

# Thank you and please write

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In keeping with the spirit of the year end, this is in part a thank you note, and in part a plea. The gratitude is to all those who help me write this column and the plea to those who know a lot more than me about education, through intense personal experience and reflection, but don't write at all or don't write for the average reader.

The thanks and the plea come together, because every time I make such a plea in person, the response is "but how can I write with this regularity, in fact I am amazed that you can write every fortnight, how do you do it?" The answer to that question of how I do it, leads me to the thanks.

Two-and-a-half years ago, I committed to the editor of Mint that I will write a fortnightly column. I had never written before with any regularity for a publication. The two simple questions in my mind were: will I have something to write about every 15 days and how will I write?

In the first three months I sorted out how to do it. Dileep, my co-worker, says that I am near autistic, for my repetitive and restricted behaviour, which I know. So, I figured out how to put this writing into my behavioural loop, which I will explain, but before that the first thanks—and this comes too late.

One Sunday afternoon I got a mail from Mint's editor that the person who handled my column—Aritra Pyne—had died in an accident. I froze to my bones. I had never met him, had talked to him two-three times on the phone. He made my columns readable. He was very knowledgeable, incredibly responsive and nice. He had given me hope that some good young people were still choosing to become journalists. What a tragedy! And I never thanked him, I won't forget that.

Here is my behavioural loop and the point is that my daughter plays tennis. On one of my morning runs during the week, I think about what to write in the next week's column. Sometimes, at the end of the run, I am completely clear: with the main point, the structure and the words. Equally, in some weeks, I can't even decide what I will write. Mostly it is somewhere in between.

On Sunday mornings, I take my daughter to her tennis class. I write in those two hours. If I miss that, then I cannot write the column, I don't have the time. So if my daughter doesn't go for tennis, I don't write that week's column. On Sunday evening, I look at the column briefly and send it to three friends (who insist on remaining anonymous) for their

comments. They usually respond by Monday. Their comments are always invaluable: to simplify, to bring conceptual depth and often some of the most interesting turns of phrases (e.g. “school swaraj” was suggested by one of them).

I wrap up the piece by Tuesday night. Often my 16-year-old son does a sanity check, on whether I have written something incomprehensible, despite all the advice. Then I am done.

That was about how I write. On what I write, the key is my role and the people that I work with. I have the privilege of being in the most remote schools of the country, talking to the teachers and children on one day, and the very next day with thoughtful university academics and policymakers. Which means that without people such as Anant, Abhishek, Kailash, Jagmohan, Umashankar (and many more) with whom I work, I will have nothing to write. Equally, the people that I meet—the teachers, the government officers, the committed field workers—give me a dose of the reality of today and hope for possibility of a tomorrow. They are all real people for me: Rekha, Aruna, Gowda, Pradeep and so on, and they give me the substance of what I write.

There are scores of people I know who have far more intense engagement with education and write much better than me. But they don’t write. The plea is to them to write. They must write because otherwise the public debate on education gets “captured” by people who have no real understating of education.

The problem with education is that it is a field where anyone can write with seeming authority, just because they have been educated. This is similar to having been treated by doctors, the patient expounding on medicine and our taking him seriously. Education is a field of deceptive expertise. It is much more complex than rocket science, but because every one of us is in some way involved with education, we think of ourselves as experts and lead education astray.

And the real experts are often quiet; they must claim their legitimate ground more often, for the sake of our education, and our country.

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