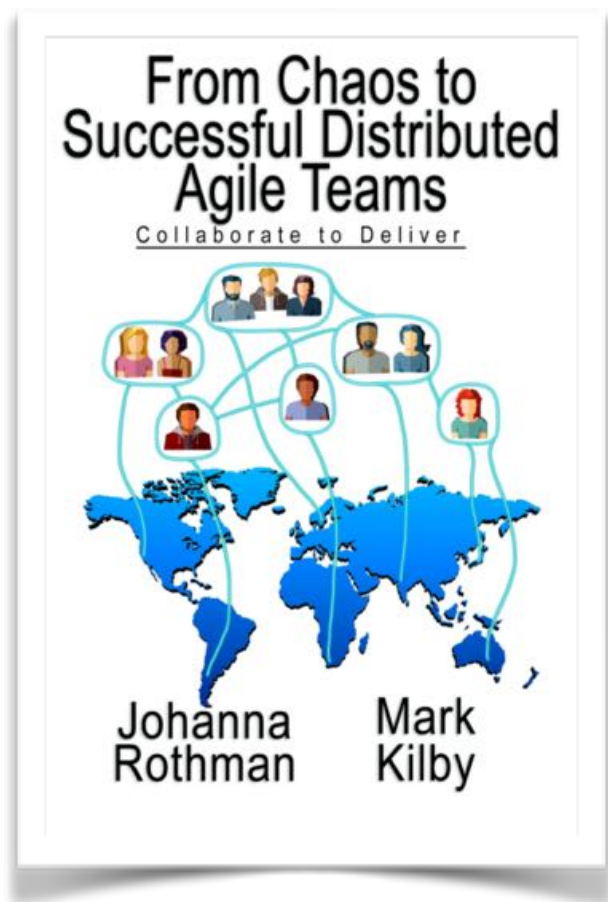


# Learning Through Agile Writing

(how agile principles can make you a better writer)



Mark Kilby  
@mkilby

(with deep appreciation to  
Johanna Rothman: @johannarothman)



