

MY TOP TEN WRITING TIPS

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INTRODUCTION

During my school days I knew I wanted to be a writer. Then I grew up and life happened. My first job was at an insurance company. The dream of being a writer was still there. I tried several postal writing courses but wasn't happy with the set assignments. I thought this meant writing was not for me as I couldn't get excited about the kind of writing projects set out on the writing courses.

When I had my children I discovered the magic of picture books! I loved the worlds that I shared with my children and the magical sharing time that we had. I read lots and lots of picture books, some for research, some just for fun. Then came the scary time when I wrote my first picture book story. And the even scarier time of sending my story to a publisher. But I did it. It took several years and over 60 rejections before I received my first offer of publication.

At the time of writing I have had 4 picture books published, a further one on the way along with a history book. I have also self published ebooks.

I have read a lot of books about writing and constantly read articles and magazines about this subject. Some of the writing tips given have worked for me and some haven't. I've developed my favourite writing tips which I'd like to share with you. Some might work for you – some might not.

Thank you for taking the time to read this ebook.

1 BE ORGANISED

You might have read about always carrying a notepad and pen with you so you can capture those stories and ideas that only come to you when you're out and about. Well, I carry notepads and have several around my home. I write ideas down and then forget where I've put the notepad. Or write an idea and totally forget about it as I then use the notepad as a shopping list.

What I do now is have one ideas notepad where I write my ideas. I try to be organised enough to transfer ideas from other notepads on to this central one. Sometimes I don't have time to write them down so I just tear the page out of the smaller notepad and stick it in the main one. My central idea pad is quite large and it has butterflies on the front (I love butterflies). All my other notepads are plain and boring so I much prefer writing in my butterfly pad. I might not develop all my ideas into stories but I know the details are there for when I need them.

I love stationery. I love collecting pens, paper clips, post its and notepads. When I was writing my children's history book I had to do a lot of research and I had notes all over the place. I used my lovely supply of stationery to get myself organised. If you're going to be writing different stories or working on different ideas then get yourself organised. There are many places for you to buy folders, plastic wallets and everything you could possibly need.

At the moment I am writing picture books, ebooks, articles and longer stories for newly confident readers. I keep everything separate so I know where to look when I'm working on different things. Also, this means I get to buy more stationery.

2 WRITE EVERY DAY

I used to read this advice in magazines and wail, “But I can’t! I’ve got children to feed. I’ve got food to buy!” I’m a lot more disciplined now and I do try to write every day. Some days I don’t manage it – it doesn’t matter. Writing is supposed to be fun and you should be easy on yourself. You’ll read about writers who get up at 5am and then work, without stopping, until 6pm. Every writer is different. I know that I can only write in short bursts and I know that I can only write at certain times of the day. If my children need me, then my writing has to wait.

As my writing assignments have increased I have had to find time to write. I’ve found that the more writing I do the more I want to do. The more you practise, the more writing becomes a habit. Even writing a few lines each day will keep your creative brain working.

One activity I’ve found that has really helped my writing is to write online articles. There are many ezines to write for. The one I submit most articles to is ezinearticles. When you first sign up you write articles and submit them to the editors there. My first article took 2 weeks to be approved. After ten approved articles I gained diamond status and now my articles are usually approved within 24 hours. It’s a lot of fun submitting articles and it can easily become a habit. The great thing is that you can write about anything you want. We all have knowledge in certain areas. There are lots of interesting articles written by people around the world. Some of these have already given me ideas for stories!

If you have a website (which I recommend) then writing articles is an effective way to drive traffic to your site. If you haven’t already, sign up to an ezine and have a go.

3 DECIDE WHAT KIND OF WRITING YOU WANT TO DO

When I first started out I tried writing all sorts of things - short stories, letters to editors, novels etc. I wasn't successful at these because I didn't enjoy writing them. Once I discovered picture books I really looked forward to my writing time. Developing a story in few words and leaving some of the story to the pictures is quite a challenge. It took a lot of practise, loads of research and many submissions before I became published. I didn't mind. I enjoyed writing every story. I still have them all. It might be time for me to re write them as I'm 'more experienced'.

To really enjoy your writing and to become successful, you have to know what kind of writing you want to do:

- Is it fiction or non fiction?
- Novels or short stories?
- Detective stories, romance, horror?
- Series of books or a one off?
- Do you want to be published?

I know this last one may seem strange as I suspect most writers dream of seeing their books on Amazon and in the shops. A lot of people are quite happy to just write for themselves. If you do want to be published you have to do a lot of market research – I would need a whole new book for that!

