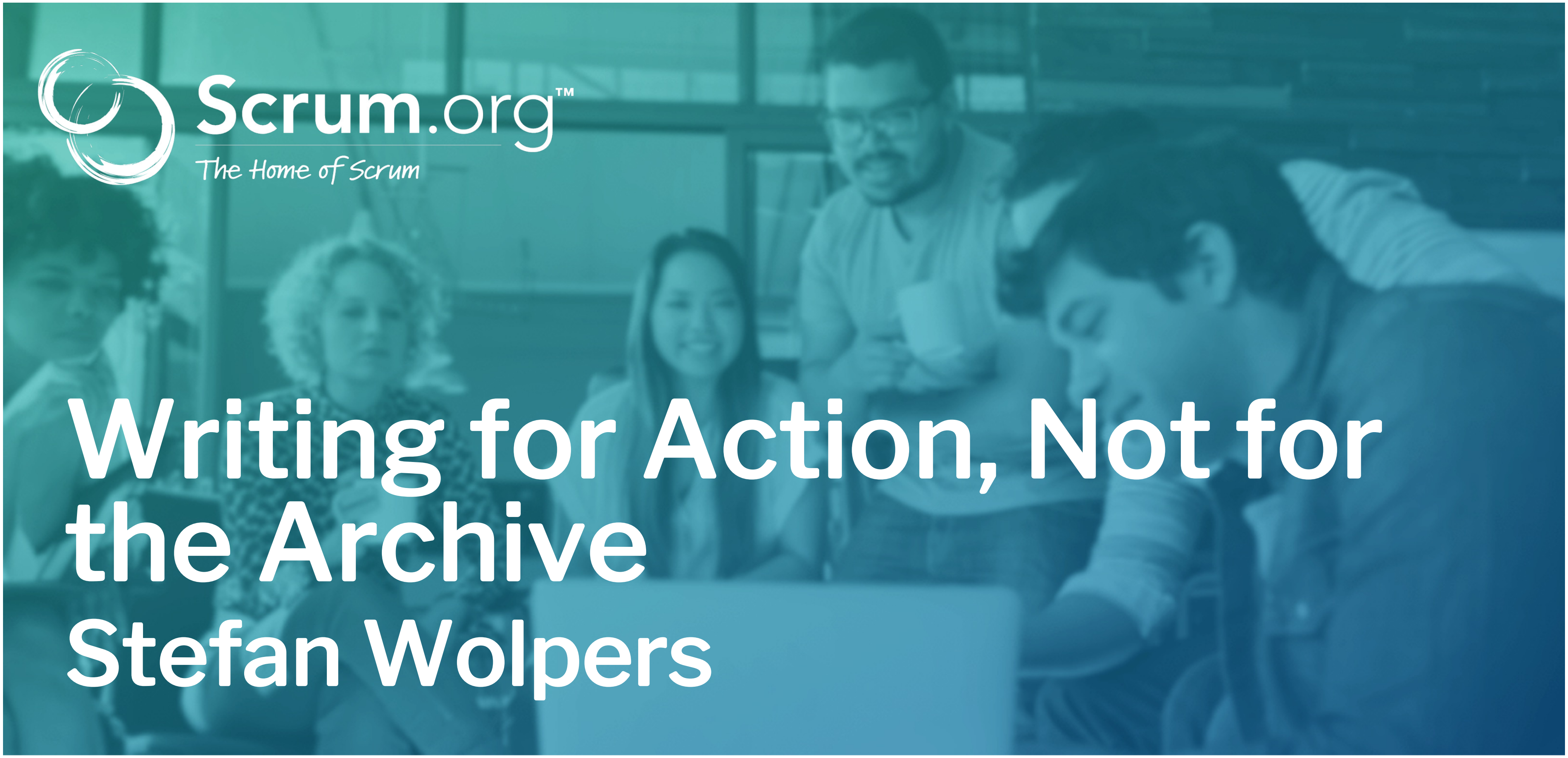

Writing for Action, Not for the Archive

Stefan Wolpers

2026

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Quick Guidelines

- Your microphones will be muted throughout
- This session is recorded. The recording and slides will be available after the webinar within 24 hours.
- Please ask questions!
  - Submit questions by selecting the Q & A icon: 

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Who is Scrum.org

Mission:
Helping People and Teams Solve Complex Problems

Ken Schwaber
Scrum.org Founder, Chairman and Co-creator of Scrum

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About Stefan Wolpers

- Professional Scrum Trainer with Scrum.org
- **Author**:
  - Scrum Anti-Patterns Guide (Pearson)
  - Blogs on Age-of-Product.com
  - ‘Food for Agile Thought’ newsletter
- **Background**: 20+ years helping organizations adopt agile product development

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What This Session Is About

This session is not about reducing documentation. It is about writing that enables action:

- **Hypotheses** written so they can be validated
- **Goals** written so success can be measured
- **Decisions** written so reasoning can be defended
- **'No' decisions documented** so they do not get endlessly revisited
- **Context** provided for AI.