My early writing experience

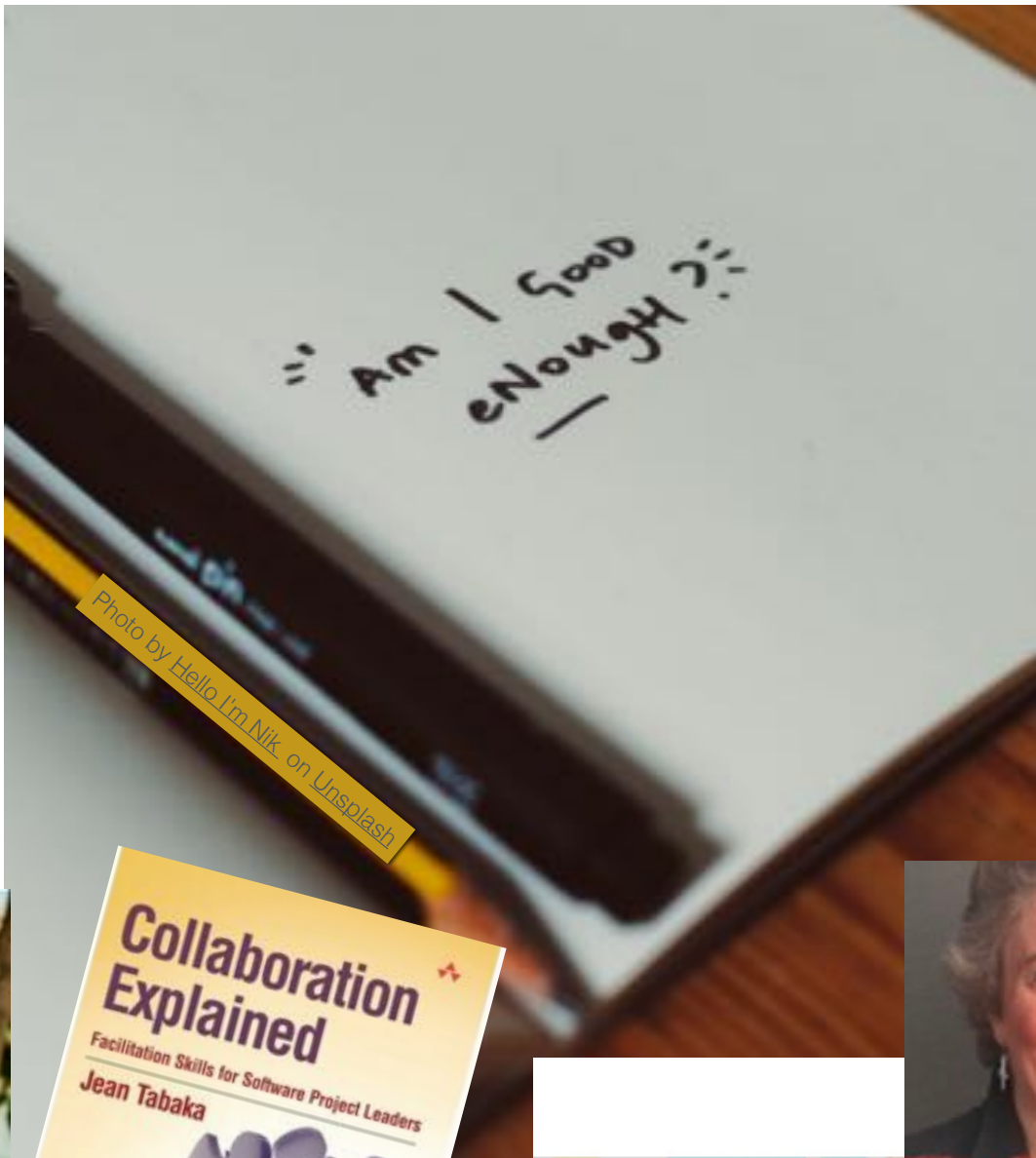
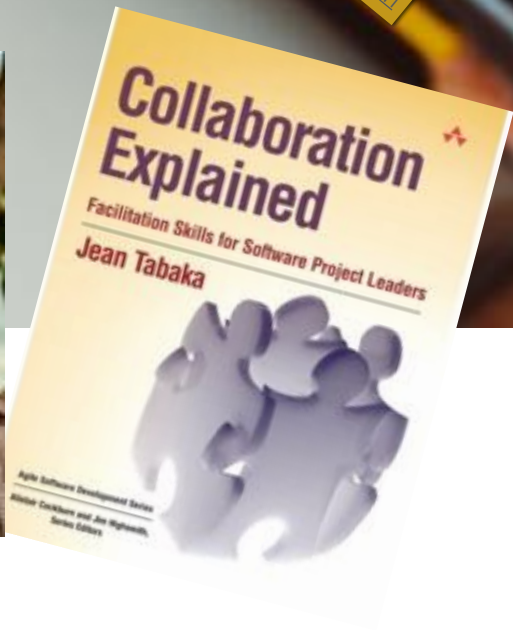


Photo by Hello I'm Nik on Unsplash

YES!

YES!





**Focus on your voice, over the right words**

Photo by [Amador Loureiro](#) on [Unsplash](#)

# “Agile Doesn’t Work for Distributed Teams!”

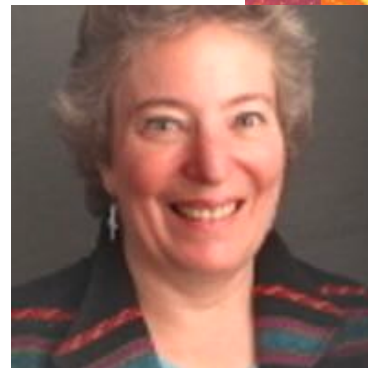
- Truth is at least 50% of all agile teams are distributed
- Agile approaches can help distributed teams deliver
  - Pairs
  - Sustainable pace
  - Fast feedback



