10 Steps to Become a *Writer*

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The Write Practice

So you want to be a writer.

When I was a senior in high school, my parents and I travelled around to different colleges, researching the best ones for my chosen major, Creative Writing.

Even though this was many years ago, I remember walking down a flight of stairs at a university in San Francisco. We had just left the creative writing department and I was feeling both ambitious and intimidated at the same time. My father, a man who I had watched spend years writing novels, plays, and song lyrics, asked me why I wanted to be a writer.

"You know how hard it is to make money as a writer?" he said. It felt like a betrayal.

"I don't care about making money," I told him. "I just want to write great books."

Despite my show of idealism, I secretly thought this was a silly conversation. As soon as I wrote my first book, I knew I would be an instant success.

Of course, that's not exactly how it happened.

Since then I've written fifteen books, hundreds of articles, short stories, and poems. But I'm still not an instant success. They haven't named a literary prize

after me (yet). And I haven't seen my name next to George R.R. Martin and Stephen King on the bestseller's list.

And yet, I've accomplished something much more important.

I've become a writer.

Every day I get to sit down in front of a keyboard and think up words, words that reach thousands of people in a dozen different countries. Every day I get to create stories out of thin air and put together sentences that change the way people see the world. Every day I get to write meaning into people's lives.

No one is born a writer. You must *become* a writer. In fact, you never cease to become, because you never stop learning how to write. Even now, I am *becoming* a writer. And so are you.

In this short book, I'd like to give you the ten best pieces of wisdom I've learned as a writer. I hope they will inspire you to begin your journey toward becoming a writer (or continue it with renewed focus!).

Afterward, I'll share some resources that will help you step into your new identity as a writer.

Let's begin, shall we?

I.

Publish

Really? Step number one is to *publish*?

It's strange to begin a list of writing tips with a tip to publish. In fact, as I read books and articles about how to become a writer, most of them don't even mention it. They usually say, "Just Write!"

However, writers write things other people read, and so the act of publishing is essential to being a writer.

What is stopping you from publishing something *today*?

Seriously. What is stopping you?

Like most people, you probably think of publishing as the process of getting an agent who will attract Harper Collins or some other New York publisher to pay you a small advance and a portion of the royalties so they can print and sell your book.

However, publishing can also look like posting your articles on a blog or emailing your short stories to a friend. It doesn't have to be groundbreaking, and it doesn't have to be perfect.

If you want to become a writer, you need to get used to writing for others. You need to practice taking feedback and dealing with rejection. You also need to start earning some fans.

You do this by publishing, publishing small and regularly. What is stopping you from printing out one of your writing pieces and giving it to a friend? Or publishing it online as a blog post or even a Facebook note?

Do you have one friend who would be interested in reading your writing today? I'm betting you do. Why not send them one of your writing pieces now? (Yes, now.)

Think of it as practice for when you publish with that big New York publisher. (It could be a while, so you may have a lot of time to practice.)

II.

Set deadlines, or better, get someone else to set them for you *(and then keep them)*

"I love deadlines," said author Douglas Adams. "I love the whooshing noise they make as they go by."

Deadlines are meant to induce stress. I know none of us really wants more stress in our lives (do you?), but most writers I know struggle with two things: discipline and focus. A good deadline helps with both.

A little bit of stress focuses you. A good deadline can keep your butt in the chair and your fingers on the keys much better than "inspiration," that fickle muse, ever could.

How, then, do you set good deadlines so they don't whoosh by as they did for Mr. Adams?

The best deadlines are set by others, by editors or freelance writing clients or even your fans.

The most effective deadline I ever set was to write one article on my blog every day. I did this while maintaining a full-time job. What made this deadline

especially effective was the people holding me accountable were my readers, a small group at the beginning but eventually a large, clamoring audience.

When you know people are waiting for your writing, you become a much more disciplined writer.

HINT: People are waiting for your writing. When are you going to give it to them?

III.

Learn how to tell a great story.

No matter what kind of writing you do, you will always tell stories.

If you want to write novels or memoir or short stories, this is obvious.

What if you're writing self-help or reference? You still need to learn to tell a good story. When firefighters hear stories about the close calls of their friends, it activates the same part of the brain as if they were going through that experience themselves. Then, when they experience a similar situation, they're better prepared because of the stories they've heard. Stories are the best teachers.

What if you're writing marketing or sales copy? What is marketing but telling a story of how a consumer's life could be different if they bought your product?

All writers tell stories. Great writers tell great stories. Learn to tell great stories.

IV.

Read things that make you feel like *someone* finally understands. Read things that *you* don't fully understand.

I wanted to become a writer because I read a few books that made me feel like someone finally understood me.

I became a better writer because I read books that I didn't fully understand and kept reading them until I did (some I'm still reading).

V.

Learn *everything* (but become an expert on nothing)

Writers are learners.

When I'm writing an article or a chapter in a book, I often have ten or twelve tabs pulled up on my browser as well as a few books open in front of me, all of them research and resources to make my writing better, more detailed, more lifelike.

Writers bring information to people who have never heard it. We can turn a few words on a page into a whole universe inside our reader's imaginations. We can look into the souls of our characters and share their story in a way that our readers fully understand them.

We do all of this through learning, learning about politics and current events, craftsmanship and science, about emotions and spirituality.

Writers should never become experts. Once you become an expert, you can no longer learn anything new, and if you don't learn anything new you will become stale and uninspired. Be a novice in everything and you will never run out of things to write about.

VI.

Steal

"Good artists copy, great artists steal," Steve Jobs liked to say.

He was "quoting" Picasso, but this quote has also been attributed to James Joyce and William Faulkner and Stravinsky among others.

