



So You Want To Be A Writer?

By
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Author's Note: We begin the ART OF WRITING series again. This is the first of 36 monthly articles on "how to write." Unlike many Creative Writing books, the Art of Writing Series is more about the philosophy of writing than it is about the technique. Not that you won't get technique in this series, but most books on writing spend too much time explaining "how to write" and not nearly enough explaining "why to write." If you came into the series in the middle, then this is your chance to add to your missing collection. If you are new to the series, then you can start from scratch, and have a complete set in only three years. Or, if you are the impatient type, you can actually BUY the books – Michael McCollum.



It has been my observation that there is a universal human desire (and it isn't the one that just crossed your mind!). Everyone, it seems, wants to be a writer. Whether this desire is imbedded somewhere in the arrangement of genes and chromosomes that define what it is to be human, or is merely an artifact of western culture, sooner or later we all seem to be bitten by the writing bug. The fact that you are reading this would tend to indicate that you have not only been bitten, but that you have come down with the contagious disease known as "the desire to be a writer." My condolences. It is often a disease for which there is no cure.

So what is a writer, anyway? In this supposedly literate world, just about anyone can write, can't they? Yes, more or less. However, by long convention, the name "writer" belongs to those who put words down on paper for the consumption of others, and then sell those words to anyone who is willing to pay money to read what the writer has written.

Which brings us to the first characteristic of a writer. Writers are people who expect other people to exchange money (that could otherwise be used to purchase beer) for pieces of paper smudged with ink in patterns that convey the writer's thoughts. Can you imagine anything more egotistical? Not only do I want to tell you my thoughts, but I want you to *pay for the privilege!*

So, the first thing you should ask yourself if you want to be a writer: "Just how egotistical am I?" If you wouldn't think of intruding your opinion on other people, or would find it enormously embarrassing to have others read your innermost thoughts, then

you will probably not be successful as a writer. If, on the other hand, you have a reputation among your peers of having an opinion about everything and of not being reluctant to share it, then you may well have what it takes to write.

The egotism of writers has a number of interesting side effects. One of these is the pay scale, which, despite what you may have heard, is below the poverty line. The reason for this is simple. Writers write, not for money, but for ego. And for this reason, there is an almost endless supply of would-be writers to fill the available commercial publications. The law of supply and demand states that when the supply of something is nearly infinite, then the price of that commodity will be as cheap as dirt.

I began my career as a writer of short stories and novelettes, selling to the monthly science fiction magazines. In 1939, the monthly magazines were paying approximately 3 cents a word for short stories. In 2003, they are paying 5-7 cents per word. Considering all of the inflation that has gone on since those days before World War II, that isn't an increase – it's a decrease!

You have to write a lot of words to keep yourself in food, clothing, and shelter at 5 cents per word. In fact, it takes so many words that you can't possibly make a living as a short story writer. The reason for this is simple. You might be able to write enough words to live, but you won't be able to find sufficient markets willing to pay you for your output. A single writer today can easily swamp all the available markets for his or her particular kind of writing. That is why the old pulp writers had so many pseudonyms. It wasn't unusual for a single writer to fill most of the pages of a particular magazine issue with his 3-4 pen names. In today's market, of course, the competition is sufficiently fierce that you will be lucky to get six stories a year published in one of the magazines. That is, of course, if your particular genre still has magazines. There are many fields where there is no market at all for short fiction.

This, of course, is why people write novels. It pays better than short stories and there are more places to sell a novel than there are surviving monthly periodicals. The problem with novel writing is that you have to put a significant amount of work into each of your projects. If one doesn't sell, then you have wasted between 3 months and 1 year's effort. What do you live on in the meantime?

But everyone knows that writing pays well, right? It does, but only for the handful of writers who manage to break out of the huge pack and become financial successes. There are so few of them that you can probably name a good percentage from memory: Robert Ludlum, Tom Clancy, Stephen King, etc. The truth is that the average writer in the United States makes less than \$5,000 per year. So if you want to become a writer, I will reiterate the most important piece of folk wisdom in all of publishing: *Don't quit your day job!*

So, you have decided that you are sufficiently egotistical to write, and that you have boundless confidence that you will be one of the few to make the big bucks. What's the next hurdle?

What kind of personality have you? Are you outgoing? Do you like people to the point where you must be with others for much of your day? Do you go to 3 parties a week, are the last one to leave, and look forward with great anticipation to the next time you can get together with your friends? Are you the boisterous one who keeps things

moving, the life of the party, the person who always seems to attract a clump of others to listen to whatever it is that you have to say?

If the above paragraph describes you perfectly, then I have bad news. You will probably never be a writer. In addition to their egos, writers share one other characteristic in common. We are almost 100% introverts.

We all know the scene in the movies: the Hollywood writer is at the pool with a gorgeous blonde under one arm and a gorgeous brunette under the other. The trio is wending its way among a crowd of muscular men and bikini-clad women; all of who seem to hang on the writer-hero's every word. The scene is so common that it has become a cliché.

