

11 Tips

To Help You Be a Better Writer

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This pdf sets out 11 strategies I wish I'd discovered earlier in my writing journey - and gives you practical ways to achieve these strategies.

The pdf is based on a talk I gave to The Waikato Children's Literature Association in 2013. This talk was so well received I thought I'd set it out here - and there's also a slideshow on the blogpost.

11 Tips to Help You Be a Better Writer

1. Read: Join a library/have a kindle account
2. Write what you want to read.
3. Believe in your stories
4. Discipline is another word for habit
5. Formal training helps
6. Know the rules before you break them
7. Join a writer's group
8. Record your submissions
9. Don't give up your day job
10. Be social
11. Retain the joy



The Tips Unboxed - what do they really mean?

1. In the Beginning was the Word.

If you're planning to write, you must read. Reading is like a work-out for writers. If you're doing weight-training, you need to lift weights. And if you're writing, you need to read. It really is that simple.

So it follows that first-time writers should have easy access to cheap books. Join a library, get a kindle account, find a good second-hand bookshop, steal from a friend. Read new-releases, not-so-new and frankly ancient. They're all useful.

2. Know the market.

Some stores need to be told, while others are frankly...boring. Or they've been told already. You'll only know this by reading - a LOT.

If you can't find a book you want to read, chances are there could be a gap that only you can fill. But you're only going to know the gaps if you know what is out there.

3. Believe in Yourself

I started to write because I had a story to tell, and I continued because I wanted to finish it. But writing the middle of a story is hard. that's when the little voice inside you tells you that 'you're wrong', 'no-one wants to read your sh*t', 'why do you even bother?' You need to keep believing, because books do not write themselves.

4. Continue the Journey

'A novel is a very long piece of work,' says Salman Rushdie in a massive understatement. But it's true; it's a marathon, not a sprint, and you need to keep going and going and going. The easiest way to do this, I find, is to not focus on the deadline, but on the process. I am very rut-focused. Once writing each day is a habit, it's no longer something you have to tell yourself to do. It's just part of your day.

5. Learning

Writing, like cabinet-making or knitting, is a craft. While you can teach yourself to knit or make furniture, having a teacher or mentor to call on makes the process much easier. A good teacher is a sounding-board, a librarian, an editor, a reviewer all rolled into one neat little package. While an MFA isn't necessary, having formal training does help you avoid the worst pitfalls.

6. Editing and Reviewing

While there's not such thing as perfect, it does help to understand the craft so well that you can break it with impunity. But the thing about breaking the rules is: you have to do it well. And you'll only do that if you know what 'right' looks like, and if you have the necessary critical eye.

7. Learn from Others

Keeping a reading journal or a diary is all very well, but there's nothing like bouncing

ideas and angst off other writers. You can do this face to face or via social media, but believe me, it really helps. Some writer's groups advertise in local libraries, others have twitter feeds or closed Facebook groups. Ask around, and see what works for you. One suggestion is: don't join them all, or you won't have time to write. Try a couple of groups first - if they're a good group they'll understand that you're trying before buying - and see what is the best fit.



8. Grow a Confidence Suit? Or just Harden Up?

Rejections are inevitable, and boy they hurt. But sometimes, just sometimes, you get an acceptance. One tactic I've used is to note all my submissions in a spreadsheet. That way you can put in large red letters 'ACCEPTED'. These red letters are a great confidence boost.

If it makes you feel better, the best writers have been rejected many, many times. Check out this great article about Marie Force, now a best selling novelist, and her rejections. (<http://www.womansday.com/life/entertainment/a55393/what-its-like-to-write-romance-novels-for-a-living/>).

Personally, I think the difference between an okay writer and a really great one is the number of rejections - because in this industry persistence really is the key.

9. Story as Market: the Grim Statistics

The publishing industry is in a state of constant change. Actually, change is the only constant in publishing! Revenue for the Big 5 Publishers is declining, bookstores are

closing, and the rise of new media - gaming, you-tube - reduces time for reading.

It's also important to understand one thing about writing: the cashflow is terrible. Payments trickle in slowly, and generally it takes a fair number of books before one begins to make any kind of living. So unless you're offered a substantial advance, you have to have a way of making money, and to make the same amount consistently and regularly. I strongly recommend: Do NOT give up your day job prematurely!

10. Be Social

If I had my time again, I would have started social media earlier. Why? Because social media allows you to interact directly with your readers. You're not filtered through a bookstore or a publisher. Some writers are shy; most of us aren't the most talkative folk (a gathering of writers is an interesting experience, with everyone watching each other for material!), many of us were born pre-internet, and most have day jobs. Keeping up with the web is time consuming, and for some it's frankly terrifying.

I've written more on social media in an earlier blog post: <http://rlstedman.com/market-your-book/> but mostly I'd say: don't be shy. The majority of people are friendly. For every negative comment there are a hundred nice ones. And there's nothing as cool as a note on your Facebook page saying "I loved your book!"

11. Enjoy the Ride

Having goals helps. Even if they're not the most exciting ("I will write 500 words tonight"), goals provide a sense of control over a craft that can, at times, feel uncontrollable. They provide direction and a feeling of achievement. On the days where writing feels hard, when the muse has turned her back and you're tired of being alone (and poor), reviewing how far you have come can be a lot more helpful than worrying about how far you have to go. So set goals. Make them achievable and realistic and celebrate that you've met them before you move on to the next.



However, and this is the most important piece of advice for any writer:

Retain the joy.

In the end, we write because we have to; because we must. And because, of course, we cannot imagine doing anything else.

About Me:

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