How do you decide what to write? Try different kinds of writing. You'll know which feels better for you. Some kinds you may struggle with but still enjoy. Persevere with it. What kind of books do you enjoy reading? This might give you an indication of what to write. Although, I really like Stephen King books but I don't have the stomach to write horror – I'll stick with children's books.

4 CONNECT WITH OTHER WRITERS

There are many online writer forums. You don't have to join but you can still read the comments posted there.

Subscribe to writing magazines. These keep you up to date with market changes. Good magazines also give you details of writing opportunities. I tried several magazines until I found one that I liked. I've learnt a lot from it and look forward to receiving it every month. They have a Member's Area where you can share your writing success with others. I've been in a few times. It's lovely to hear how other writers have reached publication.

Join writing groups. Do some research and find the best one for you. They all differ. Some set assignments for you to complete, others are happy to read out your work in progress. Writing groups are not for everyone as you have to be prepared for criticism.

Join a reading group. As well as making friends you will be introduced to reading certain books that you might not have considered before. You may find a new genre of writing that you want to try out. Some reading groups invite authors to give talks – you could pick up many tips here.

Go to literary festivals. This is a lovely way to meet authors and hear about their writing journey. Usually, you have chance to ask questions. I recently went to a festival and listened to Barbara Taylor Bradford. She was so interesting and I learnt quite a few things.

Of course, all of this getting out there will enable you to meet new people. You can use these experiences to create more characters for your writing – just change the names.

5 WRITING COMPETITIONS

These are wonderful as they give you a deadline to work to. I used to look at these competitions and wish I had the skill and confidence to enter them. I'd go as far as writing draft versions of the stories but then I'd let the deadline go by without doing anything. Until one year I decided to submit a story.

It was a competition run by favourite writing magazine, to write a short children's story. I wrote my story. Left it a while and then re-wrote it. Typed it out and sent it in the post. I was aware of the deadline and hoped that my story had reached the magazine safely. The deadline passed by and I heard nothing. Then I got a phone call from the magazine – to say I had won first place! I was so pleased I had to run up and down my hallway yelling for joy.

Not only had I won first place I was going to be published in the magazine. Not only that, I was invited to an award ceremony and given a cheque for £250. I had a lovely time at the ceremony and met lots of other writers. It was the first time that I felt like a writer. I was given a badge with my name on and underneath it said, 'Writer'. I still have that badge.

Have a go at entering competitions. You never know where they might lead. Don't worry about not feeling confident enough, I felt just the same and look what happened to me.

There are many competitions online and in magazines. Have fun with this.

6 MARKET RESEARCH

If you want to be published you need to know what publishers are looking for. You can find this out by looking on publishers' websites or asking for catalogues. Some websites have author areas where you can access guidelines. If you find out what each publisher wants and then provide that, you have more chance of being published.

When I first started out with my research I asked for guidelines from publishers. They all wanted different things. Some wanted their stories to be shorter than 500 words, some wanted them up to 1,000. Some gave a list of what to write about and others just asked for anything. I had to tailor my stories to each publisher rather than sending mass submissions out. The publishers were very helpful and some gave long sheets of writing tips and where to go for more information.

Publishers are human. They want more work. They are usually happy to help writers. Although, they wouldn't be happy to be contacted by phone for a 'chat'.

There are occasions when you have a great idea for a book but according to your research there is no demand for it. If you strongly believe it should be published then go ahead and do all you can do achieve that. One of the guideline sheets I was given by a publisher years ago stated that they didn't want stories about witches and wizards as nobody liked reading about them. A few months later the first Harry Potter came out.

You don't have to be published in the 'traditional way'. You can self publish a physical book or you can self publish an ebook. I have a couple of books on Amazon Kindle and I plan to publish more. I was nervous about doing this as I didn't have an editor to make sure everything was correct. It wasn't as difficult as I thought it would be. There is a lot of online information about self publishing. There is no reason at all why you can't become a published author. I highly recommend it – it feels wonderful!

7 BEATING WRITER'S BLOCK

I see writer's block as being stuck for ideas. Once you get a great idea your words will start to flow.

One method I use to get my brain working is to have several small pieces of card with words on such as types of characters, settings, plot triggers etc. I will randomly pick cards out of each pile and see what ideas I can come up with. This is how I came up with the idea for my picture book 'You Can't Eat A Princess!' I picked 'princess' and 'space' and began to ask myself questions : Why would a princess be in space? Has she been kidnapped? Is she looking for someone else who has been kidnapped?

