

A primer on how to enter the Writing World.

The Writing Life: Do You Have What It Takes?

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**The Writing
Life:
Do You Have
What It Takes?**

A Primer for Entering the World of Writing

By Bill Vossler

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Table of Contents

Part I: In The Beginning

- Chapter 1: To Write, To Sell Your Writing
- Chapter 2: Surveying
- Chapter 3: Dueling the Doubts
- Chapter 4: A Little Perspective
- Chapter 5: Why Do You Want to Write?
- Chapter 6: Do You Have What It Takes?
- Chapter 7: More Necessities
- Chapter 8: I Think, Therefore I Am
- Chapter 9: Thinking Like a Writer
- Chapter 10: Resources for the Resourceful
- Chapter 11: Solving Problems
- Chapter 12: Saying No, and Meaning It
- Chapter 13: Go for the Goal!

Part II: Laying the Groundwork

- Chapter 14: Your Writing Space
- Chapter 15: Read What You Want to Write
- Chapter 16: Grist for the Writing Mill
- Chapter 17: That's The Idea
- Chapter 18: Round Pegs Into Square Holes
- Chapter 19: The Where of Writing
- Chapter 20: Transitioning
- Chapter 21: Grammars & Such
- Chapter 22: Making Sense
- Chapter 23: What Should I write?
- Chapter 24: Write What You Don't Know

Part III: How to Write

- Chapter 25: Show and Tell
- Chapter 26: What Do You Say?
- Chapter 27: The Finished Piece
- Chapter 28: The Straight Dope on the Slant
- Chapter 29: The Query Letter
- Chapter 30: Those Thieving Editors

Chapter 31: Bottoms Up, or Increase Publication
Chapter 32: You and Others As Experts
Chapter 33: The Art of the Interview
Chapter 34: Organized Climb
Chapter 35: Write Non-Chronologically
Chapter 36: The Whole Picture
Chapter 37: That's Not the Word
Chapter 38: Deadlines and Reliability
Chapter 39: Understanding Your Rights
Chapter 40: Getting Paid. Or Not

Part IV: The True Art of Writing--Is Rewriting

Chapter 41: The Art of Writing Is Rewriting

Part V: The Psychology of Writing

Chapter 42: The Psychological Writer
Chapter 43: The Whole Truth
Chapter 44: The Psychology of Writing
Chapter 45: The Self-Starting Machine
Chapter 45: Censor Me Not
Chapter 47: Calliope, Erato, Thalia, et. al.
Chapter 48: The Role of Self-Discipline
Chapter 49: Imagine That!
Chapter 50: The Power of Memory
Chapter 51: The Double-Edged Swords
Chapter 52: Rejection
Chapter 53: Blessed Reassurance
Chapter 54: The Joys of Freelance Writing

Part I: In The Beginning

Introduction

The Writing Life is a primer on how to make a freelance writing career for yourself, based on my of 33 years of freelance writing and selling. It will show you what it takes to become a freelance writer. You can use the book to ease yourself into full- or part-time writing. Fiction or nonfiction.

It delineates the often-overlooked skills you must possess to join the Writing World, like resourcefulness, analyzing other writers' works, and thinking like a writer. Or if your skills are limited, how to develop them.

The Writing Life also advises you on how to lay out the groundwork for your career, where to get ideas, creating figurative language

like similes and metaphors, and much more. Basically, How to Write.

The book also leads you step-by-step on conducting yourself as a professional. You will learn such useful information as rights and payments, such divergent skills as writing query letters, saying no to friends and family, setting goals--everything you need to make you professional, for above all, the Writing World demands professionalism. Without it, your work will be ignored.

The Writing Life also discusses in depth an area totally avoided by writing magazines and books, but desperately needed: information on the psychological requirements necessary to become a successful freelance writer, and the psychological effects of the writing life.

The danger is that you will feel overwhelmed, because this book is a compendium of my 33 years as a full-time writer, having sold more than 2,900 articles, essays, short stories, poems, nostalgia pieces, feature pieces, columns, one play, and fourteen books. Nobody can hope to duplicate in a short time what I have learned and absorbed over more than three decades of thinking like a writer, practicing as a writer, and being a writer. So you shouldn't try.