👉 *Writing is not the work. But bad writing undermines the work.*

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What You Will Take Away

1. Write hypotheses using **Gherkin syntax** so they can be validated
2. Write **Sprint Goals** using *Outcome + Constraint + Evidence*
3. Capture decisions so **reasoning survives leadership changes**
4. Use **Refinement** as the venue where this writing happens
5. **Bonus:** One writing practice to try this week.

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Section 1: Writing Hypotheses That Can Be Validated

A hypothesis you cannot validate is not a hypothesis.

It is a wish.

Skipping validation?
Validation impossible — that’s an issue.

We will use two established formats:

- The **User Story** format and
- **Gherkin** syntax.

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The Problem with Abstract Hypotheses

ABSTRACT: "We believe that improving the search function will increase user satisfaction."

Can you validate this hypothesis?

- What experiment would you run?
- How would you know you succeeded?
- What does 'improving' mean?
- 'Satisfaction' is measured how?

CONCRETE:

"When a user searches by record ID, returning results in under 2 seconds will reduce search abandonment from 23% to under 10%."

Concrete hypotheses can be validated. Abstract hypotheses generate meetings.

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User Story Format: A Starting Point

User Stories follow a standard format. Useful, but often too abstract for validation:

As a [role], I want [capability] so that [benefit].

Example: "As a support agent, I want faster ticket resolution so that I can help more customers."

The problem:

- What is 'faster:' 1 second or 10 seconds?
- What is 'more customers?' How is it measured?
- 👉 This cannot be validated as written.

User Stories describe intent. To validate them, add concrete examples using Gherkin syntax.
The example becomes the acceptance test.

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Gherkin Syntax: Given-When-Then

From Behavior-Driven Development (BDD). Turns abstract stories into testable scenarios.

1. **GIVEN** =
   Starting context. Be specific: not 'a user' but 'a support agent handling a billing dispute'
2. **WHEN** =
   Action or trigger. Be specific: not 'searches' but 'enters ticket ID and presses Search'
3. **THEN** =
   Observable outcome. Be specific: not 'gets results' but 'sees customer history within 2 seconds'

Example:

- Given a support agent is logged into the helpdesk system,
- And there are 50 concurrent agents during peak hours,
- When I enter a ticket ID and press Search,
- Then the customer record appears within 2 seconds,
- And the interaction history is displayed for context.

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Three Principles for Writing Testable Hypotheses

Principle 1: Concrete Beats Abstract

"Within 2 seconds" is testable. "Fast response" is not.

👉 *If you cannot specify a number, you cannot validate.*

Principle 2: Examples Are Tests

If you can demonstrate the Gherkin scenario, you have a test case.

👉 *The scenario IS the acceptance test.*

Principle 3: Write Together

Writing Gherkin examples together surfaces misunderstandings when changes are cheap.

👉 *Before you build anything.*

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Where This Happens: Refinement

Refinement is not estimation theater. It is the checkpoint where proposed work gets validated.

What Refinement is for:

- Writing Gherkin scenarios together
- Challenging whether this is the most valuable work
- Validating hypotheses before committing Sprint capacity.

The Developers' role:

Developers are not passive recipients of work items. They have a professional duty to challenge:

👉 ***"Is this really the most valuable thing we can build to solve this customer problem?"***

If the team cannot write a Gherkin scenario during Refinement, the PB item is not ready.

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Section 2: Writing Goals That Communicate Outcomes

Most Sprint Goals are task lists: 'Complete tickets ABC-123 through ABC-127.'

That is not a Sprint Goal.

That is a to-do list.

A Sprint Goal passes the newspaper test:

👉 *Could someone outside your team understand what success looks like?*

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The Newspaper Test for Goals

Could someone outside your team understand what success looks like?

FAILS THE TEST: "Complete integration stories and fix performance bugs."
👉 *A reader would ask: So what? What changes for anyone?*

PASSES THE TEST: "Customers complete checkout 30% faster using the new payment flow."
👉 *A reader understands: Who benefits and how.*

Outcomes are what changes for users or stakeholders.

Activities are what your team does.

Goals should describe outcomes.

