

Through the looking glass: The other side of the writing life

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Technical communicators with interest in expanding the scope of audiences can translate their writing talents and language skills to novels, freelance magazine articles, pamphlets, brochures, and other pieces for popular consumption. And all without leaving the comfort of your favorite swivel chair. Writing what you know and love turns everyday details into cash and fame. Your skills (describing an audience, identifying its needs, communicating with appropriate language and register, and testing the results) prove an astonishing fit in this "other" writing life. Use your technical research skills, resources, and tools to identify your niche and find your market. Keywords: publishing, markets, transition, popular communication.

The writer's fast fingers itch a bit with curiosity as they tap out the day's project. Musings trundle through the back of the mind. I wonder if I could ever get published? What would it be like to write for a different audience? How do successful writers do it?

Documentation specialists and technical communicators often translate their honed skills to fiction and non-fiction publications and find lucrative markets that provide a satisfying, rewarding repository for their creative energies. Authors and freelance writers come to the craft for varied reasons. The start-up has shut down. Moonlighting for extra cash is attractive. Creative ideas yearn for an outlet.

Falling through the looking glass

Traipse through the other writing life with its possibilities to see if it suits you. Showing up daily to the blank page seems daunting at first whiff, but enthusiastic writers have effective tricks. Keeping index cards in hip pockets or scattered about the space where days are spent provides a jotting-down place for the small inspirations as they bubble up. Once a flow is established, it takes on flood-like proportions and the blank page is a welcome sight, a place to put it all. On the banks of this raging river, everyday detail becomes kindling for the creative fire. Not every bit finds its way into a final draft, but it supports the end result.

Writers, like other artists, suffer stodginess from time to time. They have a repertoire of block-busters to get them over the temporary hump. For example, if the character just doesn't seem to want to move from her chair and leave the house (but she has to in order to witness the murder), an author might look through the spy glass and focus on her hands. What do they feel like; what have they done in the past; where did that scar come from? The scar may never appear in the short story, but its history serves as foundation for action. She's up and headed for the door.

Writers moving toward a different mode of expression often find themselves reading and actively listening more, while watching less television and piloting the couch fewer hours. Walking becomes a part of the creative process. Simply putting foot in front of foot encourages flow of idea. The benefits seep into the day job, be it in office, en casa, or elsewhere. Irritations of a plot thread or an intro to a magazine article edge out the aggravations of snarly traffic and snippy store clerks. Abundance knocks on the door more often.

Talents that translate

Tick off and tally up your skills and identify those that translate to a different path of writing pursuits.

Do you

- describe your audience?
- understand your readers' needs?
- listen?
- have a variety of resources for your research?
- know your tools?
- dream big before outlining a project?
- joyfully trim the excess, certain that each word is golden?
- honor language and love to play with it?
- use language appropriate to audience and project?
- write clearly and with purpose?
- test the usability of your product?
- edit without weeping?
- welcome suggestions?
- package and sell your talents?
- mark your milestones and celebrate your successes?

Good, that means you could write for other markets, as well.

The alchemist and the crucible

Transform experience and knowledge into books, magazine articles, pamphlets, and brochures. For example, a four-year old boy's comment overheard on the crosstown bus, "If you sit still long enough, you will evolve," earns \$200 with a greeting card publisher. That madcap tale of adventure and seduction on your last vacation rings up \$500 in your state's motorist mag. Even a goofy one-liner from your cube-buddy brings \$50 as a textbook filler.

To give air to the darker side, a seasoned author would offer the first, best advice. Crush your editors. Or at least the local ones. Your own niggling doubts iced with the less than

encouraging comments from your brother-in-law will certainly do you in before you begin. The answer to your own question, "Do you know how old I'll be before I can finish a novel?" is always "The same age as you will be if you never start it." Be ready for closest friends and distant relatives to lob good intentions in your direction, all in the name of not wanting to see you disappointed. "Don't be surprised if it doesn't sell; it's crowded at the top." and "I've always thought creative types a little batty; you're not like them." Authors develop their own brand of tough skin or at minimum, one ear hard-of-hearing. They are sometimes astonished at such commentary, but put their heads down till it passes. Besides, a technical writer is, indeed, a creative artist. And it's not crowded at the top; it's crowded at the *bottom*.

The scoop, the skinny, the big dish

If publication is your goal, find someone to pay you for your material. The trick is in noticing and capturing the subject and its language, then in identifying the market who wants it. In browsing news stands and smoke shops, the freelance writer becomes familiar with present market trends and writing styles in order to predict future ones. (A finished article finds its way to the page a year from now; an accepted book manuscript, two years or more.) The successful author reads guidelines and follows them with meticulous care.

To cultivate a writing niche, listen to what friends and work-mates have to say about your talents and what they find clever. Yes, it's the same people that tell authors that publication is out of reach. We take their "Yes, but..." apart. We listen to the "yes" part and let everything after the "but" dissolve into a place where it belongs.

A starter kit

Let's get out the Little Wizards chemistry set and blow up the garage. It's a festive beginning. Think large. Listen and take notes. Reflect on your own best path in passing it on. Start some new piles. Here are some ideas, just appetizers.

Read about the creative process and how to develop your own style:
Julia Cameron, *Vein of Gold*, J.P. Tarcher, 1996.

Read about the writing life:

Stephen King, *On Writing*, Scribner Publications, 2000.

Anne LaMott, *Bird by Bird*, Anchor Press, 1994.

Find a writing community or partner and create a practice:

Julia Cameron, *The Right to Write*, J.P. Tarcher, 1998.

Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*, Random House, 1986.

Study the market databases:

http://www.writersmarket.com/index_ns.asp

<http://www.woodenhorsepub.com/database.asp>

Collect creative writing tools and resources:

<http://www.kabalarians.com/>

(a baby name chooser that helps you find character names)

<http://www.rhymezone.com/>
(a rhyming dictionary)

Show up to the dang page. Or index card. Or post-it note. Or cocktail napkin.

Succulent days and juicy nights on the other side

Feel lucky and you'll get lucky. When you feel as if you will flourish, prosperity will follow. Mindful listening moves you to notice the ordinary, elevate it, express it well, and seek the community to share it with. Fortune cookie wisdom? Maybe. But authors rarely find themselves dressed in black, in a foul humor, draped over manual typewriters, about to hurl empty whiskey glasses or full ashtrays at the taunting wall.

So what is in your future? We all want to see your trip to Machu Picchu in the pocket at our knees on our next flight. Or your summer herb gardening tips in May's electric coop newsletter. Your hilarious classroom tales and bizarre office-mate stories are perfect textbook fillers. And they give you money. No kidding.

About the author

Deborah DeBord, Ph.D. is a freelance writer, cookbook author, and storyteller. She has lectured in Bulgaria, China, Yugoslavia, Mexico, and Guatemala. As proprietor of Rocky Mountain Retreat for Writers and Artists, she serves as pathfinder for artists of all media in expressing their creative spirits. In her spare moments, Deborah pursues her passions: snowshoeing, weaving, tap dancing, and talking along with movie classics. She is currently writing recipes for mindful living, meanwhile chasing the ever-elusive fiction fairy.