

Getting Started as a Writer

Every accomplishment large and small begins with the same decision: I'll try. Ted Key

What does it take to get started as a writer? You must want to do it. You must give yourself 'permission to write'. That means finding a time and a place where you can sit down and write on a regular basis. Unless you take your writing seriously, no one else will.

You need to be a reader first. If you want to write romance, read Mills & Boon. If you'd rather be the next John Grisham, read what he's written - and read writers like him: Kathy Reichs, Ira Genberg, and Jonathon Kellerman. If you want to be a star freelance for *The New Zealand Listener*, read and analyse content and presentation. Practise, practise, practise.

Talk to writers whenever you can, and read books about writing. What has your local library or bookshop got to offer? Go and ask. Study the market and begin to know for whom you are writing. That means getting hold of sample back copies, requesting writers' guidelines, and finding out about publishers of books and magazines and about literary agents.

Start local. Subscribe to a magazine that publishes stories, prose and poetry - like *Takahe*, a literary arts magazine of both poetry and prose, which *Takahe* runs a poetry and cultural essay competition every year. Or *Freelance-Writers Helping Writers*, which is for creative writers of any kind. Or the many online magazines that are springing up. **Persevere.** You learn to write by writing and what doesn't break us makes us strong. The fear of rejection is worse than rejection itself, says writer Nora Profit. And Richard Bach reminds us that 'A professional writer is an amateur who didn't quit.'

Organise yourself. Whatever system works for you is fine, but set it up and stick to it.



Get the basic equipment: a desk or table; a computer, whether PC or notebook, pens and paper (bond and draft); a cash book to record sales, an A-Z notebook to record submissions); envelopes and stamps for those enquiries you can't send by email; a wall calendar to check on deadlines if you're not comfortable with electronic reminders; and cardboard boxes or a filing cabinet to store your notes, research and writing.

Believe in yourself and in your work - but get help if you need it. Sign up for a basic course in English language and/or literature. Enrol on a creative writing course at a local college or polytechnic, by correspondence or online. (You can learn online with Waiariki Institute of Technology - go to www.waiariki.ac.nz.) Go to workshops, festivals and conferences and learn from others.

Buy or bookmark a dictionary and thesaurus along with the *New Zealand Handbook for Writers* (published by David Bateman, and updated regularly.) This is your basic writer's reference library. Add to it whatever books on writing you find most helpful. Don't stint on book buying - for writers, it's a tax-deductible expense!

Open your eyes, ears and mind. Observe others, watch what they do and listen to what they say. Keep up to date with what's going on in your local community - watch out for events by Creative Bay of Plenty in The Library Arcade, Willow Street, Tauranga, and sign up for their fortnightly online newsletter. Be aware also of what is going on in your country and in the world. Good writing is a combination of the real and the imaginary. You are helped by what you know - and by how you then apply it.

Once you've got the basic skills, remember:

1. Observation is the process.
2. Ideas are the product.
3. Writing is the outcome.

Curiosity may kill a cat. It is the lifeblood of the creative writer.

Getting Published

The only true writer is a rewriter. Farrukh Dhondy

Not all writers want to get published and it is O.K. to write just for you. Many of us keep a diary, write letters to family and friends far away, and put together a family history not meant for general circulation. Some writing is for therapy and growth and you don't want to share it.

However, you may decide you do want to see your name in print, and, best of all, get paid for it. If you're writing articles or short stories, which is where money is most easily made, use your own interests and expertise as the jump-off point, and study the markets carefully.

Everything starts with an idea and you may find it useful to jot ideas down in a writer's notebook as they occur to you. If you get a good idea, keep it to yourself. This isn't only to stop people stealing it (because ideas can't be copyrighted.) It is because when you have discussed something over and over again, it feels as if you have already written it, sold it, and seen it in print. Only share with others an excerpt of your work in progress for feedback, or the finished story or article in a book or magazine.

Where do you get ideas? From your own life and observations, and the experiences of family and friends, home and work, where you live (now, and then), your hobbies and interests, things you did and things that happened to you, or to someone you know. You can also get ideas from reading newspapers and magazines, books and other sources of information.

Professional writers for magazines sell the idea through a phone call or query letter before they write the article. (This doesn't apply to short stories, which are submitted complete.) You can find out what editors want by checking out what they've bought and paid for in back issues.

You can also politely request a copy of that magazine's guidelines for writers by post (include an SSAE) or email.

Download a copy of any Tauranga Writers handouts from www.taurangawriters.org.nz. We have about 45!

You do need to learn the importance of drafting, revising and rewriting your work to make it 'best words in best order.' You can request a free PDF of *Constructive Editing* by Jenny Argante by sending an email to taurangawritersnz@gmail.com. When you send out your work, make sure it's properly laid out with no gimmicks - just good clear print on plain white paper, double-spaced and single sided, with page numbers in the footer and a word count at the end.

Add a brief covering letter and always send it to a named person - it's OK to ring up and ask who that is. If you send it to the Editor or Fiction Editor, it will get lost in the 'slush pile'.

Learn to write a proper query letter - yes, we've got a handout on that, too! - and follow through. Don't promise what you can't deliver. You will lose friends and antagonise people.

Writing for competitions is excellent training for a writer because you write to a theme, word length and deadline. You will have something else to market.

If it's a longer work - a non-fiction book or novel, or perhaps a play, you may find that you need a literary agent or publishing consultant to help you choose the right publisher and market. You might have to pay a reading fee for this, and they will take a percentage of your earnings from any successful sales.

And in these days of the indie author and of small presses, it's important to learn all you can about self-publishing. Again, an email to taurangawritersnz@gmail.com will steer you in the write direction. (No fee for this enquiry.)

You will also need to find the courage and commitment to get started, keep going, and finish your work.

When you've done all that, whether or not someone buys your work, you're definitely a writer.