Thus it is imperative that you stop from time to time and set the book aside to think about what you have read, to make notes or rumi-

nate on it and integrate it into your mind and life. Then to return, read another chapter or two, and integrate once more.

Though the book has been designed to be read from page one through the end, depending on where you are in your writing skills and views, you may want to skip around and find chapters more relevant to your writing station at this point in your life.

Though I feel as though all of this book is important, one part is more important than others, to steal a concept from George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. That is Section IV, Chapter 41, on rewriting. If you read only that chapter from this book, and followed it, you could improve your writing by perhaps half, and very quickly.

Some traits and skills and recommendations in this book you will be able to incorporate into your writing life very easily and quickly; others will take longer; still others, much longer. That is the way of the writing life.

Remember that while you are working through this book and accessing new and useful ideas, you can still conduct your freelance writing career. If you are not yet at that lofty position of starting your writing career, this book can help you figure out what it takes, and help you get there.

Chapter 1: To Write, To Sell Your Writing

You want to become a writer and sell your writing. That's why you're reading this book.

In these pages you will learn how, from a battle-scarred veteran of 33 years fighting the wars of the Writing World. You will acquire the skills to sell--but only if you're willing to learn. And willing to work.

You will learn how to conduct your writing life from a professional who has published 2,900 articles, essays, short stories, poems, nostalgia pieces, and 14 books. And one play.

You will learn what I wish I had known 33 years ago: how to set up your writing life without the time-consuming trial and error of useless side trips; the secrets to improving your writing, fast; what to write; where to submit; how to submit--in short, all the most effective ways to become a paid professional writer.

You will learn that the Easy Road to Becoming a Writer does not exist. You will learn practical shortcuts to selling your writing, but not how to shortcut the hard work a writing life entails. Hard work; but joyous work. What could be more joyous than doing what you want to do, and love to do, every day?

You will learn if you have what it takes.

exercise, put the paper in a folder or some safe place where you will return to from time to time to check your progress.

Because you will progress, and a lot faster than you think you might.

Chapter 3: Dueling With Your Doubts

Do I have what it takes to become a successful freelance writer?

That thought flashes through the mind of every person who wants to be a writer, at one time or another. Especially in the early days.

As it did with me thirty years ago when with high anticipation I tore open an envelope from the editor at Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. An acceptance for my "W.S. II" story, I was sure.

Instead, a 3 x 5 card that read:

Dear Bill: Someone has to tell you. You will never be a writer. Your prose sounds like a jackhammer outside my window at 5A.M. in the morning. Get a real job. Leave the writing to those who can write.

I stared at the card without comprehension. *Leave the writing to those who can write?* But I was a writer. Or at least I wanted to be a writer.

To say I was crushed was like saying the ocean is huge. The urge to write for a living lay heavily upon me. I thought of nothing else. My entire life was turned and tuned in that direction.

Without success. I couldn't imagine a better--or different--way of making a living. I was brimming with ideas and enthusiasm.

Through my blurry vision, I read and reread the words in that death knell of my dreams, wondering how he knew.

How, by reading four pages of my prose, did he know I wasn't good enough to be a professional writer?

He had tapped into my deepest insecurities, the insecurities all of us have about our writing, those that flared up and immobilized me when the writing got tough, or when I didn't know what to say next, or didn't know how to achieve the effect in writing that I wanted to achieve.

As I held the card in my hand I got madder and madder. How dare he! I kept thinking, *That idiot doesn't even know that 5 A.M. is always morning!* I composed a letter, angrily denouncing him, but realized his missing 5 A.M. as implicitly in the morning had nothing to do with my writing.

Which he'd discovered, but what I'd known--I was lousy, and worthless. I had been found out. I was a writing fraud, and this big-time editor knew it. No use going on. I might just as well put away my Brother portable typewriter, and turn my attention to something else.

Which I did for nearly a year, existing in a fog, feeling like my only true love had rejected me. Which was true.

