

The Writing Academy presents the ultimate guide to writing compelling novels and short stories for publication and sale.

Fiction 101

Module Ten

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The Writing Academy

Welcome to Fiction 101 – Module Ten

Writing Your Manuscript

Many thanks to those of you who have sent me such positive feedback about the course. I'm glad you feel the same as I do – that this course is a life-saver for the modern fiction writer!

It's the kind of course, with the breadth of in-depth, no holds barred information that I wish I'd read at the beginning of my career. Even my wife, Robyn, author of now over seventy published books, said to me that there are many things in the course she has never seen anyone encapsulate so well before. (But of course, she's biased!)

Anyway, onward.

The Writing

The most important facet of writing a manuscript is commitment. Not just to work on it consistently but to commit right from the beginning to FINISH it.

So many writers stumble on this point. They're happy to write, enjoying the process, but with no clear end in sight. They know it will take them some time to write a novel but they're not sure how long. The end date keeps extending until they realize five years has gone by. Ten years. Twenty years. And they still haven't finished their book.

They go through all kinds of angst. Wondering over their talent. Questioning it. Contemplating it. All to naught.

Wondering whether your writing is any good is irrelevant when it comes to manuscript production. The whole MS is the thing – the tone of it, the rhythm of it, your way with words is primarily defined when, and only when, it is finished.

You simply can't know how good a MS is, or how good you are as a writer, until it's done. So, by far the most important decision you must make before you start writing, is to write until it's over. And that's about planning.

Planning

Each time you decide to write a manuscript, you need to work out how long it will take you and how much time you are going to set aside for it. The key to this is word count. You need to know, on average, how many words you can write in an hour.

Contrary to what most people think, full time writers don't spend hours staring at a blank screen or typing their opening sentences repeatedly. If they did, they would never produce any manuscripts. No, writers write or, as John Braine once said, *writers count words*.

For instance, I'm working on a novel now. I'm busy with other stuff so I decided to set aside just a little time – with the help of my partner. It's only four hours a week, not much I know, but this was all I could afford to give it. The alternative was not to write fiction at all and use the time to do something that would bring in money more immediately. But my partner insisted. She has great faith in my fiction and doesn't believe I spend enough time on it.

So anyway, four hours we decided was enough to at least produce something.

Now, I write every day – letters, assessments, emails, lessons, newsletters, promos, nonfiction books, whatever. But I can only afford to spend two hours on Monday and Tuesday evenings, between seven and nine, to write fiction. There's not much on TV at these times and if there is, we can always tape it.

I write roughly 1000 words an hour. That might sound like a lot but remember this is 'first draft' writing. I'm just writing as fast as my brain works, getting down the words as they occur to me. Also remember that I work to my outline, so I don't have to think about what happens next – I've already done that. I use the outline to prompt me and when I run out of things to say, I move on to the next 'prompt' in the outline and work on that.

Working this way, I produce around four thousand words a week. I'm guessing my novel will be around 80000 words so, with a little help from a calculator (I was never very good at math) I know I will finish the first draft of the novel within 20 weeks. Not bad, eh?

You must do the same. Work out when you're going to write and for how long. Then work out how many words you can write and from that work out how long you will take

to write your novel. Then make it a goal to finish your novel within that time. Write down the goal, mark out the time on a calendar and spend a few minutes promising yourself you will do it. Make the commitment – say it out loud, at least once a week.

Writing Without Stopping

Right now, I'm going to prove to you that I'm psychic. Because I know exactly what you're thinking. Your thinking, yeah, that's alright for you, but...

Am I right?

Your thinking, yeah, I would love to set aside time like that, I would love to be able to write that many words, but my life isn't like that. I never know what I'm doing from one moment to the next, let alone on a daily or weekly basis...and even if I could write 1000 words an hour, they probably wouldn't be any good...

How do I know this is what you're thinking? Because I used to be same. Plus, it's something would-be writers tell me all the time.

The fact is it doesn't matter how fast you write. If you write only 100 words at a time, that's still better than nothing. A lot better. If you can only write for a few minutes every now and then, that's still better than not at all.

But you must make the commitment to write. You owe it to yourself.

Wilbur Smith says he writes 500 words a day. It takes him an hour or so, sometimes a lot less. But that means, even if he only works weekdays and takes off all the public holidays and weekends, he's still producing a 125,000 word book a year.

Getting In The Mood

Another common excuse for not writing is waiting until you feel inspired or 'in the right mood'. This is a mistake. You've heard the phrase: "Success is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration." The same is true for writing. If you wait until you're inspired to write, you'll probably wait a very long time – perhaps forever.

