

7 Things You Should Stop Doing NOW if You Want to be a Writer

#4: Stop talking about writing.

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It's none of their business that you have to learn to write. Let them think you were born that way.

– Ernest Hemingway

Becoming a successful writer basically boils down to being willing to keep writing until you've learned to write well enough for other people to want to read your work.

And then writing some more, until people actually do read your work.

And then, unless you're Harper Lee, writing some more.

You can do that. It'll help if you stop doing these seven things first.

Hating your own work

My creative writing education started in 1988 when I fought to be allowed to take creative writing instead of AP English my senior year in high school. I graduated with an MFA in 2018.

That means I have thirty years of experience participating in creative writing workshop settings.

That's a lot of workshops. And the single most impactful thing I've learned from all of them is that there seems to be some kind of unspoken rule that says if you have aspirations of being a 'real' writer, you must hate your work.

If that sounds like you, stop that. Please.

Not only because it's annoying as hell, either. I'm here to tell you that there is a lot of time and effort and tears and uncertainty lying between the moment you decide you want to be a writer and the moment someone agrees it's a good idea and sends you a check.

Getting through all of that takes a huge dose of audacity. You better love your stories if you expect anyone else to.

Comparing your start to someone else's middle

It's so easy to look at someone who is successful doing what you want to do and think...*Damn. I'm never going to get there.*

Don't do that.

If someone has enough success that it's causing you jealousy, then they aren't at the same place in their career as you are. You're at the starting line. Or maybe in your car in the parking lot trying to get up the nerve to toe up to the starting line.

And they're already out of the gate.

Comparing the start of your writing career to someone else's middle is like being a fifth-grader jealous of their big brother because he's in high school — and believing their brother only got to high school because he hit some kind of educational lottery, instead of realizing that high school happens to everyone who makes it through elementary and middle school.

If you're an unpublished writer, your job is to write. To keep writing. Aim for a million words. And keep learning and improving so that each finished work is better than the last. When you finish something and it's as good as you can make it, take a deep breath and send it out into the world to see what happens. Then write some more.

Are you doing those things?

Then don't worry about what J.K. Rowling is up to. You're doing just what she did when she was where you are now.

Not shipping

Okay, 'don't not ship' is a double negative. But stick with me. It works.

I know so many writers who work and work and work.

They get their million words in. You know. The million words that will make them a *real* writer.

And every one of those million words is mouldering away on their hard drive.

You don't need a trunk full of unpublished manuscripts! You need a collection of rejections.

When you write something, you need to ship it. Publish your blog posts. Send your query letters. Indie publish, if that's what you're planning. Wrack up some rejections and failures. Collect them like some kids collect baseball cards. Be proud of them.

Make your writing shine. Edit it, for real. Hire an editor, if you're going the indie route. But then hit publish. Do it. Then do it again. And again.

You must stop not shipping.

Talking about writing

Writer's brains are so, so tricky.

Yours has probably played this trick on you. I know mine has. It's the trick where you spend so much time in

critique groups and Facebook groups and writing forums and conferences that you feel like you're really writing .

But you do not have any finished manuscripts.

Community is good. Community is necessary. [I run one of the coolest writing communities I've ever even heard of.](#)

But chinwagging about writing is not actually writing.

Writing is only one thing: putting words down.

Writing is not critiquing, talking to your writing friends (even about writing), editing, revising, researching, or ANYTHING but putting down words.

All those other things matter. They're important. But if you aren't making progress on your draft, then you aren't doing the one thing that really matters.

You need a first draft. You can't do anything without one. You can't edit or revise or query or publish. Stop talking about it and actually sit your butt down and write it.

Crossing your fingers

I want to make this one thing very clear: Being a successful writer (however you define that) isn't a matter of luck.

It's a matter of perseverance.

Every published writer is a writer who did not stop

writing. Not when their first book didn't sell. Not when every book that doesn't sell, didn't sell. Not when they did sell a book.

Not at all.

Uncross your fingers so that you can put them on your keyboard and write.

Worrying about success

A few years ago a post passed through my Facebook wall.

Someone wanted to know when everyone else in this writing group would feel comfortable calling themselves a writer.

My answer was that I started calling myself a writer the first time I was paid \$10 for a freelance story and used it to put gas in my car. I was twenty-four. Not long after that, my oldest daughter started kindergarten and when I went to enroll her, I wrote 'Writer' in the box for her mother's job.

I didn't write my first novel until ten years later. And it took me seven more years to sell one.

Remember what I said about audacity?

Some of the other responses on that thread were ridiculous. And so sad. One person wouldn't consider

themselves a writer until someone made a movie out of their book. Several were holding out for being New York Times Bestsellers. Many were waiting until a traditional publisher bought one of their manuscripts.

If someone asks you what you do, tell them you're a writer. Don't worry about the level of your success. If you're writing regularly, you're a writer. Creating stories is all the success you get at first, you might as well own it.

Catering to your muse

A few years ago I got the chance to go give an author talk at my high school alma mater.

That was surreal. I spoke to a group of student writers in the library where I'd hidden out most lunch periods for three years in the 1980s. I remember looking around that room and thinking my fifteen-, sixteen-, and seventeen-year-old self probably left DNA in that room. A finger print in a book that was still on the shelf or something.

After my talk, a student came up to me and told me that he really, really wanted to be a writer. He wanted to know how I managed my muse. I wasn't sure at first exactly what he meant, but then he went on and the truth came clear.

This poor guy said that he couldn't write unless he was sitting at a certain desk in a certain chair, with a window open just the right amount, wearing a specific pair of

sunglasses (!), with the exact right beverage, and pencil, and notebook, and chair height, and incense flavor, and . . . you get the idea

Don't do that to yourself. Your muse works for you. You're the boss. If you need a ritual to call up your creativity, that's okay. I do. I light a yellow candle. It's my creativity color. But then, I write, whatever the circumstances.

If you write, the muse will show up. She doesn't want to be left out, afterall.

[Here's my secret weapon for sticking with whatever your thing is.](#)

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