Luckily my teaching career, along with extra-curriculars kept me busy, as well as my playing 70 ama-

teur basketball games during the winter, and 112 slow-pitch softball games in the summer. During this hiatus, I also decided to play basketball every day for a year.

All to keep my mind off the pain of my rejection as a writer.

Nevertheless, writing was never far from my consciousness. If you not only want to be a writer, but also have to write, that desire can't be permanently squelched. My fingers twitched every time another idea floated into my vision, mocking me. I tried to dispel them from my thoughts, but I wasn't always successful.

The Return of the Words

Ten months later I was pondering how often I discovered I was my own worst enemy. How I often short-circuited my own success. I listed the times I had stopped myself--quitting college basketball, not calling a young woman I thought was out of my league, (by the time I discovered she had had a crush on me, she was married), getting into financial trouble by buying a snazzy new car I couldn't afford--and so on. As an afterthought I penned, "Allowing editor to sabotage my writing."

As I looked at those words, a flare of excitement burst inside me. I'd been looking at it all wrong.

Suddenly it became clear: *only I could determine if I was going to*

become a writer. No one else.

At that instant the need to write returned with such intensity that my trembling almost prevented me from retrieving my notebook and pen and begin scribbling again.

The dam was broken. I wrote “Are You Your Own Worst Enemy?” I was half-sobbing as I stuck in an envelope and sent it to Listen magazine.

Several weeks later I received a check for \$40.

Hah! I screamed. Take that, *IASF Magazine editor!* Here’s proof! I am a writer! I have what it takes to become a professional freelance writer.

If I now wrote “From then on it was all clear sailing,” that would not be the truth. But the die had been cast.

Chapter 4: A Little Perspective

Of course, neither extreme reaction--that I would never be a writer, or that I had now made it--was accurate. One acceptance does not make a solid career. But it surely set me on my way.

I had a great deal more to learn until I could become a successful freelancer. Out of my next 101 submissions, I sold only four.

Not much money there.

But at least I was selling, learning about writing’s in and outs, and my confidence was growing.

I wish I’d known then what I know now. But that is past, and in the rest of these pages contain all the information you need to make informed decisions about the writing life, gleaned through my 33 years as a fulltime professional writer.

My experience will help you figure out whether you have what it takes to become a successful freelance writer; and what’s more, how to take the steps to move into selling your writing, if you do. (I’m guessing you believe you can make it as a freelance writer, but need some encouragement and inside information to aid you on your journey.)

The Flaw in the Ointment

Chapter 6: Do You Have What It Takes?

Now that's the crucial question, isn't it? *Do you have what it takes to make it as a freelance writer?*

Before we dive into that question, as you make your way through this book, you **absolutely must** keep reminding yourself of two things:

First, remember that this book is *the result of 33 years of freelance writing*. So at times you will feel overwhelmed, inundated with the writing concepts I've learned during half a lifetime.

So quit reading at times and put the book aside, either before you are overwhelmed, or when you begin to feel overwhelmed. Better to stop before you're overwhelmed, making it easier to return later.

Second, *you can learn all the skills you need for a career of selling your writing*. Fulltime or part-time. In fact, you already possess many more of the skills than you think you do.

The rest you can learn bit by bit in this book, no matter where you are on the continuum today.

The information in this book will offer you a solid pedestal to stand on, to peer down the road ahead as you begin your freelance writing career.

It will help you avoid shunting

the main train of your writing career onto a sidetrack. It will help prevent you from getting tripped up.

But only if you practice what I preach.

On the other hand, because you are a unique person, different from me, you will conduct your writing life different from mine. Only you have the answers that will work for your life. Yet those answers will be similar, just as all handwriting is different, yet similar.

But be careful that you don't toss the difficult aspects of the writing life under the bus just because they are difficult, saying, "Well, I'm unique and don't need that." Think hard about abandoning parts of what you learn in this book.

Keep in mind the twin tenets I wrote about above:

1. This book encapsulates 33 years of what I've learned about freelance writing, *so you're going to feel overwhelmed*.

2. If you lack certain expertise in the writing life, *you can learn all the skills you need for a career of selling your writing*.