But the quote actually originated with T.S. Eliot, the great modernist poet, who wrote, "**Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal;** bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different."[1]

When Ernest Hemingway was first beginning as a writer, he would type out whole sections of books by writers he admired just to get a sense of the flow and rhythm of their writing.

When I was working my first job as a freelance writer for a local newspaper, I printed out ten of the best articles I could find from the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, and then carefully read through each one, taking notes and asking, "Why did the writer say this here? What is the purpose of this sentence? How

does this word move the story forward?"

Whenever I begin a new writing project, I read something that I admire to inspire and motivate me.

Cormac McCarthy, author of *The Road* and *All the Pretty Horses*, once said, "The ugly fact is books are made out of books."

There is nothing new under the sun. The question, then, is which books are you going to make yours out of? And how are you going to turn them into something better (or at least something different)?

[1] See the **Quote Investigator** for more details.

VII.

When you see pain/ poverty/evil/injustice/ death, *don't look away*

I once read a short story about a boy who wanted to become a writer that stuck with me (although, I'm forgetting the title, so if you know it, email me!).

The story begins with the news that a man in their small ranching community had been killed. To help with the body, the boy and his father and uncle leave late at night and walk through the wilderness.

It would be the boy's first time seeing death, and when they came upon the body, he was terrified and looked away.

"You want to be a writer?" his uncle asked.

The boy nodded.

"Then don't you look away. Don't you ever look away."

I've seen things I have wanted to look away from. I've seen legless boys pull themselves around on a cart to beg for coins from passing cars. I've seen hillsides

covered with slums, people living amidst trash and human waste with just cardboard and tin for shelter. I've seen death.

If you want to be a writer, you must know death and pain and evil and injustice, know it as intimately as you know your soul. A writer's job is to bring the bad to life just as well as the good.

Don't look away.

VIII.

Become acquainted with boredom, comfortable with writing-induced misery.

Every writing project I've ever worked on has come with weeping and gnashing of teeth.

When you begin writing, you are awash with excitement. You have a vision and you're confident you can bring it to life.

It's the middle that's always the hardest. Author Donald Miller said every story is like paddling a row boat to an island.[2] When you first start, the shore recedes quickly and the island feels so close you could touch it.

But once you get out into open water, it's easy to think you're not even moving. The shore you just left seems far away and the island you're rowing toward isn't getting any closer. You're not making any progress, and you start to wonder if you should just give up.

Most people quit here. No one has problems starting stories. They don't even have a hard time finishing them. But the middle is a story graveyard, littered with corpses of books, blog posts, and articles.

When I was finishing my first book, I became so frustrated and hopeless with my writing that I knelt on the floor, put my face in my hands, and cried (a very macho, manly cry, of course). I thought, "I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to write this book. I don't want to be a writer at all anymore. I never want to feel this stupid again."

But after a little while, I got up, and I wrote a few more words. The next day, I wrote a few more. A month later, the book was finished and sent off to the editor.

That moment on the floor was the turning point, the beginning of the end of writing my first book, and now I remember that moment every time writing is at its most frustrating and hopeless, and I know I'm nearly finished.

Write through the mess. Write through poor grammar and awkward tense changes and switches in point of view. Keep writing even when you know as you've known nothing else before that what you're writing is worthless. When you're in the middle, good and bad are meaningless. Just keep writing.

And when you can see the shore, when you realize, at last, that you're nearing the end of the writing process, remember the feeling. You'll need that memory for the next time you find yourself in the middle.

[2] From *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*.

IX.

Surround yourself with people who inspire you *(some of them may be writers)*

We think of great writers as silent, brooding geniuses, but the truth is no one becomes a writer on their own. It takes a team, a community, to sustain the passion, creativity, and sheer willpower to become a writer.

The truth is, the best writers have always had a community. Ernest Hemingway had F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, and the expats in Paris. Jack Kerouac had William Burroughs and the Beats. J.R.R. Tolkien had C.S. Lewis and the Inklings. Virginia Woolf had Leonard Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group.

"You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with," said Jim Rohn.

If you aren't spending time with creative people who inspire you and challenge you to do your best writing, perhaps you need to make a few new friends.

Don't know where to find one? Join ours!
thewritepractice.com/join

Let me close with one last story.

A few years ago, I did something that changed my life. I started writing. In fact, I finished one writing piece every day.

I had, of course, written before. I had even started a few novels (that were soon abandoned). I had written essays for school and a few bad poems for fun.

However, when I started finishing one writing piece per day, something happened to me. I started to think of myself as a writer.

A real writer.

This led to getting small jobs as a writer, freelancing for a local paper, editing books for friends. It took a while (and a lot of practice), but eventually, I was able to quit my job and support myself and my family full-time through my writing.

X.

Oh, and don't forget to write...

It all started by finishing ONE writing piece regularly. That small habit changed my life.

I'm passionate about helping other writers go from being aspiring writers to becoming daily writers. If you're ready to step into your writing habits, check the following page for a few resources I think will help you.

No matter what you do next, know that I'm rooting for you and your success.

Happy writing, and see you soon!

Joe Bunting

More Resources

1 The Write Practice

We want to be your home for writing advice, encouragement, feedback, and support. Get our free writing tools, worksheets, and courses: **thewritepractice.com/free**

2 Our writing community

All writers need feedback. I do. Stephen King does. And so do you! Our community is where writers get the feedback they need to improve and the encouragement to keep going. Join free: **community.thewritepractice.com**

3 100 Day Book

Ready to finish writing a book? We built 100 Day Book to give writers the mentorship, accountability, and encouragement to finish a great book in 100 days. Check it out at **thewritepractice.com/100-day-book**



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