

LiveWrite SHARE

One Beautiful Book at a Time!

How To Create A Writer...

My childhood memories of being curled in a corner, in a feather-cushioned chair with another book knowing I could try to start *and* finish on the same day, resonates with me still. I would never be interrupted, never expected to leave this special place. I had the opportunity to explore different worlds, experience the lives of others by walking in their shoes, being transported every day to another place...

I couldn't (and still can't!) imagine a day without reading.

I always believed this passion for reading was given to me by my parents. They read to me as a child and so obviously treated the reading experience with reverence. Once I had my own children and applied the same ethos, I was devastated my eldest simply loathed reading and worse, being read to!

What had I done wrong!

With books visible at every north, south, east, west vantage point throughout our home; a publishing business that spans a decade with hundreds of titles produced by children and the belief in 'children see, children', I had to trust the love of reading would be something she would embrace at some point. Gentle perseverance (and the odd piece of trickery!) and I was rewarded with being on hand to witness her 'writing' her first book by way of stick figure drawings. She dictated the sentences whilst she drew. It was the breakthrough! Then, at 14, discovering a book that truly resonated with her was the clincher and we discovered she reads deeply and with a questioning mind, whereas I skim and race and forget. She now considers herself a 'reader' and has actually she asked for a Kindle for her 17th birthday!

Often, I get to work with other children who certainly do not enjoy reading, let alone writing. These same children find themselves in classrooms being given the instruction 'write', but they have eschewed the initial research phase of understanding this craft – they simply don't like to read. It is like asking them to run before they have even begun to crawl!

Fundamental to the process of creating a writer, therefore, is to also create a reader! For you, as a writer, you need to understand the magic of story and how it so convincingly has dominated our worlds for centuries.

Following are our top ten tips. Whilst they certainly do combine, like ingredients for a recipe, to create a fabulous end product (in this case, a writer and reader), each are also equally powerful as stand-alone conversations or exercises. Certainly, I do

concentrate on picture books, but I believe these points are relevant regardless of the style of writing.

1. Comfortably uncomfortable!

When we start any workshop, whether it is for a group of children with whom we will be working with for the rest of the year, or a mob of adults we are only with for a couple of hours, we always start with describing the life of a writer, the feeling of discomfort that can strike the most prolific and successful writers, especially when sharing their work for the first time, or worse, then showing their second book! We also share the crazy elation and intense feeling of achievement, which comes at book launch and the immensely powerful sensation of influencing people's emotions!

It is a roller coaster ride and honestly, the only reason people don't write is because of that feeling of being overwhelmed by the task at hand. It is easier to walk away! When you feel that overwhelming sense of 'flight or fight' because you are so uncomfortable, it is worth imagining it is just like a wave - it too will pass. Knowing you are capable of a task you haven't yet completed is an indication of your level of self-efficacy.

Sometimes, dealing with a low self-efficacy, it can be as simple as pledging to not give up! Brainstorm a 'pledge' like:

"I will give the project at hand a go! I will give it all of my attention and I will try my hardest."

Read these words aloud.

2. A little bit of self-analysis...

Now, I'd love you to give this a go - we are going to use a tool for analysis usually applicable in business. I started doing this as a business practitioner, as writing and self-publishing, when dealt with like starting a business, is the most rewarding, emotionally and financially! The idea to use a SWOT analysis is to help you uncover any potential threats to your writing career.

The SWOT analysis is a tool used in business, for understanding strengths and weaknesses, of a business, and the opportunities and threats, which exist external to the business.

First step is to draw a large plus sign, so the vertical line goes from the top to the bottom of a page and the horizontal line goes from side to side. Where the lines intersect is indicative of the person who is doing the SWOT, so demonstrating the influence or importance of a particular note by writing it closer or far away from this point is useful. For example, whatever you list closest to the point of intersection is the most important. When you feel as though something is not as influential or important, write it on the page away from the centre.

Now to the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Choose a quadrant to allocate one each of these four 'topics'

You can write down the things you are good at (strengths) – invaluable for providing you with topic suggestions for them to write to later or even better, to focus on by way of motivation if you start to flag because the task at hand is too hard.

The list of your weaknesses may shed insights into why the process of writing may be challenging. Your reticence may come from a fear of failure, you may be uncomfortable about the exhibition process (or reading aloud to others) or that the written word is not valued in your world. It could be as simple as not knowing what to write. This gives you a list of things to mitigate.

The opportunities of being a writer can sound quite fickle in the first instance, especially simply state they wish to be famous or rich or have a movie of their story made... but it does give you something to help aim for. (I had a student this year who wanted to write a book to declare his love for his not-yet-born sister!)

The threats, well, they can be hard to identify. You may have financial commitments that mean working hours lessen your writing hours, or other forms of time pressures. It may be that your partner needs extra support or isn't supportive of this as a project. It is anything that is beyond your control that may hinder the process. (Again, this year, one student was only relatively newly speaking English and when we suggested she write in Chinese first, then translate the story, she flew!)