Source: <https://www.pictofigo.com/image-detail/2650/>

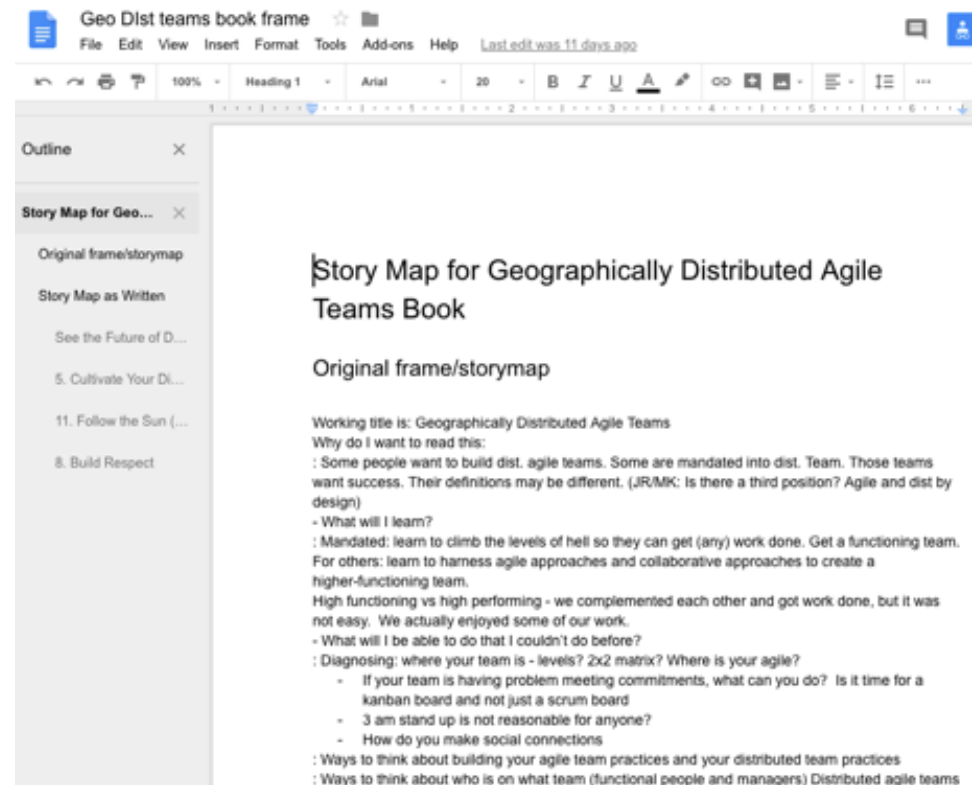
# Origin of the Book

- We discussed what we'd seen: *same old, same old*
- We decided to pair-write the book
- We focused on **collaboration** and **role flexibility**



# Agile Principles Helped Start

- We started Aug 30, 2017.
- We had interruptions for hurricanes and international travel
- Developed a “book frame” (similar to a product skeleton or story map)



# Interruptions

- Writing from various locations proved typical distributed team challenges:
- Insufficient hours of overlap
- Insufficient infrastructure for audio and video



Source: <http://www.afcent.af.mil/News/Art/igphoto/2000618148/>



# Early Timeline

- Wrote first three chapters (simultaneously) Nov-Dec 2017
- Reordered/refactored chapters
- Finished first five chapters in January and February
- Sustainable pace of 1 hour every day, anywhere from 500-1500 words



# Learnings Through March

- How to function as a team (pair)
- How to collaborate
- Tools and how to use them
- Micro-retrospectives



