

How to be a Writer

Stewart Ferris

ways write from the heart.

- Strong central character
- Sub-plot?

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Finding an agent.
- Overcoming writer's block.

Writer should always
have a notebook & pen.



How to be a **Writer**

Secrets from the inside

Stewart Ferris

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Contents

Getting started 7

Part 1

Preparation for writing 10

Somewhere to write 11

Tools of the trade 13

Pen and paper 14

Computer 15

Back-ups 21

Should I give up the day job? 22

Think like a writer 24

Is it glamorous? 28

Part 2

Practicalities of writing 30

A daily schedule for a writer 31

Write every day 33

Write rubbish 37

Re-write 39

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------|
| What constitutes a new draft? | 42 |
| <i>An approximation of the whole work</i> | 44 |
| <i>A tightening of the structure</i> | 45 |
| <i>Development of the characters</i> | 48 |
| <i>Improving the dialogue</i> | 50 |
| <i>Working on the language and imagery</i> | 51 |
| <i>Re-structuring parts of the work</i> | 53 |
| <i>Adding layers of conflict</i> | 55 |
| <i>Improving the crucial opening pages</i> | 56 |
| <i>More work on the character development</i> | 59 |
| <i>Proofreading for mistakes</i> | 60 |
| Be an expert | 63 |
| Develop a voice | 63 |
| Language, grammar and punctuation | 64 |
| Keep it interesting | 65 |
| Feedback | 65 |
| Finding inspiration | 66 |
| Beating writer's block | 72 |
| Part 3 | |
| Technicalities of writing | 73 |
| Basics of writing a novel | 74 |
| <i>Description</i> | 74 |

| | |
|--------------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>Characters</i> | 75 |
| <i>Plot structure</i> | 77 |
| Basics of writing non fiction | 80 |
| <i>Know your subject</i> | 80 |
| <i>Structure</i> | 82 |
| Basics of writing for cinema | 85 |
| Basics of writing for television | 87 |
| Basics of writing for radio | 89 |
| Basics of writing for the stage | 91 |
| Basics of writing books for children | 94 |
| Basics of writing comedy | 96 |
| <i>Sketches</i> | 97 |
| <i>One-liners</i> | 98 |
| <i>Sitcoms</i> | 99 |
| Basics of writing for animation | 106 |
| Layout | 108 |
| Loglines, synopses, treatments and samples | 110 |
| Writing groups | 112 |
| Writing classes | 114 |
| Writing qualifications | 115 |
| Writing alone or writing with a partner? | 117 |
| Networking | 118 |

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Getting published | 121 |
| <i>Publishing is a business</i> | 121 |
| <i>How to submit your manuscript</i> | 122 |
| <i>Research your market</i> | 125 |
| <i>Vanity publishing</i> | 126 |
| <i>Self publishing</i> | 128 |
| Dealing with rejection | 130 |
| Dealing with doubt | 136 |
| <i>Doubt from within</i> | 136 |
| <i>Doubt from others</i> | 138 |
| Vocabulary | 139 |
| Competitions | 140 |
| Copyright protection | 141 |
| Agents | 143 |
| <i>Do I need one?</i> | 143 |
| <i>How hard will they work for me?</i> | 143 |
| How do royalties work? | 144 |
| <i>Would I get royalties for the rest of my life?</i> | 146 |
| <i>Fixed fees</i> | 147 |
| <i>Are there other ways to earn money from a book?</i> | 148 |
| Useful websites and software | 152 |
| Definitions | 153 |

Getting started

THIS BOOK IS for all writers, in all genres, but most of the examples apply to book writers because they form the biggest single group. This book presupposes only that you want to be a writer. No previous experience is necessary. I'll take you through all aspects of what it takes to be a professional writer in the publishing and media industries today. There are some harsh truths exposed in this book and many myths will be shattered.

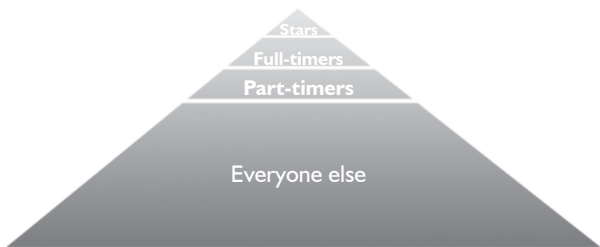
My aim in revealing the secrets of the writing game is not to destroy your ambitions and dreams, but to empower you to be able to achieve them.