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The Goal Formula: Outcome + Constraint + Evidence + Anti-Goal

- **OUTCOME:** What changes for users or stakeholders?
- **CONSTRAINT:** What boundaries apply? Time, scope, dependencies?
- **EVIDENCE:** How will you know you succeeded? What can you measure?
- **ANTI-GOAL:** What are you NOT trying to achieve?

Example:
"Customer support agents can resolve common inquiries without escalation, reducing average resolution time from 12 to 4 minutes."

- **Outcome:** Agents resolve without escalation.
- **Constraint:** Common inquiries only.
- **Evidence:** 12 to 4 minutes.
- **Anti-Goal:** NOT replacing escalation for complex cases.

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Goal Canvas Template

10 minutes to complete. Saves hours of misaligned work.

OUTCOME:	What changes for users or stakeholders?
CONSTRAINT:	What boundaries apply?
EVIDENCE:	How will you know you succeeded?
ANTI-GOAL:	What are you NOT trying to achieve?

👉 *If you cannot fill in Evidence, your outcome is too vague.*

👉 *If you cannot fill in Anti-Goal, you have not thought about scope.*

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Sprint Goals in Practice: The Sprint Planning Flow

The Goal Canvas applies directly to Sprint Goals. Sprint Goals emerge from a specific process:

Step 1: Product Owner revisits the Product Goal and introduces the desired outcome — the business objective — for the Sprint
Step 2: Scrum Team collaboratively creates the Sprint Goal (not dictated by PO)
Step 3: Developers commit to the Sprint Goal and forecast the work required
Step 4: Developers plan how to accomplish the forecast.

Key Insight:

- The Sprint Goal is NOT dictated by the Product Owner.
- It emerges from collaborative negotiation during Sprint Planning.
- Use the Goal Canvas during Step 2.

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Section 3: Writing Decisions That Preserve Reasoning

Decisions decay. People leave. Context evaporates.

When the reasoning behind a decision is lost, organizations re-debate settled questions.

This is expensive in time, momentum, and morale.

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The Decision Note Template

Six fields. Ten minutes to write. Saves hours of repeated debate.

DECISION:	One sentence. What was decided?
CONTEXT:	Why now? What triggered this?
OPTIONS:	What alternatives were evaluated?
RATIONALE:	Why this option? What factors were decisive?
CONSEQUENCES:	What does this enable? What does it prevent?
REVISIT IF:	Under what conditions should we reconsider?

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Example: Mobile-First Prioritization

Decision:	Prioritize mobile experience over desktop for Q2-Q3.
Context:	73% of active users on mobile, up from 54% last year. Desktop declining 15% YoY. Limited developer capacity.
Options:	(1) Mobile-first. (2) Desktop-first. (3) Split 50/50.
Rationale:	Mobile growing, desktop declining. 50/50 delivers mediocre experience on both.
Consequences:	Desktop users may see slower improvements. Enables responsive-first architecture.
Revisit If:	Desktop traffic rises above 40%. Mobile conversion drops below desktop.

👉 *When the new PM asks 'Why mobile-first?' hand them this note.*
👉 *5 minutes of reading replaces 3 meetings.*

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Connecting Decisions to the Anti-Product Backlog

The Anti-Product Backlog is where 'no' decisions live.

Decision Notes document WHY you decided not to build something:

- Context that led to the decision
- Options that were considered
- Rationale for saying no
- When to revisit

The Anti-Product Backlog makes 'no' visible and defensible:

- Stakeholders can see what was rejected
- Reasoning is preserved
- Conditions for reconsideration are clear
- Prevents endless re-requests

👉 *We will NOT implement feature X because [rationale].*
👉 *Revisit if [conditions change].*

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Section 4: Your Toolkit

Templates for hypotheses, goals, and decisions:

- **Gherkin Story Template:** Given-When-Then format for hypotheses and user stories
- **Goal Canvas:** Outcome + Constraint + Evidence + Anti-Goal
- **Decision Note:** Six-field template for preserving reasoning
- **Test Card + Learning Card:** Strategyzer tools for experiments

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The Test Card: Before Your Experiment

Structure your experiment BEFORE you run it.

Step 1 - HYPOTHESIS: We believe that...
Step 2 - TEST: To verify that, we will...
Step 3 - METRIC: And measure...
Step 4 - CRITERIA: We are right if...

