

21W.755, Writing and Reading Short Stories (Fall 2006)
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Session 23: The Life of the Writer

Writer's Block

Some people just write faster than others – this is not a race.

Writing when you're not ready:

1. Material too close
 - don't push the big stuff before you're ready
 - build technique
2. You don't really know what you're writing

Writing against what the characters/story want:

A story: I was writing a novel that I had plotted out and got to a point where there was supposed to be a battle scene. I tried to write it every day for a week and I could not. The words weren't there, I couldn't visualize the sequences, nothing worked. I tried all my techniques and nothing happened. Every day for a week I sat down and maybe wrote one sentence, tore it up, wrote another sentence and then tore it up. I didn't know what to do or why it was so hard. I knew what was supposed to happen.

And then one night as I was drifting to sleep (in that lovely twilight state where we have more access to subconscious processes than usual) I saw all my characters standing around my bed. "We're not soldiers, we're not fighting," one of them said to me. "You want a battle, you get soldiers."

That seemed fair enough, so I asked what they did want to do, given that they were already in the situation. "Let's have a party," someone suggested.

"We'll bring the beer," a character from the other side said.

A party instead of a fight. Okay.

The next day I sat down and I could hardly move my fingers on the keyboard fast enough to keep up. The scene practically wrote itself.

The moral of the story: If you have created real characters who are multidimensional, they have lives of their own. And they may not always do what you want them to do, even if it's in your plot outline. The characters win. Every time. Listen to them. They know what they want to do, and you may be fighting them. Try it their way and see what happens. (It may surprise you, but that may work out better than you expected.)

Loss of confidence

It takes courage to write. It also takes a degree of arrogance. We all have the evil editor demon who sits on our shoulders and whispers, "This story sucks. This prose is horrible. That sentence sounds like lead. That dialog is ridiculous. A box of cornflakes has more personality than my narrator." On and on and on. It never shuts up.

One of the biggest jobs a writer has is to **ignore that voice**. Remember—it is not your job to critique your work, especially when it isn't done yet. Your job is to put the words on the page, that's all. You have to tell the voice to shut up, that you aren't listening, that you won't pay attention. That's all. It's terribly difficult to do, and sometimes that voice takes over and can immobilize a writer, sometimes for months or even years.

Know that it is the demon voice. It is not real. This is one of those times when a writers' group is great—THEY are the critics. It is for them to make a judgment, or the editor. It is NOT YOUR JOB. Tell the demon to get lost.

One way to trivialize the demon is draw a picture of it. Make it silly. Color it in some stupid color, put it in ridiculous clothes. It is not a useful critic of your work, by the way. It's only purpose is to keep you from writing. Know it for what it is, trivialize it, and ignore it.

Do NOT try drugs/alcohol to get out of this. It may appear to help, but the work suffers. (Example: F. Scott Fitzgerald) A lot of writers abuse substances to shut up the demon (which means they get two demons for the price of one—such a bargain!)

Things to try:

Free Writing

We've done free writing assignments in class. What makes free writing work is that you just sit down and write whatever appears in your mind. Just write, just let it come no matter how silly or bad it seems. Because when you do just write, eventually you find yourself more interested in what you're writing than in the demon that's trying to get you to stop.

Writing to assignment (theme anthology ideas)

People in group can give ideas, anthologies, fan writing, free writing

Have someone give you an assignment, maybe something very specific. Maybe something that isn't like your usual. This happens when a good friend edits an anthology and asks you for a story (and it's really hard to say no.) But if you feel like you have to write something and it's very different, you'll find yourself pushing to do it.

I was asked by a friend for a story for a Sherlock Holmes anthology he was editing. I said I'd try to see what I came up with, but I wasn't inspired. I like the Holmes stories, but I'd never thought of writing one. Anyway, I thought I'd just get past the deadline, apologize, and that would be all. He called me up a month before the due date and asked about my story. I told him I was trying but it wasn't coming all that well and he might want to go on without me, but I'd see what I could do. Then he told me that one of the people he'd been counting on for a story had died. He needed my story, he was short, and one of his best potential contributors was dead!

So I had to write the story. It wasn't one of my best stories, but it was in the anthology.

A lot of writers I know do challenge stories—a vampire story, a story where the grandma is not wonderful and grandmotherly, a story about a car, a story about a flying toaster.

While an assignment story may start out as more of an intellectual exercise than anything else, you may well find yourself actively engaged. If you're having trouble or feel overwhelmed or unable to write, try it.

YOU DON'T LOSE IT!!! (except with alcohol/drugs) The ability to write does not disappear. If you can write, you will be able to write in the future. If you feel like you cannot write now, it's more than likely #1 or #2 above. Or you're trying to get the characters to do things they don't want to do.

Writer's life

- money
 - short story
 - novel
 - PEN (SFWA etc.) surveys
- packagers
- agents
- tie-in
- work-for-hire

Writers do not make a lot of money. Fewer than 5% of professional fiction writers, members of professional organizations, make over \$5000 a year from writing. Short stories do not earn enough to live on. Today a writer has to write novels to earn anything but stories bring prestige and readership. If you see yourself as entirely a short story writer, you may win literary accolades but you will need a day job.

Agents do not sell short stories at all—there isn't enough money in it for them. Most people sell their first work unagented, and if you're writing short stories you may not need an agent. Agents do not really sell anything. What they do is negotiate the contract, usually for a book. Short stories often sell not with a full contract but with a 2-page letter of agreement (often written in plain English.) Make sure with a short story that you are selling only First Serial (to a periodical) rights in North America. Do not sell world rights.

To sell a story to a magazine, identify the magazines where you think your story best fits. Find the names of the editors from WRITER'S MARKET, which is available at any library, or online. Print out the story in correct format (double spaced, black ink, white paper, name/page# in the upper right hand corner, full word count on the front) and include a **short** cover letter. Two sentences is sufficient—I hope you like the following story—I've written about a cruise ship magician because I spent two summers working on a cruise ship. Send it off. Keep sending it to appropriate places until it gets sold.

Good luck!