The reality of writing is not what many people believe it to be. Some of these chapters may surprise or disappoint you. Use this book as a reality check before embarking on a career as a writer. Use it to inspire you to achieve high standards, greatness and professionalism. Without those you have nothing. *With them you can conquer the literary world.*

HOW TO BE A WRITER

The Success Pyramid

The community of writers who can command a living wage from their work is very small. That's the community you want to join. How many people are knocking on the doors looking for space in that community just like you?



The top group consists of the superstar authors, the lucky and talented few who have made it rich through their writing. This group includes J. K. Rowling, Stephen King, Bill Bryson and anyone else who has managed to turn their name into a saleable brand that can command high advances.

The second group from the top is a little larger, and consists of all those writers who are able to

THE SUCCESS PYRAMID

earn enough from their writing not to need to do any other work. Most of them are not at all famous or glamorous, just jobbing authors who scrape enough successes to pay the mortgage and feed the dog.

The third group from the top consists of writers who earn some money from writing, but not enough to be able to write full time. They might have had one or two books published with moderate success, or they might sell the odd article or television script. Many are happy where they are, though some would prefer to move up a level and earn enough from writing to be able to tell their bosses where to stick their jobs.

And the giant group at the bottom is everyone else. The many millions who have yet to earn any money from writing and who dream of finding a shortcut straight to the top of the pyramid. Little do they realise that there's only one difference between them and the fortunate people higher up who earn money from writing. It's a difference that is easily remedied. I'll reveal that difference later in this book.

Days write from the heart.

• Strong central character

• Sub-plot?



THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Finding an agent
- Overcoming writer's block

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have a notebook & pen.

Part I

Preparation for writing

Somewhere to write

YOU NEED A place where you can write, where you can concentrate, where your creativity flows. Roald Dahl, Louis de Bernières and Philip Pullman all forged a writing environment in their garden sheds. J. K. Rowling wrote her first *Harry Potter* tale on a notebook in various Edinburgh cafés. You may prefer to use a desk in the spare bedroom, your office desk after hours, or your car.

The location you choose may depend on whether you write longhand or with a computer. Writing from your imagination with a Biro is the most flexible option. If your writing requires much research and papers spread all over the desk you'll need your own office space at home. But if you live with noisy kids then the only place you can get your thoughts together will be away from the house.

An inspiring view is a luxury most writers consider to be important for their location. If you

HOW TO BE A WRITER

can't access a view across rolling hills, deep blue oceans or the New York skyline then don't feel disheartened. A window to anywhere will do, just to get some natural light. In fact, many would-be writers with nice views spend far too much time staring out of the window and not enough time writing.

Kit out your writing space with the tools of your trade, plus any personal items that make you feel comfortable there, like family photos and a plant or two. Make a shelf for reference books like this one. Ensure there is space to spread out your research materials and writing, and also that there is space to put it all away tidily if you are progressing with another project simultaneously. Try to be as far from a telephone and television as possible, but it's useful to have Internet access for research purposes.

Tools of the trade

THERE ARE TWO systems of writing viable today:

1. Produce a draft using a pen and paper, then type it onto a word processor. This has an inherent advantage of forcing you to review and re-write your first efforts, so the first version to appear on your computer is actually a second draft.
2. Type the first draft immediately onto the word processor, then edit from there.

There's a third system that is inexcusable today: the typewriter. If you view the process of typing your work on a typewriter as the equivalent of writing longhand then fine. Type it once on paper then type it again into a computer so that you can actually have a chance of being regarded as a professional writer. But if you think that typing on a typewriter will generate the final product,

HOW TO BE A WRITER

you're wrong. That isn't how the publishing and media industries work these days. Everything has to be processed through a computer, and if you can only supply your writing on photocopied sheets then you're adding unnecessary costs for

Don't put yourself at a disadvantage at the start of your writing career by not bothering to learn how to use a computer.

the publisher because if they want to accept your work someone will have to re-key every word of it.

Scanning using optical character recognition software is a possibility, but it's slow and unreliable and will add mistakes to your work. Typewritten work will only be tolerated from established authors (usually of a very senior age).