👉 *The Test Card prevents moving goalposts. You define success before you run the experiment.* (Source: Strategyzer AG)


The Test Card
Strategyzer

Test name:
Duration:
Assigned to:
Deadline:

STEP 1: HYPOTHESIS
We believe that

STEP 2: TEST
To verify that, we will

STEP 3: METRIC
And measure

STEP 4: CRITERIA
We are right if

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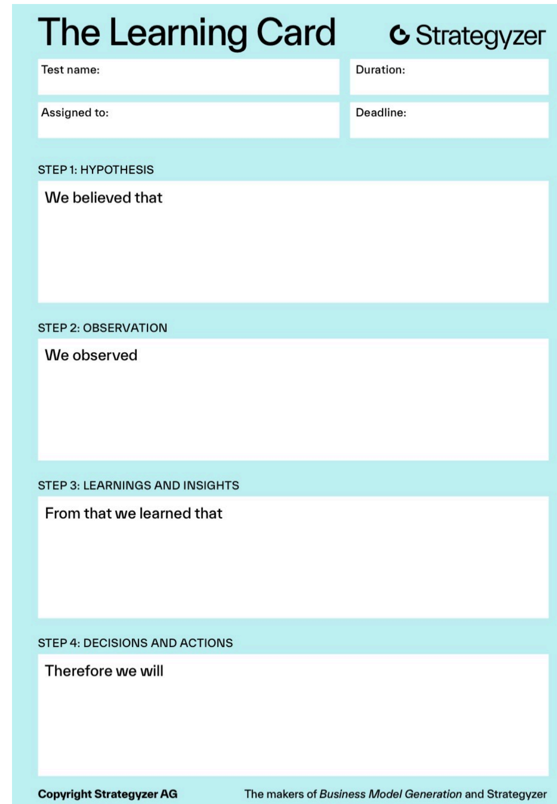
The Learning Card: After Your Experiment

Capture what you learned AFTER you run the experiment.

Step 1 - HYPOTHESIS: We believed that...
Step 2 - OBSERVATION: We observed...
Step 3 - LEARNINGS AND INSIGHTS: Hence, we learned that...
Step 4 - DECISIONS AND ACTIONS: Therefore, we will...

👉 *Notice the past tense:*
- *Test Card before.*
- *Learning Card after.*

Together they create a complete record. (Source: Strategyzer AG)


The Learning Card
Strategyzer
Test name:
Duration:
Assigned to:
Deadline:
STEP 1: HYPOTHESIS
We believed that
STEP 2: OBSERVATION
We observed
STEP 3: LEARNINGS AND INSIGHTS
From that we learned that
STEP 4: DECISIONS AND ACTIONS
Therefore we will
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Your Templates

Gherkin Story Template
Given-When-Then format for hypotheses and user stories.
Use for: Concrete scenarios, acceptance criteria.

Goal Canvas
Outcome + Constraint + Evidence + Anti-Goal.
Use for: Sprint Goals, milestones, objectives.

Decision Note
Six-field template for preserving reasoning.
Use for: Technical decisions, 'no' decisions, architectural choices.

Test Card + Learning Card
Strategyzer tools for experiments.
Use for: Hypothesis validation, product discovery.

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Why This Matters In A World of Agentic AI


```
Megabrain_team/
 sprint-22/
  sprint-goal.md
  planned-items.md
  daily-notes/
   day-01.md
   day-05.md
  retrospective-outcomes.md
  scope-changes.md
 sprint-23/
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 team/
  working-agreements.md
  definition-of-done.md
  skills/
   retrospective-analyzer.md
   backlog-health-check.md
```


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Your Action This Week

Product Owners / Product Managers

- Take your current Sprint Goal. Apply the newspaper test.
- If it fails, rewrite it using Outcome + Constraint + Evidence.
- Share with your team: 'Does this better communicate success?'

Developers / Team Members

- In your next Refinement, when a story is discussed, ask:
  - Can we write a Gherkin scenario?
  - What would Given-When-Then look like?
- You are ensuring work can be validated.

Scrum Masters / Agile Coaches

- Pick one recent decision your team made. Write a Decision Note retroactively.
- Then ask: 'If we had written this at the time, would it have taken less than 10 minutes?'
- Use this to introduce the practice going forward.

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Key Takeaways

Writing for action means making your work testable, communicable, and defensible.

Hypotheses:	Use Gherkin syntax (Given-When-Then) to make them concrete enough to validate.
Goals:	Apply the newspaper test. Write Sprint Goals using Outcome + Constraint + Evidence + Anti-Goal.
Decisions:	Capture the WHY, not just the WHAT. Six fields, ten minutes, saves hours.
Refinement:	Use it as the checkpoint where all this writing happens. Not estimation theater.

👉 *These are not separate techniques. They are one integrated practice:*

- *Teams accountable for value, discovering what is worth building, and*
- *Communicating clearly about what they learn.*

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