Make sure you repeat them to yourself as you go through the book.

What It Doesn't Take.

Talent.

The role of talent is the most misunderstood aspect of becoming a writer.

“Am I talented enough?” “Do I have talent?” At workshops, seminars, and writing classes, yearning writers bombard me with these questions, or variations of them.

The answer? You don’t need writing talent to become a writer and make a living at freelance writing.

Think of how many times you’ve read an article or book and said, “Huh, I could have done that better.” Or seen sophomoric writing published in various magazines and books.

I’m not advocating bad writing. Just saying that it’s out there. In fact, I blush to think of the bad writing I published in my early days.

But more importantly, if you can write cogent and clear sentences, you can sell your writing. That’s not all it takes, as the rest of this book attests. But it’s a huge start.

Some writers in their ivory towers believe writers are born, not made; that writing is an innate skill and cannot be learned; that if you aren’t talented, you are nothing.

I know that isn’t true; my writing life is a paean to the making of a writer.

Most people are not highly-talented teachers, or ditch-diggers or love-makers, never mind writers. They’re adequate. That adequacy is all you and I need to be consistent selling writers.

I’m all for creative and artistic writing. But Art does not pay my

bills.

I can create Art. *Hemispheres* magazine claims to publish only the best writing in the world. The American Airlines inflight published my essay, “Teach Me How to Forget.”

Praise enough; but they also included the piece in their anniversary issue celebrating “The Best Writing of the Past Ten Years.” So at times art and adequacy fuse into one.

But most of the time, deathless prose requires a huge expenditure of time and energy not reflected in the pay. So I’ve always written adequately so I can make a living at freelancing, with the occasional artistic piece.

So don’t worry about that nebulous “talent.” Unless you’re illiterate, you’ve got enough.

Knowing Someone in the Business

The canard that knowing someone in the writing business assures publication of your work refuses to die. But it’s not true; knowing an editor at a periodical or book company won’t get your work published *unless it is publishable*. An editor publishing *dreck* won’t last long.

If everything between two writers is equal, knowing an editor is an advantage. The reason is simple: if two writers present a similar idea, why wouldn’t the editor lean

towards the writer they know? It only makes sense.

A classic example occurred in my own family. After North Star Press of St. Cloud, Minnesota, published my book, *Burma-Shave: The Rhymes, The Signs, The Times*, it was nominated for a Minnesota Book Award. North Star Press publishes many Finnish books, and my wife is part Finnish.

Though me the editors discovered Nikki had grown up with a sauna, (sow-na, not saw-na,) so they asked her to write a book on the sauna. The result was *Some Like It Hot: The Sauna, Its Lore & Stories*, now in its third reprinting.

And I know North Star didn't publish the book merely because mine had become a best-seller for them. I know because they required me to entirely rewrite *Burma-Shave* the first time I submitted it.

So most of the time, knowing someone in the publishing industry is no advantage until you produce a viable work they can buy.

So What Does It Take?

A Love of Words.

Without a love of words, you cannot make it as a writer.

Words are the writer's stock-in-trade. Without a love of words, I doubt anyone can become a successful professional writer.

Words must ooze out of your

brain and dribble off the ends of your fingers; cascade across the screen in front of you, drip onto your work desk, pile up on the chairs around you, cram your bookshelves full, crawl into bed beside you in the evenings and rise with you in the morning, shower with you, sit across the breakfast table from you. In short, control your very life.

Learning to love words could be the most difficult facet of becoming a writer. But I suspect I am preaching to the choir, because without a love of words, I doubt you would be reading this book.

Perhaps a few could sell their writing without a true love of words, just as a carpenter could perhaps make a living without knowing how to use a hammer, saw, and plumb line. But it would be extremely difficult.

My love of words began when I was eight years old. One snowy Saturday afternoon my cousin Rodney gazed at me across our kitchen table, and cleared his throat. Our mothers had cracked open a brand-new box of modeling clay, a miracle in itself, to keep us occupied while they chatted. We had just moved from the Billings rimrocks, back to my parents' ancestral village, but without my father.