Pen and paper

If you write longhand, don't skimp on the pen and paper. You'll be scribbling hundreds or even thousands of words a day as a writer so it's vital to choose a pen that is comfortable to hold and that can get the ink quickly enough onto the paper

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

to enable you to write at full speed when the ideas are flowing.

Choose a notebook that makes your writing feel special. Look in the stationery shop for a notebook that inspires you. There are blank notebooks that look like bound hardback books, or you may be more inspired by spiral bound journalists' pads. But don't fall into the trap of buying a notebook that is so beautiful you feel that to write anything inside it would spoil it. The real beauty will come from your words, your doodles, your notes. This notebook will be your first draft, not your final draft, so don't be afraid to explore your creativity even if half of what you write ends up in a literary dead-end and never makes it onto the typed version.

Computer

Any computer on the market today is more than adequate for word processing work. Word processing is the least demanding of all major computer applications, so the only relevant factor in choosing a computer to write with is whether

HOW TO BE A WRITER

you want a laptop or a desktop.

If your writing base is at home and in a private, consistently quiet area, a desktop computer will be best. They're cheaper and usually come with larger screens. But if you want flexibility to write in other locations, a laptop will give you that freedom. Battery life varies, but most will give two to four hours of power before warning you to save and close your work because they want to shut down. If there's mains power available you can run the laptop from that, and in some longhaul airline cabins you can even plug your laptop into the seat for in-flight power.

Laptops have less space for keyboards, so the keys are smaller and closer together. This isn't a problem for typing once you get used to it. In fact the reduced distance your fingers have to cover can actually speed up typing. The only difficulty comes when switching from a laptop keyboard to a desktop keyboard and getting used to the change.

There are some really tiny computers available which are small enough to fit in your pocket. The

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

keypads on these things are not suitable for extensive typing, and the screens are too small to be useful for a writer of anything longer than an e-mail.

Some people with desktop computers are uncomfortable about staring into a cathode ray tube (CRT) monitor for hours on end while they write. Choosing a flat screen TFT monitor will reduce eye strain and eliminates the radiation associated with the larger, older-style CRT monitors.

Are you one of those writers who object to using a computer on the grounds that they don't know how to type? Really? You mean you're incapable of looking at a printed letter on a button and pressing it? I don't know how to type, and I've probably typed over three million words into computers. Of course typing the first book was slow. I had to look at what my fingers were doing. I took no typing lessons. I just used one finger on one hand and one finger on the other, and roughly divided the keyboard between them. Typing the second book was a little quicker.

HOW TO BE A WRITER

Occasionally I could take my eyes off the keyboard and still hit the right key. That was a nice feeling, but I couldn't rely on it. I started using two fingers from each hand on the next few books to speed things up a little. Several books later came the revelation that I wasn't looking at the keyboard any more. I never noticed the moment of transition, but somehow I reached a point at which I only needed to look at the screen while my four typing fingers managed to hit all the right keys. I think I now use about three fingers on each hand for typing, but my fingers move so fast I can't really tell. One thing's certain: I can type a lot faster than I can write with a pen and I only look at the keyboard to find the punctuation keys.

Fast typing generates errors, known in the business as 'typos'. They are a normal part of writing and can be easily fixed during later re-writes. The first draft of this book was full of typos, all spotted by my eagle-eyed editor, but they only took a short time to fix using my computer. Imagine if I'd typed the book on a

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

typewriter: to insert a few words into one paragraph on a typewriter used to require typing out the entire page again. With the two or three mistakes per page that were present in the first draft of this book I'd have had to retype the whole thing, which would be like rebuilding a house just because a bulb had blown. At least with the computer I can make repairs to individual words and the rest of the paragraph layout adjusts accordingly.

Did I spot all the typos in this book? Let me know via the e-mail address on my website if any have slipped through the net!
www.stewartferris.com

What about dictation software? In theory it's a great idea, giving all of us writers the opportunity to write like Dame Barbara Cartland, laid back on a chaise-longue dictating our masterpieces without ever having to write or type. I met the famously pink beclad Barbara Cartland at a book launch party a couple of years before she died. Our conversation was problematic to say the least: she was too deaf to hear me and her voice was too soft for me to hear her. Quite how her