QUIZ: Are You Right for Writing?

written by Holly
December 23, 2009
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You're pretty sure you can string together sentences in a coherent manner. You even have fun doing it. And God knows you'd love to see your name on the cover of a book – maybe a best-seller, even.

But do you have what it takes to be a writer, year in and year out? Could you write your way into a decent supplemental income? Could you write your way out of your day job?

I can't promise you a definite answer, but I might be able to give you a pretty good idea. *Take my Are You Right for Writing* quiz and find out where you rank on the writing personality index.

This is not a scientific tool; it is simply the product of my years of observing myself and my colleagues and trying to figure out what makes the whole herd of us tick. I'm a good observer, though; I'd trust the results of my quiz over any you might find in *Cosmo*.

Okay. Just answer honestly. If you start this out by lying to yourself, skip writing and go straight into politics. The money is better and you'll be a lot happier.

Question 1:

You've turned off the TV, the stereo, and every other possible entertainment device, you have removed all books, and you are sitting in a dimly-lit room doing absolutely nothing. So…how long can you sit without going crazy?

- A. 5 seconds. I get cold sweats just thinking about power outages.
- B. 15 minutes – but only if I have a bag of potato chips.
- C. 1 hour – I can always replay my last argument and come up with wittier things I could have said.
- D. Man! I lost track of the time. I started watching people in my imagination doing interesting things, and the next thing I knew, it was nighttime and I'd missed supper.

Question 2:

You're writing and the phone rings. You:

- A. Answer it.
- B. Finish your sentence, then answer it.
- C. Let the answering machine get it.
- D. Have no phone access in the room where you work.

Question 3:

The person calling is one of your dearest friends, who wants to get together for brunch and a good long chat about his/her ex. Unfortunately, this juicy brunch will take place during your peak writing time. You:

- A. Decide to go. You haven't heard the latest dirt on the evil ex in ages.
- B. Reschedule for a later hour.
- C. Reschedule for a non-writing day.
- D. Pass.

Question 4:

You're out at the restaurant with your friend when you have a fantastic idea for a novel. You:

- A. Have to hope you'll remember it – you have nothing to

write with and nothing to write on.
- B. Will manage. You always have a pen, and there are napkins in restaurants.
- C. Carry a special notebook, an organizer, or even a laptop with you everywhere – you're completely prepared.
- D. Aren't at the restaurant; that would cut unacceptably into your 14-hour writing workday.

Question 5:

When you see yourself as a successful writer, what is the image that is clearest in your mind:

- A. The rounds of publishers' parties, autographings, and talk shows where you are lionized for your work of immortal literary genius?
- B. Your name on the spines of a shelf full of beautiful books?
- C. A vision of sending off a completed manuscript to a waiting editor or agent?
- D. Your butt in your chair, your fingers on your keyboard, and your eyes on your monitor (or whatever tools you use to produce your stories or novels.)

Question 6:

You anticipate being able to quit your day job to write full time:

- A. immediately – you have a great idea for a book you know will be a bestseller;
- B. as soon as the first book sells;
- C. when you have three or four on the shelf;
- D. when you're making as much from writing as you make at your day job . . . and have done so for a couple of years.

Question 7:

Do you have…

- A. an idea for the Great American Novel – a certain best-seller;
- B. a few ideas for different stories;
- C. background and development for a number of related books, a timeline, and a whole handful of novel ideas;
- D. half a dozen fully developed worlds, including maps, costume worksheets, fully developed languages, cultures, flora, fauna, religions, sciences, and much more, plus enough story ideas to get you through this lifetime, and the next one.

Question 8:

You figure the biggest benefit of becoming a writer is:

- A. Money & fame;
- B. Flexible hours;
- C. Creative control and being your own boss;
- D. The writing.

Question 9:

You read:

- A. The occasional newspaper, magazines, and remember having read books . . . but not recently;
- B. You read in your free time if you don't have something better to do;
- You invented the term multi-tasking because reading IS your "something better to do"– you usually have a book in hand no matter what else you're doing at the time;
- D. Your house doesn't need insulation; the triple-stacked shelves of all your books will serve quite nicely, thank you. *(The electronic corollary to this is*

that you already own most of the ebooks on the internet, and have to write now just to have something new to read.)

Question 10:

Where is the weirdest place you have ever written?

- A. Your desk…maybe, in a crunch, at the kitchen table;
- B. In bed. (An extra 10 points for this one if you were on your honeymoon at the time);
- C. On the toilet;
- D. Don't ask.

Scoring the Quiz

Give yourself 1 point for each A answer you gave, 3 points for each B answer, 6 points for each C answer, and 10 points for each D answer. Add up your answers, then check out the short key below before going on to the discussion.

10 – 29 points—You have some seriously romanticized ideas of what writing for a living is like. You're going to be badly disappointed by the reality.

30 – 49 points—There's hope; you suspect some of the darker truths about the profession, and have an idea of what some of the rewards are. If you really want to do this, you'll face some disillusionment, but also stand a good chance of finding the real joys of the profession.

50 – 79 points—If you can write, you're in there.

80 – 103 points—You'll probably make a great writer. You should think very carefully before getting married, having children, or buying a pet, however. Walking into your living room and discovering the dust-covered skeleton that was your cat – or your spouse – can be really bad for morale.