The uncertainty created by his disappearance had my nerves scraped raw and ajangle, so anything out of the ordinary took on

overblown proportions. Everything became a live grenade.

I had never met Rodney before. Under our hands we rolled cold clay on the tabletop until it softened. I fumed, irked at my missing father, irked at playing with Rodney, irked that he'd grabbed my favorite red clay.

Rodney pressed his palm into the clay, incising lifeline trails and fingerprint whorls. He cleared his throat and said, "*Messer*."

I blinked. "What?"

"*Geps mir Messer*."

Confused, I handed him the empty clay box. He flung it away and jabbing his finger, again said "*Messer!*"

I took a deep breath and handed him a new log of yellow clay. He backhanded it onto the table and lunged across and grabbed the knife.

I put up my hands for protection. Was he going to stab me? But he smiled and waggled the knife and said, "*Messer*."

"You mean 'knife?'"

"*Messer*."

I nodded collegially, vaguely thinking "knife" and "*Messer*" were the same, like *dog* and *Fido*. But why name my table knife? Weird. Not to mention rolling the R in *Messer*, a sound alien to my ear. I frowned.

In Billings everybody spoke English. I hadn't known German existed. Or any other language. I didn't know I was German-from-

Russia, or that in Wishek pretty much everybody could speak German, and half of the 1200 inhabitants spoke *only* German. No surprise, considering their flight from the Ukrainian steppes barely two generations earlier.

I hadn't thought much about words before *Messer*. Except Aunt Edna patting the flank of a Hereford, who gazed at us with huge limpid eyes. "A car is "car," not "cow," Aunt Edna said. "*This is a cow.*"

For the next ten years of my life I grew up alongside a generation of elders who spoke only German, or a German-English mix, so the concept of words was never out of my sight or thought.

That interplay sparked my love of words. Today I lose myself in the words of dictionaries and thesauri (paper ones, please,) getting led from one exotic word to the next. I haunt bookstores and libraries. I play with puns, speak in riddles, ask questions about words, revel in words. Write write write.

Today I remain a word-a-holic, the basis for my success as a freelance writer.

As Rudyard Kipling said, *Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by humankind*. Eddie Cantor added, *Words fascinate me. They always have. For me browsing in a dictionary is like being turned loose in a bank*.

In order to be a professional, sell-

ing writer, you must begin with a love of words.

A Love of Learning

A close second requirement to a love of words is a love of learning. To be a professional writer, you need to be a scholar, interested in learning for its own sake. Learning everything you possibly can. Storing it away in your brain.

You never know when that little tidbit you learned about the origin of willy-nilly, for example (originally will-he, nil he,) might be usable in your writing.

At that point you'll need to research its accuracy. But you couldn't ever use it if you didn't know it existed. That's where the love of learning everything you possibly can enters in.

Writer pay is flat, or down. So learning information in many fields will increase your chances of keeping your freelancing life alive.

During my 33 years of writing, I have written about: farm toys, Indians and cameras ("The Little Shadow Catchers"), watching a deer drink water, seeing a moose jogging in a fog-filled ditch, a book on Burma-Shave, planting potatoes ("Buried Treasure,") losing my grandparents to my step-dad's jealousy ("Teach Me How I Might Forget,") new year's resolutions, choosing how you feel, Mississippi River Steamboats, MIS-X or WW II

POWs, tractors, construction equipment, and so much more.

My wide interest in learning has helped me make a living at freelancing.

Love of Learning, Part II

At the same time that you are learning about the Mound Builders, or cinnamon, (at one time the world's most expensive spice, more costly than gold,) gathering information for articles or books, you must also be willing to learn how to write the different types of writing: essays, feature articles, poems, plays, non-fiction books, even novels. Each has its own special way of being written.

If you take it step by step, this is not as difficult as it sounds.

Mark Twain wrote, *Never learn to do anything; if you don't learn, you'll always find someone else to do it for you.*

How true; if you choose not to learn as an integral component of your writing life, you will lose out on possible articles or books you could have sold. Someone else will do the learning and write that book. And cash those checks, instead of you.

A primer on how to enter the Writing World.

The Writing Life: Do You Have What It Takes?

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