

Letters to Joel Spolsky



Dear Joel,

I regret to inform you that I must decline your invitation to be a featured guest blogger for Joel On Software.¹

I realize this will come as a shock, especially given my well-documented need for attention.

The fact is, I don't care how many thousands of readers you have, how many millions of dollars of software you sell, or how many minor celebrities worship you. At the end of the day, you appear in

a little window in an RSS reader. You fill in a template consisting of a cute story tenuously connected to a dramatic point, inspiring wanna-bes to commiserate and laugh with indignation at the stupidity of others.

While they've been laughing, I've wondering whether you practice what you preach. You admonish programmers who don't understand Unicode,² yet five years later our copy of Fogbugz still cannot receive email from Korea because of a character encoding issue.

Also, are you out of gas? Your column in Inc Magazine consists of 1300-word reproductions of chapters from your book which themselves are reproductions of blog entries you wrote in 2001. And your blog has turned into announcements for products and trade shows.

I can already hear your fanboys calling for my head, but from where I'm sitting, you're a celebrity who is cashing in on fame, no longer compelled to have new ideas.

But introspection isn't your thing. Admitting you've been wrong or that you don't take your own advice would crack your well-crafted façade.

I'm not like that, and I can't pretend otherwise for you or your readers. I'm afraid the answer is no.

Sincerely,
Jason

Dear Mr. Spolsky,

I'm not sure if you received the last email I sent. I hope not. I used Outlook's "recall this message" feature, but sometimes that doesn't work. (That's Microsoft for ya, am I right? Ha ha!)

Anyway, I'd like to apologize for the things I wrote. I feel I've done both of us a disservice by refusing your generous offer to be a featured guest writer for Joel On Software.

If you want to know the truth, my unwarranted outburst stems from a core insecurity. Had you rejected my article, I would have been crushed. I guess this was my way of rejecting you before you could reject me. Juvenile, I know.

In fact I have deep respect for what you've done for the software development community over the past decade. I myself have been inspired by you since 2000; I can still remember the glee of getting new articles delivered to my inbox.

As an entrepreneur, you've taught me everything from how to hire great people,³ how to think properly about bootstrapping,⁴ how new projects help you cope with burn-out,⁵ and even how to run tech support.⁶ In fact, there's very little I do each day that isn't influenced by you in some way.

That's incredible, if you think about it.

What I'm trying to say is, I would be honored to accept your invitation, and I trust that you will disregard my first email.

Apologetically and humbly yours,
Jason Cohen

Hi Joel!

I haven't heard from you, so I'm forwarding a copy of an email I sent earlier this week.

You must get an ass-ton of email! So no hard feelings.

Talk to you soon,
Jason

Hi Joel,

Oh man, that article about hanging the blinds at Fogcreek⁷ was awesome. Did you really do all that? Of course you did, it was in the photo! I loved how you tied in the army story—it's really motivational.

I'm so glad Inc is featuring you. They need someone to speak truth to power and put the stuffed suits in their place. You're like the Moses of software developers! What's next, the New York Times? Why not!

Speaking of articles, I've got some article ideas I'd love to discuss! I know you're super-busy—that's what I keep telling my friends. They're such nervous nellies—they think you're ignoring me! A quick little two-second reply from you would really reassure them. Thanks!

+1 for Joel in the NYT!

Jason

Joel-

Quick idea: I was thinking of doing an interview series about how your writing has inspired successful software projects. Maybe even make a short film? You could attach it to your next "Interning at Fogcreek" DVD. What do you think?

Here's what I'd say: Your three⁸ part⁹ series¹⁰ on designing software for real people permanently changed my perspective and continues to be my bible. It's the kind of thing you have to re-read every few months to make sure you're building great, usable software.

PS. I still haven't heard back about the guest post. Should I be worried?

Thanks again,
J

Hey hey J-Spol!

I was just telling a friend about your offer. You know, all I have to say is “Joel” and everyone knows exactly who I’m talking about. I guess that’s how you know you’ve made it!

Anyway, this friend thinks that if you were truly interested, we would have had more conversations by now. Imagine how surprised she’ll be when you publish my article! Ha ha, we’ll both get a kick out of that.

Let me know.

Waiting expectantly,
Your boy JC

Hi Joel,

This will be my final email. I don’t want to seem like a stalker!

So it turns out I have some influence over one of your interns (one of those friend-of-a-friend-who-owes-a-favor-to-a-friend type deals). He (or she!) set up me with a Copilot¹¹ account behind the FogCreek firewall, so I’ve been playing with the Joel On Software CMS myself.

Seems like it’s a custom job. No problem—I’m Smart and I Get Things Done³—I’ll figure it out.

So you should see my article appear soon! I’m glad I found a way we could work together without interfering with your schedule. Cheers!

—Jason

Shamelessly modeled after “Dear Oprah” from Steve Almond’s¹² fantastic short story book Rants, Exploits, and Obsessions (Not that you asked).¹³

Good artists copy;¹⁴ great artists steal. (Said by Steve Jobs, stealing a quote from Pablo Picasso.)

Current version of this article:

<https://longform.asmartbear.com/letters-to-joel-spolsky/>

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