Another method is to rewrite traditional stories but with a twist i.e. what if Goldilocks didn't like porridge? What if the 3 bears hadn't gone for a walk but were hiding in the cupboards ready to pounce? What if Cinderella couldn't be bothered going to the ball? Or if the prince wanted to marry one of the ugly sisters? Obviously, if you come up with a great story it might be wise to change the names!

Something to use whilst you're queuing somewhere : look around you at people nearby. Make up secret lives for them. Are they really spies? Are they pretending to be off work sick when really they're going to the beach? Try not to stare at people when you do this and don't talk out loud. My problem is that I smile to myself as I think up good stories.

You could create a secret life for yourself as some sort of superhero with special powers. What powers would you have? Would you use your powers for good or evil? You might not come up with any publishable work but you are getting your creative brain working.

Stories are all around. Look in magazines and newspapers. Look online at true life stories. Once you start looking you'll find ideas everywhere.

8 INTERRUPT YOURSELF

This is a difficult tip to follow but it is highly effective.

If you find it difficult to get down to your writing at a regular time you need to find a reason to come back to it. To do this, the day before (or whenever you last wrote) stop your writing halfway through a sentence or even halfway through a word. When you come back to your writing you will immediately know what to write. Starting is the hard part so make it easier for yourself.

I don't like to leave sentences half written, I like everything completed for the day. But this method works. For me, it leaves me feeling a bit irritated that I haven't finished my work but it makes me eager to get back to my writing.

A short tip but a powerful one.

9 REJECTIONS

Receiving your first rejection can be upsetting. You've lovingly sent your work out only to have it turned down. It feels personal and can put you off writing forever.

But – rejections are part of being a writer! All writers get them. There are very few people who get their work accepted on their first try. Rejections are part of your writing journey. Each rejection brings you closer to publication. If you picture your published book a little in the future, see these letters as stepping stones along the way.

Rejections are not personal. Publishers turn down stories for all sorts of reasons: they might have just taken on a similar story, they might have reached their budget for new work for that year, your story just isn't what they are looking for.

I had over 60 rejections before I received my first publishing offer. At first, these were standard rejections. Then I began to get editors' notes telling me they liked part of the story and maybe I should consider changing.... These kind of rejection letters show that your work has promise and is improving. Eventually I got a wonderful letter to say the publisher was interested but could I make some changes? Of course I made the changes. And then some more. And then a few more. This led to the publication of my first picture book – 'The Teddy Bear Scare'.

If I'd have let those rejections get to me I never would have become published. So if you receive rejections think positively – you're on the way to publication!

So that you know you're in good company here are some famous books that were rejected by publishers:

War and Peace, To Kill A Mockingbird, Watership Down, Wind In The Willows, Lord of The Flies, Carrie and (of course) Harry Potter.

10 DON'T QUIT

To be a writer you have to be persistent and determined. Learn all that you have to along the way. Keep trying new writing techniques. Don't listen to anyone who tells you that you'll never succeed. If you believe in yourself you can achieve your dreams.

When I first started submitting stories I told friends what I was doing. Quite a few said, "You'll never get anywhere with that", or "Writing isn't a proper job". I used to feel embarrassed about calling myself a writer as people would ask what books I'd had published. At that stage I hadn't been published. Now I'm proud to tell people what I do. Some people still turn their noses up or act as if I've just declared a mental illness! Most people are interested and you soon find out who the budding authors are as they ask you for tips.

If you write, then you are a writer. It doesn't matter if you've been published. You are creating wonderful works of art, even if it's only for yourself.

My road to publication was long and a bit bumpy but I enjoyed every step. I recently received my first fan mail from a young girl telling me how much she loved my book— how amazing is that? It happened to me – it can happen to you.

I came across these sayings recently:

The temptation to quit will be greatest just before you're about to succeed.

When you're ready to quit, you're closer than you think.

It's always darkest before the dawn.

Here is my favourite poem, author unknown :

DON'T QUIT

When things go wrong, as they sometimes will,
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high,
And you want to smile, but you have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit,
Rest, if you must, but don't you quit.

Life is queer with its twist and turns,
As every one of us sometimes learns,
And many a failure turns about,
When he might have won had he stuck it out:
Don't give up though the pace seems slow –
You may succeed with another blow.

Often the goal is nearer than,
It seems to a faint and faltering man,
Often the struggler has given up,
When he might have captured the victor's cup,
And he learned too late when the night slipped down,
How close he came to the golden crown.

Success is failure turned inside out –
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt,

And you can never tell how close you are,
It may be near when it seems so far,
So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit –
It's when things seem worst that you must not quit.

I wish you lots of luck and success with your writing.

Gillian