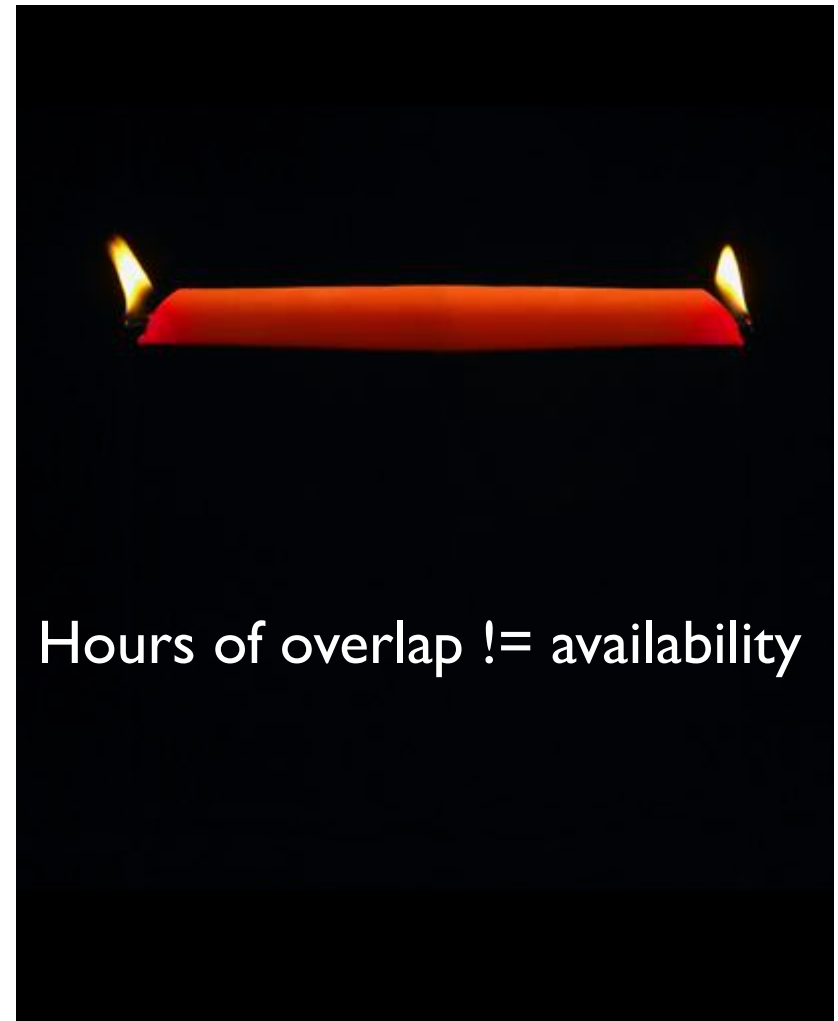
# Continuous Integration?

- Had used Google docs as regular text
- Tried various markdown extensions/add-ons
- Changed to writing in **Markdown** in Google docs and then sweeping to dropbox files for **Leanpub (continuous integration)**



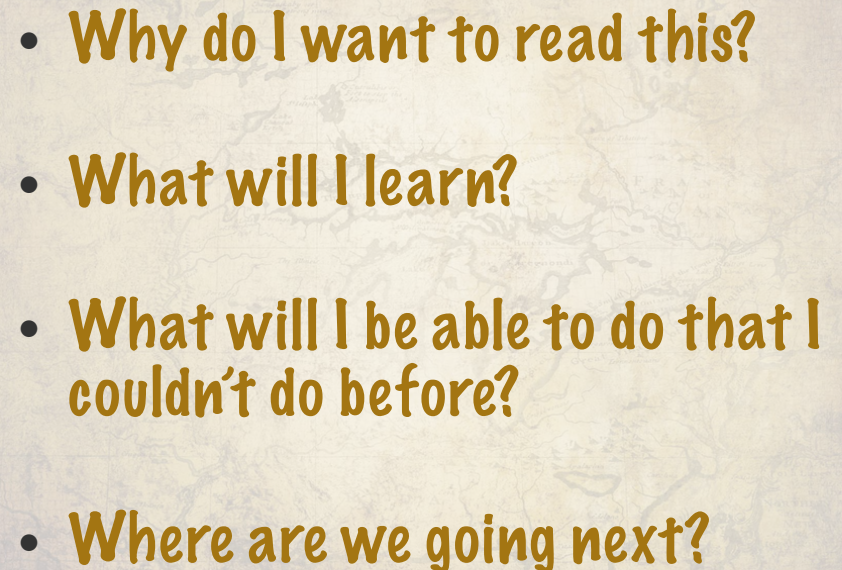
# When Could We Work Together?

- Both in Eastern time zone
- *Needed to find at least 30 minutes each week day*
- Normally mornings
- We're both fuzzy in the late afternoons after a full day
- No deadlines; just cadence and flow



