

How Not to Write a Hot Take



[№ 51: How Not to Write a Hot Take](#)

Say you've gotten an idea for a thinkpiece. You've seen something on Twitter or read something in WaPo. It's made you Mad and given you a Big Idea about What's Wrong With the World. Probably it's the fault of Disembodiment or Disenchantment. It's certainly traceable to the Lack of Thick Community and is probably traceable to Nominalism.

Sample: Young people aren't going on dates any more. William of Ockham's intellectual errors explain why.

Here's what you should do. Write down your hot take, briefly, and then put it aside. Demote it from Pitch or Take to Topic. It is not yet a Pitch. And your Take may be correct, but you don't know that yet. Hold it as a hypothesis, however half-baked it is, but hold it lightly.

And then ask yourself these questions. Write in response to them: names, phone numbers, addresses, and notes, paragraphs, other questions. These questions will not finish your piece for you. But, when you write in response to them, and collect the results of your research, they will generate the ingredients that you will need to write something that is actual magazine journalism and has the chance to be good.

1. Where is anything related to this physically happening? Can I go there?
2. How can I test my hypothesis? If I were wrong, how would I know?
3. What have some people who are wiser than me and who disagree with me and with each other said about this topic?
4. Who has expertise in this topic?
5. Who can I talk to who has been doing something practical related to this topic for more than three years?
6. What scenes - as in a play - would illustrate this topic?
7. What in my life makes me care about this topic?
8. What is the most vivid personal anecdote that you can tell that would explain that?
9. If I don't have a vivid personal anecdote about this topic, who would? What is their anecdote?
10. What secrets related to this topic can I find out?
11. What statistics related to this topic can I track down?

12. What institutions related to this topic exist and how can I get involved with them? (infiltration, interview, business records.)
13. Who has written about something related to this topic 50 years ago? 100? 500? 2300?
14. What fiction or poetry has been written about this topic?
15. What are counterexamples to the problem this stood out to me about this topic?
16. What else is going on that might be a confounding factor: what affects this topic?
17. Who can I talk to who has experienced the dire consequences of this topic, or other aspects of this topic, firsthand?
18. What community can I visit where this topic is being suffered or countered? Who are the key people in that community?
19. What adventure or caper can I go on to explore this topic?
20. What historical parallels to this topic are there? Who are those people and what are those stories?
21. What are the Golden Nugget quotes from interviews or other texts related to this topic that I almost certainly will want to include?
22. Finally, for a Plough piece: How can what I have uncovered in this investigation help readers to live as though another life were possible?

Exercises:

1. Go through your piece or pitch. For each assertion that you make, think of a scene or conversation which would allow you to show that assertion being the case. Then go look for where those scenes or conversations would be, if they existed. Be open to being extremely surprised. Be open to finding that your Take was uninformed. Be open to the world being complicated. Be open to being wrong.
2. Read Joan Didion's "Slouching Towards Bethlehem." Identify in it the Cranky Hot Take she probably originally came up with. Then notice what she did with that. A crucial insight in your life as a writer is that having the same opinion about the hippies as Joan Didion does not make you Joan Didion. And in any case you would not want to be Joan Didion.
3. Read Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen*, & Will Arbery's *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*. Identify the Hot Take or Big Thinkpiece that each could have been. Notice how the ideas/themes from that Hot Take or Big Thinkpiece are made into scenes & characters & dialogue, and made more complicated.

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