It doesn't matter how you feel, just write. And if you don't feel inspired, fake it. It will come.

And when you're writing it's as well to remember that you should never question your abilities. This is a trick I learned early on. Self-doubt is the major killer of creativity. Self-doubt should be banished from your mind at all costs. Of course, this doesn't necessarily make you a great writer but it does at least make you a writer – a producer of words.

Write Without Thinking

You should be writing with the creative side of your brain. The other side of your brain is the logical half, the critical half that will halt you and make you question what you write. Whenever you think you're analyzing your writing and finding it wanting, banish those thoughts. Just write, write without stopping – this will usually keep your logical, rational, critical side at bay. And as I say, don't question your abilities, just write and keep writing.

Don't worry about the mechanics – the words, the sentences, and so on, until after you have the bare bones down. Writing is one thing, editing is another. Don't combine these activities – it doesn't favor productivity.

How to Stay on Target

Dream. Dream big. Dream about all the great and good things that will happen to you when you're a best-selling author. Fantasize about how good you will feel when you've finished your novel. How great you will feel when you start submitting it. And how fabulous it will be to get it excepted for publication, or get the movie deal. These are the things that give your manuscript project 'legs' and help maintain your motivation. These are the things that will inspire you to keep writing, even when you don't feel like it. It's okay to feel these things. It's okay to dream.

Practical Writing Tips

Good writers write entertaining fiction. Therefore, when you write, you should ideally be entertaining yourself. Writing blocks of exposition because you feel you should is not the way forward.

Remember I said modern fiction contains a high proportion of dialogue? That's because it's fun and entertaining, easy to read and for the most part, compelling. There are three other important aspects of writing compelling fiction which I call QED, which stands for:

Questions, Empathy and Drama

On each page that you write, you need to address QED in some form or another. It's not enough to write without considering your reader – and his or her needs.

Questions

Readers continue to read because they have unanswered questions in their minds. How will this turn out? What will happen? Consequently, if you continually give your reader all the answers, you're nullifying their reasons to keep reading. It's okay to be cryptic about certain things. You don't need to explain everything up front. It's okay to hold things back and keep the reader guessing.

For instance, I generally try to keep the reader guessing as to how a character will act and react to a situation. Also, I introduce ideas and themes that I explain later. And generally, there is always an element of mystery in my stories – whether it be the identity of a killer or a situation that is only fully resolved at the end.

Empathy

It's easy to forget that readers want characters they can identify with. That's why you should try to make at least your protagonists heroic and larger than life.

Too much emphasis on an un-likeable person will turn your reader off. However, a likeable character will draw your reader deeper into your story. Be aware, on every page, that you have a responsibility to keep your reader interested in and enthralled by your characters.

Drama

Reading pages of text where nothing happens is not a sure-fire way of impressing your audience. Drama is where the plot is being played out, where the story is unfolding in front of the reader. On every page, make sure you are moving the plot along – and that means ‘showing’ and not ‘telling’ your story. See Module Six to refresh your memory on this issue.

Who’s Leading Your Story?

Many writers tell me they get stuck over their characters. Either sub characters take over the story or main characters run out of things to say and do. I read many manuscripts where minor characters are overly developed to the detriment of the story.

It’s all about focus – and sticking to your outline. New and interesting characters are fun – but if you find they’re taking over, cut back on their influence and save the ideas for another manuscript.

Writing Out of Corners

Stephen King says he doesn’t use outlines – or rather he did once on *The Dead Zone*, and didn’t like it! He says he deliberately puts his characters into impossible situations and then tries to get the out of them but always, always by using the tenacity of the characters rather than manipulating the plot. This the right way to do it.

Many writers realize they’re in a hole and stop writing only to fret and wonder what went wrong. However, nothing went wrong. All you must do is keep writing and work yourself out of the hole with words. Not thought. Not pondering the universe outside you window. By simply writing.

Getting Past the ‘Two-Thirds’ Slump

Many writers feel discouraged and / or near to exhaustion at the 2/3rds point in their novel. This is mainly because the bulk of the work is done but there seems to be a long way to go to complete a vision you’re beginning to see holes in. Fight it.

Use the same energy to finish the MS that you used at the beginning. If it's hard to keep going, fake it, keep going anyway. You'll find that you'll feel renewed energy when you've finished the first draft. And that's good – because you're going to need it – for the editing!

Keep writing!

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Creating Better Writers

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