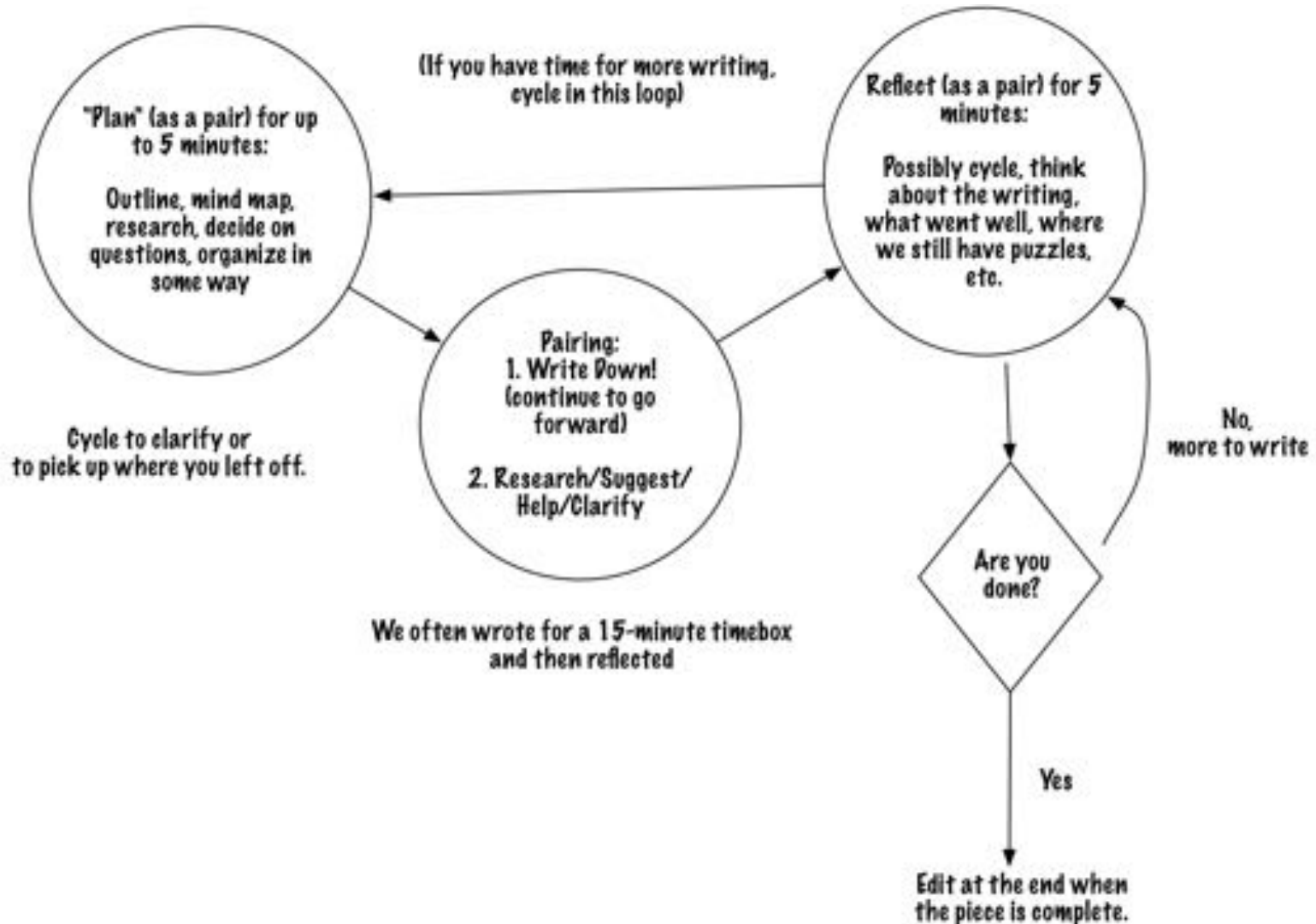
# How We Wrote (Part I)

- Used a story map for each chapter
- Wrote in sections

- 
- **Why do I want to read this?**
  - **What will I learn?**
  - **What will I be able to do that I couldn't do before?**
  - **Where are we going next?**