It is also fantasy. Such scenes appear in movies because it is the Hollywood writers who write the scenes. And though virtually every writer would like to be like that, none of them are. Writers are people who sit alone for long hours at their typewriters or computers, amusing themselves by putting words down on paper (or in glowing phosphors).

I have been to a fair number of writer functions in my career and have been struck by an interesting observation. They are almost universally dull. I remember a Nebula Awards dinner in Hollywood one year. Everyone sat around in small clumps, talking to the people they already knew, and looking around at the people they didn't. There was almost none of the spontaneous mixing you get with gatherings of extroverts. Everyone just sat there and looked, wondering how to break the ice, but seemingly unable to do so.

"But what about Truman Capote?" you ask. He was renowned for giving parties when he worked in Hollywood, the very archetype of the social butterfly. The answer, of course, is that he was faking it. Mr. Capote was a small, shy man with a squeaky voice, who decided to overcome his "handicap" and become the life of the party.

Dale Carnegie, the inventor of the course on how to make friends and influence people, was the same way. The course teaches you to be an extrovert, to clap people on the back and confidently draw them into conversation. Mr. Carnegie was nothing like that. He, too, was a shy introvert.

It isn't that the tendency to be introverted cannot be overcome. It can. People at work always argue with me when I tell them that I am an introvert. That is because I am one of those people who seems to have an opinion on everything and who feels free to express it. Still, when they see me at a party, I am usually seated on the couch in the corner of the room, or behind the potted plant, talking to my wife.

So, introversion is a social defect that can be overcome – everywhere, that is, except in front of the computer screen. When you are alone and in a creative mood, you must let the introvert in you come to the surface. For if you crave the presence of others, it won't be too many minutes alone before you have to talk to someone. And that is something a writer cannot do. To write, you must commune with your inner thoughts, you must be completely alone and undisturbed while the words pour out onto paper or screen, and you must do this for hour after endless hour.

Introverts call this fun. Extroverts call it torture!

So, if you are an egotistical introvert, someone who must impose his or her opinion on the world regardless of the difficulty in making the world listen, and one who has an alternate means of making a living, then you just might have what it takes to be a

writer. There are other requirements, of course. You have to know how to type (which in the age of word processing isn't the skill it once was). You have to have perseverance, a thick skin, and be able to take rejection (if not well, then at least with some measure of stoicism).

But most of all, you have to want to write. It has to be a burning desire so strong that you can almost taste it, a need to communicate that will not let you sleep, an inner voice that screams silently in your head until the entire world can hear it.

If any of the above symptoms are plaguing you . . . take two aspirins and go directly to bed. If the symptoms persist in the morning, then buy yourself a comfortable chair to put in front of your computer. It looks like you are going to be spending a lot of time there.

It looks like you are going to be a writer!

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NOVELS

1. Life Probe - ^{US}\$4.50

The Makers searched for the secret to faster-than-light travel for 100,000 years. Their chosen instruments were the Life Probes, which they launched in every direction to seek out advanced civilizations among the stars. One such machine searching for intelligent life encounters 21st century Earth. It isn't sure that it has found any...

2. Procyon's Promise - ^{US}\$4.50

Three hundred years after humanity made its deal with the Life Probe to search out the secret of faster-than-light travel, the descendants of the original expedition return to Earth in a starship. They find a world that has forgotten the ancient contract. No matter. The colonists have overcome far greater obstacles in their single-minded drive to redeem a promise made before any of them were born...

3. Antares Dawn - US\$4.50

When the super giant star Antares exploded in 2512, the human colony on Alta found their pathway to the stars gone, isolating them from the rest of human space for more than a century. Then one day, a powerful warship materialized in the system without warning. Alarmed by the sudden appearance of such a behemoth, the commanders of the Altan Space Navy dispatched one of their most powerful ships to investigate. What ASNS Discovery finds when they finally catch the intruder is a battered hulk manned by a dead crew.

That is disturbing news for the Altans. For the dead battleship could easily have defeated the whole of the Altan navy. If it could find Alta, then so could whomever it was that beat it. Something must be done...

4. Antares Passage - US\$4.50

After more than a century of isolation, the paths between stars are again open and the people of Alta in contact with their sister colony on Sandar. The opening of the foldlines has not been the unmixed blessing the Altans had supposed, however.

For the reestablishment of interstellar travel has brought with it news of the Ryall, an alien race whose goal is the extermination of humanity. If they are to avoid defeat at the hands of the aliens, Alta must seek out the military might of Earth. However, to reach Earth requires them to dive into the heart of a supernova.

5. Antares Victory – First Time in Print – US\$7.00

After a century of warfare, humanity finally discovered the Achilles heel of the Ryall, their xenophobic reptilian foe. Spica – Alpha Virginis – is the key star system in enemy space. It is the hub through which all Ryall starships must pass, and if humanity can only capture and hold it, they will strangle the Ryall war machine and end their threat to humankind forever.

It all seemed so simple in the computer simulations: Advance by stealth, attack without warning, strike swiftly with overwhelming power. Unfortunately, conquering the Ryall proves the easy part. With the key to victory in hand, Richard and Bethany Drake discover that they must also conquer human nature if they are to bring down the alien foe ...

