth is it's because I have a focus here, and the focus is really what's the best way to support student learning? I think in many cases in educational technology and in digital publishing, it's easy to say, wow, we have this great new toy, how do we make it work, and to be technology-driven.

I think what we're doing with this project and the reason that I was so attracted to working with the folks at Gadget Software is our purpose is driven by the learners and what the learners need and what students need. Today in higher education, 40% of our students are non-traditional. They're working full time, taking classes at night, grabbing a lesson on their phone on the way home on the bus. So they have an entirely different set of needs. A 400-page print textbook simply is not going to work for them.

I think the reason that I'm excited about this new model is because I firmly believe that it will serve students in a way that the traditional textbook publishing model is no longer serving those needs. We really try to put what learners need and what they can do, provide some authentic learning experiences, and give them a purpose. It's very easy to say, dear students, go make a video. That would be what I would describe as a technology-driven, because we're defining the medium – make a video. I prefer to say, give the students a purpose – tell the story of X, Y, and Z – and let them choose the medium. They might choose to make a video. They might choose to write a paper. But they have a genuine purpose.

So I think this mobile platform and this kind of digital publishing model gives students the ability to take ownership of their own learning, and I firmly believe that it will be effective as an experience for them in terms of what they're actually learning and what they'll take away from the course or the textbook at the end of the semester.



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KENNEALLY: Michael Greer, rethinking the paragraph and remaking the textbook, thanks so much for joining us again on Beyond the Book.

GREER: Thank so much for having me. It's really been a pleasure. I love to talk about this stuff.

KENNEALLY: Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center, a global leader in content management, discovery, and document delivery solutions. Through its relationships with those who use and create content, CCC and its subsidiaries RightsDirect and Ixxus drive market-based solutions that accelerate knowledge, power publishing, and advance copyright.

Beyond the Book co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Join us again soon on Beyond the Book.

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