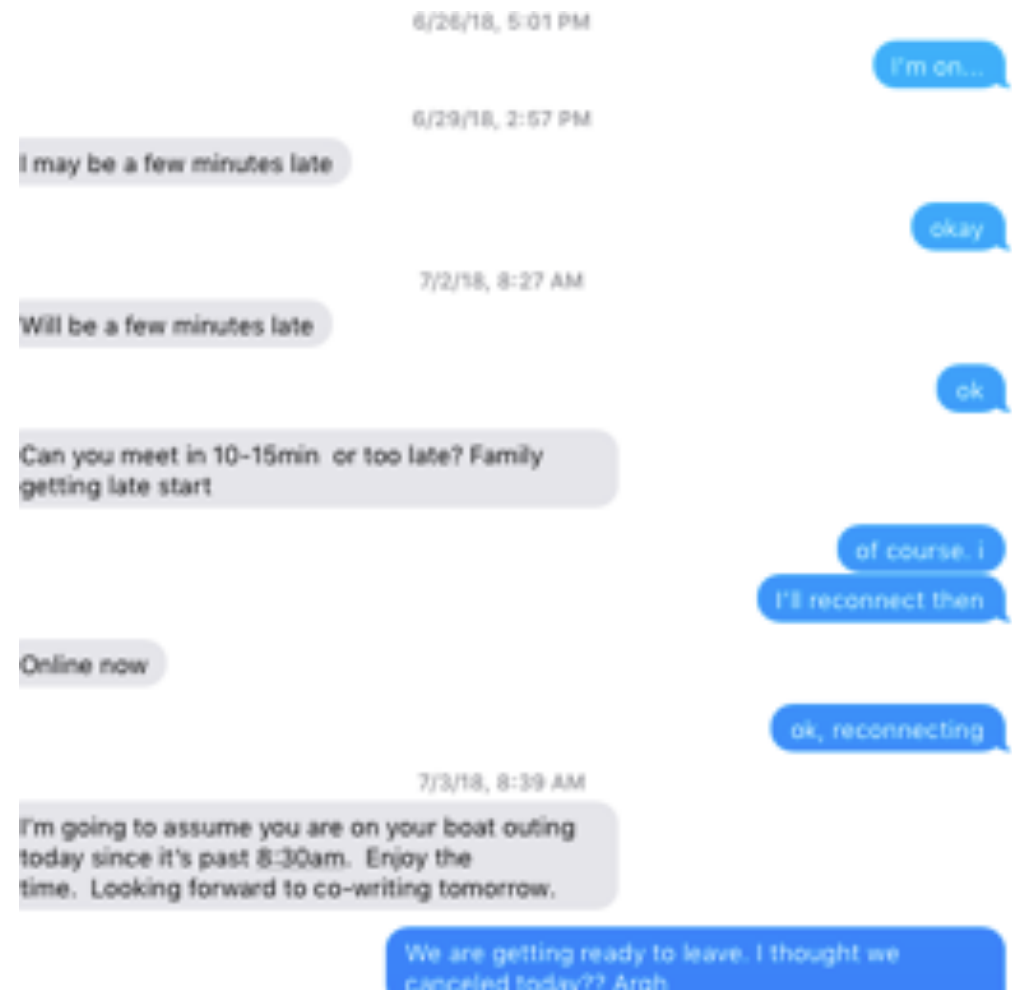
Map texture source: Ava Verino <https://flic.kr/p/85teFF> CC BY 2.0

# How We Wrote (Part 2)



# Backchannel

- Text (SMS)
- Email



# Each Other's Human Cues

- RCA dog: head cocked, curious look
- Finger on the chin means “I’m thinking”
- “When I’m tired, I’m pretty human”
- “We’re done”
- “The writer/typist/AV engineer/secretary didn’t show up today”





