

'Learn to savour words and language because no matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world' - Robin Williams

I grew up loving this quote from Dead Poets Society, and as a consequence, with a deep infatuation for writing. Mainly for pleasure and as a hobby, but of late, as **a tool to stir conversation and provoke thought on issues that matter.**

It started last year, when after watching an episode of ABC's Q&A, I felt angered at some of the conversation taking place around youth mental health and decided to convey this emotion through writing. I immediately wrote a piece and sent it to the ABC Drum.

This is the first and most important lesson I've learnt in writing opinion pieces. **Respond to a clear need.** An issue that's topical, that has already captured public attention, something that you passionately care about. Being truly evoked to write, is not only likely to produce better content for the reader but also you're likely going to have a lot to say on the topic.

In submitting this piece, I had to grapple with two other questions. Do I have the **appropriate credibility to write on the topic?** And, if published, was I **ready for the type of response that it would attract from readers?**

These are important criteria to satisfy, for yourself, but also for the outlets that the piece may be submitted to. Depending on the complexity of the topic, there may be a certain level of experience required to be able to confidently talk to the issues at hand. In other instances, it may be, that a very compelling opinion, is more than enough for the piece to be picked up. Reflecting on this, also allows the writer to position who they are and how they want to be represented in the public forum.

Being prepared for all sorts of responses is crucial, as you never know who is going to be on the other end. Often, the topics that I have written about attract a range of community sentiment, and people have certainly not held back on their views. For every person that may fully agree with your argument, there could also be someone who disagrees in equal measure. Exercising perspective, and a little bit of detachment, once the piece is in the public domain can be a helpful strategy - it may also allow you as a writer to more openly consider other aspects of an issue that you may have not thought about.

Having said this, doing the **required homework for any opinion piece is of paramount importance.** In my context, this is all about being up to date with current research concerning issues of youth mental health. For others, it may be introspective reflection of personal experiences, or collating evidence from different sources. Whatever the homework is, do it thoroughly and fulfill the task with accuracy. Every time I write a piece, I feel a tremendous amount of responsibility to convey a message with integrity, as writing genuinely has the power to change lives and shift thought. Therefore, when intending to circulate a piece in the public domain, it is essential to exercise due diligence with background preparation.

Accompanying a love for writing growing up, was also a mother who was **insistent about proofreading.** It sounds so simple, but it is so essential. In order for writing to make an impact, it must firstly be understood by those that are engaging with it.

There are incredible writers and thinkers in our community, who shape our public discourse, that set the nation's agenda, critique the status quo, and pave better ways forward, all in vastly different ways and with their own unique styles. But they all have one thing in common.

They think about issues differently, and offer a fresh take on age old challenges. That is the challenge, and the mandate for every writer that is wanting to make a meaningful contribution in the public space.