

WRITE FOR YOUR LIFE, Part II.

By

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Wanting to become a writer is a yearning many feel. Expressing yourself in words, verbally or in text, is a uniquely human skill. Writing for publication, however, takes much more than just the desire. It requires a plan, a place, a dedication—and a strong will to complete a project—and make some money at it.

The first requirement for writing—like painting or sculpting or any other art—requires inspiration. Demands it, in fact. To conceive of being a writer is the very definition of imagining yourself into a different existence. No matter if you write non-fiction or fiction, poetry or lyrics, writing requires a constant flow of imagination. Now that sounds easy.

But is it?

To a new writer who is just learning how to put thoughts on paper every day, the idea of being free to write each day sounds romantic. Being able to produce words every day in useful form, however, may become less fun and more like...dare I utter the word?...work. The question is—can you sustain your interest and improve your skills to become a paid and acclaimed writer?

Let's find out. How quickly can you write one full page letter to a business associate? (Note I said business associate, not friend. Writing to friends does not qualify as a written experience demanding organizational skill nor logic.) Does it take you twenty minutes—or two hours and twenty minutes to write this? How long does it take you to edit that same piece? Another twenty minutes? Or two hours and twenty minutes? Time yourself on various projects of many lengths. Keep that list handy as we talk about what it takes to produce a longer piece, for example, a novel of 100,000 words.

To write and edit your own novel of 400 manuscript pages totaling 100,000 words, many authors take 6 to 9 months of writing daily. Why does it take so long, you ask? Let's do the math on that. At 400 pages, double-spaced of 12 point type, you could write 4 pages per day and finish the manuscript in 100 days. That equals 3 months and 10 days from "The Beginning" to "The End." But if we calculate that way, then we are not allowing for weekends. Or holidays. Sick days. Research and plotting. Or editing.

Ah, yes. Editing. That is the process by which you digest what you have written, see if it makes sense and fits your voice and work. That is the process by which you decide, word for word, what you have said and improve it for drama, color, content and accuracy. This little activity can eat into your project, chew it up and spit it out, all in one sitting. Learning how to tame your inner editor—and make him work for you and not against you—is a skill like no other you have ever mastered.

This editor—some call him their alter ego and others have less kind names for him—can make or break your day. For some writers, he is a welcomed housemaid. For others, the kindly wizard. For still others, he is their nightmarish ghoul, a vampire who sucks them dry of thought and hope and, yes, even their original idea. Learning how to humor him, control him, feed him or fire him can be one of your biggest challenges, next to sitting your fanny in your chair and producing today's pages.

So, just how do you learn how to keep the inspiration coming—and how to deal with your inner editor? Is there a secret formula? A simple solution to all these challenges?

Well, the answer is yes. And no.

Inspiration, the font of all your need to write, is the element that compels you to action. You can read, you can talk, you can listen to many who will not necessarily be in the publishing industry and keep your inspiration level high. For me to suggest how you cultivate that is a challenge I have the humility not to address. For me, for any writer or artist, your constant nurturing of your inner creativity is your own unique and solitary task. But for the challenge of remaining on task, writing daily, I do have two suggestions for you.

My first answer is to go to the library and check out all the books on writing. Begin with "Writers Market." Read it. At approximately 800 pages, this will tell you who is buying what, and how to get in touch with them. Next, pick up all the books on characterization, plotting and conflict. Next, find the books that describe how to best write your genre. These books won't necessarily inspire you. But they will provide you a floor, a basis for understanding precisely what you are about to do—and how you are about to change.

My next suggestion is that you join a writers group. A professional writers group in which the members are dedicated to production is the best use of your limited time and money. Many writers groups exist today in many areas. Mystery Writers of America has many metropolitan chapters, as do Romance Writers of America. Also, many independent community-based Writers Guilds exist. Their meetings tend to be listed in

local newspapers in the lifestyle or meetings sections. Look for them. Go. The members will welcome you as a new recruit to their ranks. What they will teach you is a totally different way to live your creative life. What they will offer you is a support group to learn, strive, achieve and give back to those who wish to do the same as you.

Dedicated to aiding new writers and building the expertise and careers of published authors, these groups charge a nominal sum to join and very little—and sometimes nothing—to attend monthly meetings. At these events, you can hear published authors speak on the techniques of the profession. Don't have enough humor in your romantic comedy? Can't find a hook for your children's novel? Don't understand how to plot a murder mystery set in England in 1880? Other writers can help. In fact, they share their tips on just such problems—and they regularly do it for the price of a chance to speak—and maybe sell their newest novel to you.

To hear other authors reveal their solutions to creating fiction is not the only reason you should join a writers group. You need to join to hear literary agents, editors, publishers, publicists and booksellers speak. All of these are invited to speak at writers group meetings, and each of them contributes to the greater wealth of knowledge that you must know to sell a novel and survive by selling another. That knowledge becomes your understanding of the publishing industry, the business that dedicates itself to putting thousands of new books by new authors like you on the bookshelves every year.

Each of these professionals in the publishing industry has an expertise that you, the author, need to understand. So, by listening to an agent speak, you learn what types of works he represents—and what he wishes to represent. By hearing an editor speak, you learn what she wants to buy—and what her specifications for submissions are. Listening to publishers gives you a perspective on how they see themselves in the marketplace and what they consider their niche to be. Hearing a bookseller speak, you learn what sells in her store—and how she sells it. Listening to a publicist, you can learn how to promote your new book, whether appearing on Oprah is truly a good tactic for your book's rise to the *New York Times* list, and whether advertising really helps a book get bought.

But by far the greatest advantage to joining a writers group is the support you get from others in the same profession. Writing, by definition, is solitary and lonely. Work habits, how you use your down time, your family time and how you do your research can all affect how quickly and efficiently you produce a salable work. Only writers know what writers experience, emotionally and professionally. Your significant other may think he or she does—but they only see the outside of what you are doing. They never see the inside of your story until it is published. By then it reads so easily! It makes so much sense! They and the rest of the world think you are so brilliant. And you take your bows, claim humility and utter your thanks to those who helped you along the way.

Join a writers group today. Spend one hour a month with these people who have the same dreams you do. Learn from them. Emulate them.

After all, they took the chance. They began their journey. And now they are learning how to live their dream within the parameters of the business that publishing is.

Should you take the chance, begin the journey, learn how to transform your dream into a product from which you can earn money—and call it your new profession?

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In Write for Your life, part three, next month, we will explore a few realities of the publishing industry, such as who gets to the best seller lists...and why!

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Prepare to become a professional:

1. Analyze your creative potential
 - How quickly do you write now?
 - Set realistic goals for writing & editing
2. Learn the publishing market:
 - Read the specs of the marketplace
 - Read craft books
3. Join a professional writers group