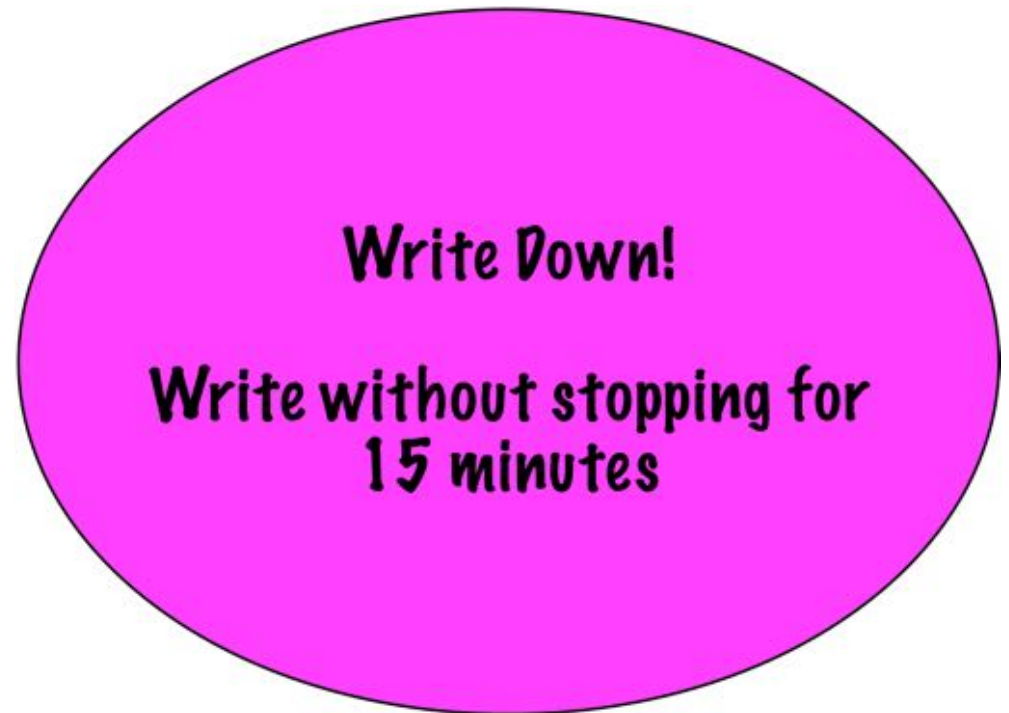
# Each Other's Writing Cues

- “You have to say more about that”
- “Let’s unpack that”
- “Mind if I tweak that?”
- “I’m okay with that”
- “Where are you?”
- XX means fix this later



# Our Working Agreements

- Default to writing
- Don't write over the other person
- If you're typing, always go forwards
- If you navigate, think clarity, find connections in other parts of book or references, refactor 2nd
- Don't try to talk and write at the same time
- Change driver and navigator every 5-10 minutes (it depends)



# Results and Learning

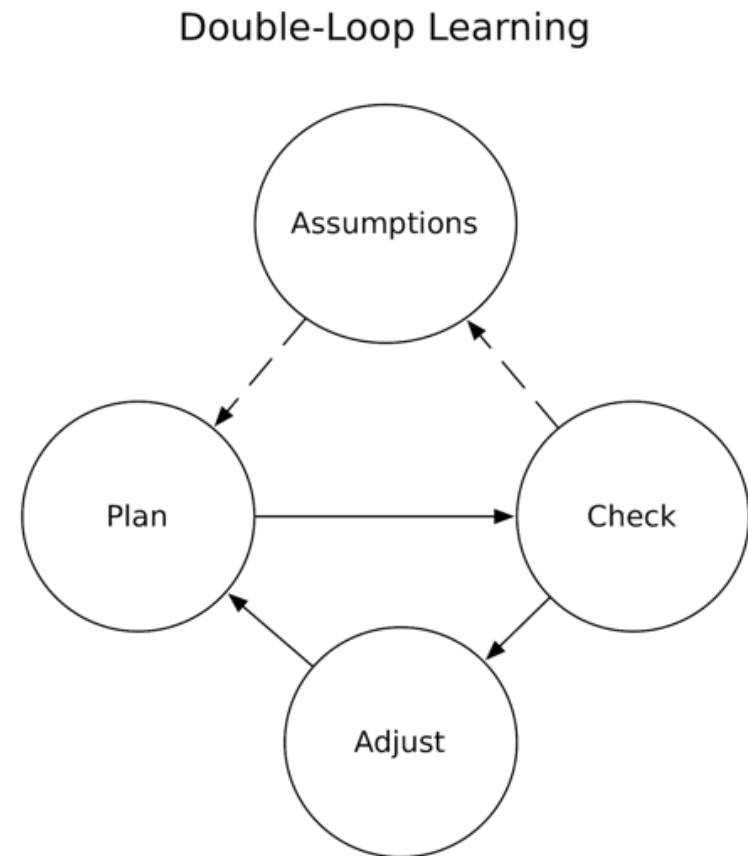
- Check in at the start of each session
- Power of a streak
- Declaring done (and moving on)
- Write clean



Photo by [Nathan Dumlao](#) on [Unsplash](#)

# Cadences, Timeboxes, Flow

- We used flow so we didn't have to batch our planning or retros
- We timeboxed each day's work
- Replanned when we needed it
  - Plan a chapter with a map
  - Write and review in the small
  - Review at the end: did we fulfill the promise in the map?