3. Everyone is 'writer' and everyone is exposed to writing!

De-mystifying the process is half the battle! We break it down to having a paper and pen and *voilà!* You have all the physical tools to become a writer. Easy peasy.

Okay, so your still feeling reticent about starting, and maybe you haven't read a novel or even a short story lately, how about referencing your favourite television show as a story outline and then comprehending it as a written script; know your favourite blogs started as a mere idea; the movie you saw on the weekend started with a pen and paper... The instructions, the laws, banking, sports contracts, rule books – all started with a pen and paper...

Often, the trigger point can be just asking yourself if they want to be influencers or simply being slaves to other people's ideals or plans. That will immediately assess the validity of you writing your story!

4. Demonstrating 'words beget words'

Trust us, this is fun! Start this exercise with a group of your friends. As we have been exposed to stories, even if we haven't read them (see above), and we use words to communicate every day – it makes sense that there is a natural order for words.

For example – when you see the word ‘**The**’ we already know following it will usually be a noun, so ‘The **cat**’ and then an action ‘The cat **sat**’ and then words, which join it to a location ‘The cat sat **on**’ maybe another ‘The cat sat on **the**’ and finally the location ‘The cat sat on the **mat**’.

The instruction to your friends is you will start with a word and the person to your left (or right!) will say the word which naturally follows... the sentences you construct will finish in their own natural time. Another important instruction to them is not to ‘shut down’ the sentence. They have to keep it open and alive – kind of like bouncing a balloon around amongst a group of people. No point pushing it to the ground if the game is to keep it afloat!

If you are game, keep track of the silly sentences (in homage to Dr Sues!) by firstly taping the session and later, producing the transcript. Collate these sentences together as your first collective ‘book’, complete with a photo of each participant throughout the book or together on the title. Already the ‘authors’ are recognised, but there is security in the collaboration. Produce a copy of the ‘book’ for each contributing author. For the reticent writer, there is something powerful being known as an author rather than a writer. Plus, and I believe this is the key, you are demonstrating you value your words.

5. Lots of Plots...

I’ll share an insight into the seven plots used by humans to describe the world around us and to make sense of this same world as we transition through the various stages of childhood to becoming an adult. ‘Overcoming the monster, rags to riches, rebirth, the voyage and return, the quest, tragedy and finally comedy.’

· Overcoming the Monster

A terrifying, all-powerful, life-threatening monster needs to be confronted by the hero in a fight to the death. An example of this plot is seen in the oldest known written ‘story’, the poem *Epic of Gilgamesh*, through to *Beowulf*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and well known *Dracula*.

· Rags to Riches

Someone who has seemed to the world quite commonplace is shown to have been hiding a second, more exceptional self within. Think *The Ugly Duckling*, *Jane Eyre* and *Clark Kent*, *Princess Diaries*.

· The Quest

From the moment the hero learns of the priceless goal, he sets out on a hazardous journey to reach it. Examples are seen in *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Treasure Island*.

The hero’s companions – usually three, have distinct characteristics, which complement each other and add up to a ‘whole person’.

· **Voyage and Return**

The hero or heroine and a few companions travel out of the familiar surroundings into another world completely cut off from the first. While it is at first marvellous, there is a sense of increasing peril. After a dramatic escape, they return to the familiar world where they began. *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Time Machine* are obvious examples; but *Brideshead Revisited* and *Gone with the Wind* also embody this basic plotline.

Three questions: How do they get to this 'other world', what is the nature of the 'other world' and how does the journey affect them. (The hero is taken out of the familiar, to experience an alternative, to come home to appreciate what they have!)

· **Rebirth**

There is a mounting sense of threat as a dark force approaches the hero until it emerges completely, holding the hero in its deadly grip. Only after a time, when it seems that the dark force has triumphed, does the reversal take place. The hero is redeemed, usually through the life-giving power of love. Many fairy tales take this shape; also, works like *Silas Marner* and *It's a Wonderful Life*.

· **Tragedy**

A character through some flaw or lack of self-understanding is increasingly drawn into a fatal course of action, which leads inexorably to disaster. *King Lear*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Bonnie and Clyde*—all flagrantly tragic.

· **Comedy**

Following a general chaos of misunderstanding, the characters tie themselves and each other into a knot that seems almost unbearable; however, to universal relief, everyone and everything gets sorted out, bringing about the happy ending. Shakespeare's comedies come to mind, as do Jane Austen's perfect novels.

Really, by sharing the description of the plots, the message is that the same stories have been told by humans forever-and-a-day. The value of your author telling the 'same' story is no-one ever has seen the world through their eyes, on that day, in that setting in which they are telling the story. It is this combination that makes the story 'original'.

The value of understanding the plots is you now have a tool to untangle your stories if you have made them overly 'tangled'. In the first instance, you don't have to express 'this story is good or bad' which may be your preoccupation. For example, you can read a story and say, 'Mmmmm I think you have started as a 'Voyage and Return' but have moved to a 'Rebirth' this is why it doesn't make sense.' It is so much easier to handle constructive criticism if you have established the framework to describing what needs to be fixed.