6. Thunderstrike! - US\$6.00

The new comet found near Jupiter was an incredible treasure trove of water ice and rock. Immediately, the water-starved Luna Republic and the Sierra Corporation, a leader in asteroid mining, were squabbling over rights to the new resource. However, all thoughts of profit and fame were abandoned when a scientific expedition discovered that the comet's trajectory placed it on a collision course with Earth!

As scientists struggled to find a way to alter the comet's course, world leaders tried desperately to restrain mass panic, and two lovers quarreled over the direction the comet was to take, all Earth waited to see if humanity had any future at all...

7. The Clouds of Saturn - US\$4.50

When the sun flared out of control and boiled Earth's oceans, humanity took refuge in a place that few would have predicted. In the greatest migration in history, the entire human race took up residence among the towering clouds and deep clear-air canyons of Saturn's upper atmosphere. Having survived the traitor star, they returned to the all-too-human tradition of internecine strife. The new city-states of Saturn began to resemble those of ancient Greece, with one group of cities taking on the role of militaristic Sparta...

8. The Sails of Tau Ceti – US\$4.50

Starhopper was humanity's first interstellar probe. It was designed to search for intelligent life beyond the solar system. Before it could be launched, however, intelligent life found Earth. The discovery of an alien light sail inbound at the edge of the solar system generated considerable excitement in scientific circles. With the interstellar probe nearing completion, it gave scientists the opportunity to launch an expedition to meet the aliens while they were still in space. The second surprise came when *Starhopper's* crew boarded the alien craft. They found beings that, despite their alien physiques, were surprisingly compatible with humans. That two species so similar could have evolved a mere twelve light years from one another seemed too coincidental to be true.

One human being soon discovered that coincidence had nothing to do with it...

9. Gibraltar Earth – First Time in Print — \$6.00

It is the 24th Century and humanity is just gaining a toehold out among the stars. Stellar Survey Starship *Magellan* is exploring the New Eden system when they encounter two alien spacecraft. When the encounter is over, the score is one human scout ship and one alien aggressor destroyed. In exploring the wreck of the second alien ship, spacers discover a survivor with a fantastic story.

The alien comes from a million-star Galactic Empire ruled over by a mysterious race known as the Broa. These overlords are the masters of this region of the galaxy and they allow no competitors. This news presents Earth's rulers with a problem. As yet, the Broa are ignorant of humanity's existence. Does the human race retreat to its one small world, quaking in fear that the Broa will eventually discover Earth? Or do they take a more aggressive approach?

Whatever they do, they must do it quickly! Time is running out for the human race...

10. Gibraltar Sun – First Time in Print — \$7.00

The expedition to the Crab Nebula has returned to Earth and the news is not good. Out among the stars, a million systems have fallen under Broan domination, the fate awaiting Earth should the Broa ever learn of its existence. The problem would seem to allow but three responses: submit meekly to slavery, fight and risk extermination, or hide and pray the Broa remain ignorant of humankind for at least a few more generations. Are the hairless apes of Sol III finally faced with a problem for which there is no acceptable solution?

While politicians argue, Mark Rykand and Lisa Arden risk everything to spy on the all-powerful enemy that is beginning to wonder at the appearance of mysterious bipeds in their midst...

11. Gridlock and Other Stories - US\$4.50

Where would you visit if you invented a time machine, but could not steer it? What if you went out for a six-pack of beer and never came back? If you think nuclear power is dangerous, you should try black holes as an energy source — or even scarier, solar energy! Visit the many worlds of Michael McCollum. I guarantee that you will be surprised!

Non-Fiction Books

12. The Art of Writing, Volume I - US\$10.00

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Writing Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 72,000 words. Now you can learn about character, conflict, plot, pacing, dialogue, and the business of writing, all in one document.

13. The Art of Writing, Volume II - US\$10.00

This collection covers the Art of Writing articles published during 1998. The book is 62,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

14. The Art of Science Fiction, Volume I - US\$10.00

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Science Fiction Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 70,000 words. Learn about science fiction techniques and technologies, including starships, time machines, and rocket propulsion. Tour the Solar System and learn astronomy from the science fiction writer's viewpoint. We don't care where the stars appear in the terrestrial sky. We want to know their true positions in space. If you are planning to write an interstellar romance, brushing up on your astronomy may be just what you need.

15. The Art of Science Fiction, Volume II - US\$10.00

This collection covers the *Art of Science Fiction* articles published during 1998. The book is 67,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

16. The Astrogator's Handbook – Expanded Edition and Deluxe Editions

The Astrogator's Handbook has been very popular on Sci Fi – Arizona. The handbook has star maps that show science fiction writers where the stars are located in space rather than where they are located in Earth's sky. Because of the popularity, we are expanding the handbook to show nine times as much space and more than ten times as many stars. The expanded handbook includes the positions of 3500 stars as viewed from Polaris on 63 maps. This handbook is a useful resource for every science fiction writer and will appeal to anyone with an interest in astronomy.