# Writing is an Act of Discovery

- Writing English is similar to writing code
- Clarified and refactored earlier work



Photo by [Rachel Pfuetzner](#) on [Unsplash](#)

# Other Learnings

- Pair-writing might be a simulation for your team's product development
- Pair-writing is fun, produced a better book than we could solo
- Johanna wishes for a real Markdown tool for pair-writing
- Mark wishes for more experimentation



Photo by [Sharon McCutcheon](#) on [Unsplash](#)

# Distributed Team Learnings

- Need sufficient hours of overlap
  - Need experiments
  - Flow worked better than batching for us
  - Natural communication tools
- \* **Acceptable Hours of Overlap**
  - \* **Transparency at All Levels**
  - \* **Culture of Continuous Improvement**
  - \* **Pervasive Collaboration**
  - \* **Assume Good Intent**
  - \* **Project Rhythm**
  - \* **Resilience through Holistic Culture**
  - \* **Transparency at All Levels**

# Where We Are Now

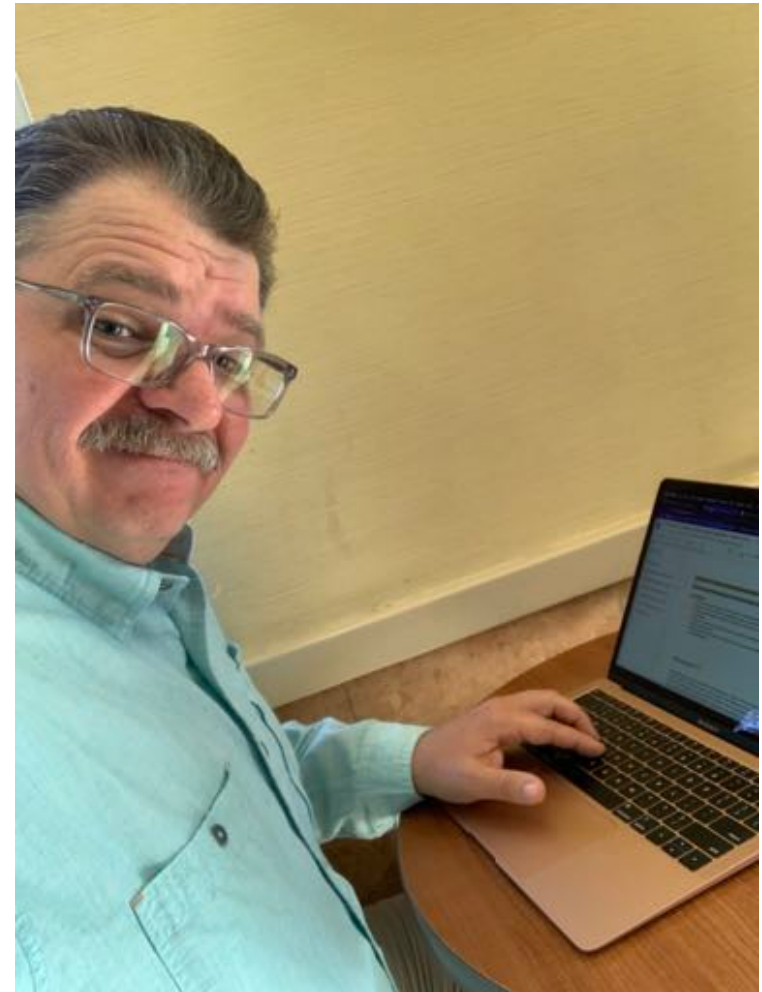
- E-book available - Oct 2018
- Print book - March 2019
- Audio book - Dec 2019
- Online intro course (cover Ch 1-4) - Aug 2019
- Online team course (Ch 5-9) - Feb 2020





# What can you do?

- Discover writers you like; get to know them and their process
- Think about agile principles you could apply to your writing (rhythm & flow, pairing, reflection in the moment, etc.)
- Find your voice (vision)
- Find your customers, experiment often, see what resonates.
- Practice, practice, practice your writing craft.



# Let's Stay in Touch

- Mark:
  - <http://markkilby.com>
  - Twitter: @mkilby
  - <http://www.linkedin.com/in/mkilby>
- Johanna:
  - Pragmatic Manager:  
[www.jrothman.com/pragmaticmanager](http://www.jrothman.com/pragmaticmanager)
  - Please link with me on LinkedIn
  - Ask about her writing courses