I love this as well, when a group of children embrace the plots, because if you want to give children a starting point, choosing a plot to write to gives them that step-by-step framework for creating a satisfying story!¹

6. Read a story!

One of the most sincere tips writers give at every writers festival or workshop is that it is imperative to 'know their craft' and 'to get thee to a bookstore and see what the market is embracing'.

7. Let's start writing – by DRAWING!

We have just discussed the value of lots of plots, but what about starting at an even simpler point – a character that could be the focus of a story?

There are a number of wonderful drawing techniques to create characters.² My favourite is the 'Frankenstein' method, where, ghoulishly, we collect body parts from all over the place and assemble to create a character!

First of all, you need to write a 'shopping list' of 10 or so body parts needed to create a person. (You can do this for animals as well) This brainstorming methodology is fun, fast and yields the most fabulous results. Put the list away for a while!

Now, with the list in hand (and possibly a day or so later!), read the first body part and write down the very, very, first description which pops into their minds. (This is awesome to do at the end of the day when you are too weary to overthink!) For example, you read 'nose' and you may write 'button' or 'crinkly' or 'pointy with a wart on the end'. Once you have a description for every body part, DRAW IT. I can hear you protesting! A truly original character will emerge.³

Once done, name him / her. Even more time? Where do they live? What do they like / don't like... There is no limit. However, there is one question that needs to be considered. Given their physical attributes, what problems are immediately obvious? For example, if particularly unusual looking, do they have others who look like them or do they need a friend. If they have a feature, like large feet, do they trip over a lot? If they are huge, can they use this attribute to do something that attracts the positive attention of their peers... This is endless and best 'discovered' by not overthinking.

¹ *Finnley's Great Escape* was written and illustrated by a group of thirteen children in three days. The first task on the first day of the workshop was to decide what plot line to follow. The rest of the project simply fell into place after this!

² <http://www.childwrites.com.au/Free-Stuff-Imagineit.html> for the free first chapter of 'Child Writes: Creating a Children's Picture Book is Child's Play' for more ways to create ideas with drawing and other tools.

³ There are many titles in the Child Writes library, with the main character derived from this exercise. For example, Ingrid Mieklejohn's "Maggie's Pet"
<http://www.childwrites.com.au/Store/maggies-pet>

What you have at this point is a page littered with words, which may seem meaningless for the moment, but I promise the 'character' is coming more and more to life with every thought! Matching this character with a plot provides a framework to now write a story.

8. Right to Free Write

You often hear it is 'page fright', staring at the empty page, or worse, not having any ideas that are the greatest issues for writers. Well, I honestly believe it is the lack of time that is the enemy of a writer! If you have a lovely ten or twenty minutes available where you won't be interrupted by another task or a bell, apply the 'words beget words' theory and with your character in front of you and a possible plot in mind, ask them to write... and write... and write... If you get stuck for a second, look at the word you have just written, and ask yourself, what word naturally follows.

It is super important to reiterate that at this point, what you are about to produce is for no-one other than yourself. It is not to be judged, shared or distributed. You can always do a 'practice run' by getting to do this for a minute or so, and then crumple up the paper and throw it into the bin and start again! It is yours to do with it what you will.

Once you trust this and feel safe, you will be able to write for a longer periods of time. You will see abandon your critical inner self and write! You will also notice you feel a sense of achievement at writing so many words and you will be uncomfortable with the idea of 'throwing' them away! Love it!

9. Making sense yet? Editing with four pens to untangle the mess!

There is something immensely satisfying about the editing process. Sure, it may involve more words, but it is really like a treasure hunt – is there a seed of a story in that tangle of words? Is there a universal adherence to a plot? Does the character really convincing within that plot framework? Like a messy bedroom, once you clear way the mess, can you see a comfy bed?

I use a 'four by four' pens (you know those clicky ones where you choose what colour you are going to use?).

Now, allocate four possible things that can make a story hard to read? What about RED for spelling mistakes, GREEN for grammar, BLUE for punctuation and BLACK for 'it doesn't make sense'.

You have to read the story aloud (and not 'aloud' so you hear the voice in your head, but truly out aloud!) This is invaluable; because it is amazing how quickly you feel a frown on your brow when it doesn't make sense (black) or if it doesn't sound right (green) or if you stumble (red) because the word is not spelt correctly, or you don't take a breath or any variance in tone because there is no punctuation (blue)!

10. Dare to Share

I do recommend you embrace the 'dare to share' motto, given now your first tentative words are untangled by way of editing and proofreading. To share is the difference between a writer and an author.

Sharing can be simple like handing the story to a friend as an independent reader. It can be printing a couple of copies and handing out to family members or peers. You can read it aloud to your 'target audience' (so if a picture book, to the children in the preschool!). You can post a copy on the schools webpage or magazine or newsletter... You can collaborate with a friend who then 'illustrates' the story and then scan the images, overlay the words, and print finished double spreads... The possibilities are endless!

Whilst you set out to inspire yourself as a writer, you inadvertently supported yourself as a reader, and with the completion of this last little step, you have created an author! How immensely, deeply satisfying!

Congratulations 😊