And Now The Discussion

Quizzes have always seemed pretty worthless to me if they didn't include a discussion of why any given answer was good or bad. So my quiz includes a question-by-question discussion.

Question 1 Answers—That empty room with nothing going on was not a hypothetical situation. That's the writer's work day. You, a quiet room, and nothing happening except for what's going on between your ears. This is pretty much a make-or-break question: if you can't entertain yourself for at least a few hours a day with no source of entertainment but your thoughts, you're not going to have much fun writing for a living.

Question 2 Answers—As long as you have no one depending on you, D is the ideal answer – but most of us live in a world where someone we love might, at some point, need us. So we don't have the option of seclusion. The self-control of screening out all but emergency calls with an answering machine (or looking for the name of the person calling on your cellphone before answering, and only answering calls from your priority people during work hours) becomes the real-world, practical answer.

Question 3 Answers—This one depends on how much you want to hang onto your friends, but also on how often such invitations come. The friend who routinely disrupts your writing time (if he knows it's your writing time—making sure he knows when you write is up to you) isn't much of a friend.

However, if you're passing on spending time with someone who is usually respectful of your schedule but who could use some support now, you aren't much of a friend. Writing needs to hold an important place in your life, but if you plan on having a life, it can't hold the number one spot.

Question 4 Answers—I come in with a solid C on this one:

because I always (yes, always) have my Visor with me, I could actually write the book on the spot, were I so inclined. *(Okay, so now it's my iPhone. Same concept, better software.)* You need to keep some tools with you all the time. Visor, tape recorder, or even just a little notepad and a pen—you need to have something to record great lines, bits of dialogue, or character or story ideas while you're out. And you can't count on everyone to have napkins you can borrow.

Question 5 Answers—If you chose answer **A** for this question, sit down. I have bad news. No one is going to hold a ticker tape parade in your honor because you wrote a book, or even a bunch of books. Aside from your spouse, your agent, and your eventual fans, no one CARES that you're a writer. You won't be recognized in restaurants and hounded for your autograph. Hell, you won't even be recognized in bookstores unless you introduce yourself. And maybe not even then.

If your answer was **B**, you're getting warmer. The name-on-the-books thing is big. But you're looking for happiness a long way from its source. In almost all cases, it takes a minimum of about two years from the time you start writing the book until the time it sees print. That's best case, when you have a contract for the book. If you have to write the book and then sell it, you could be in for a very long haul.

If you chose answer **C**, mailing off a finished manuscript, you're edging close to home, but not there yet. If you're very prolific, you'll complete two or three first-draft novels in a year. I usually do one or two. I have friends and colleagues who do a book every two years or less. That's a long time to wait for the thrill.

If you picked **D**, you have the best chance of being happy enough with what you're doing to do it long enough to succeed. To be a career writer, you really ought to like to write. You ought to have fun sitting in your little corner of the kitchen or your office, if you're lucky enough to have one, coming up

with neat stuff to do to your characters. If you can learn to get your joy from that, you can be happy nearly every day.

Question 6 Answers—I know the temptation to quit the day job. Boy, do I. As someone who once dumped a really good straight-days weekend-Baylor nursing job on the strength of just an idea—and then had to go get a job that was less good a year later when things didn't pan out, I'm aware of just how strong that pull can be. And what a mistake it can be to give in to it.

If you're desperate to get out of your day job, you're probably not going to listen to me, but I'll say this anyway; the longer you hold on to your day job after you start selling your work (and the smarter you are about hanging on to the writing money), the less likely you'll be to give up on writing in desperation a year or several years down the road, when the grind of never knowing when—or if—you're going to get paid drags you under.

Question 7 Answers—An idea for one book is a good start, but except in the rarest of cases, one book does not make a career. If you are already giving some thought to what you're going to do for an encore, and for the encore after that, you're thinking like a pro.

Question 8 Answers—If you think the main benefit of being a writer is money and fame, think again. When most first novels sell for around $5000 to $7500 dollars (and this is for something that may have taken years to write), and most novels disappear from shelves in weeks, never to be seen again, and most readers cannot tell you the names of the authors of most of the books they liked, much less recognize those authors by sight, your chance at finding great wealth or public adulation in this business is vanishingly small.

And the dark truth about most self-pubbed novels is that while you can put them together for damn near free if you're not

including the value of your own time in your math (and you should be), most self-pubbed novels sell as badly as or worse than most commercially published novels. ***Deservedly so.*** *And this won't change, simply because of Sturgeon's Law: 90% of everything is crap.*
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sturgeon%27s_Law

As for flexible hours . . . yes, they are flexible. When I was getting started as a pro, they flexed from the minute the kids left for school in the morning until they got home in the afternoon, and then from 9 p.m., after they went to bed, until I couldn't force my eyes open any longer, every day off. Since I worked 12 hour weekend nursing shifts and had older children, I at least had long blocks of time to write. Before the kids started school, it was a lot harder to find time.

As for taking days off—you can take off any day you want. You just don't get paid. I've had one vacation since 1991, when I sold the first book. I don't work 10-hour days anymore, which is nice. I do work seven days a week most weeks. And I never have enough time to do everything I want. **Rule of thumb for the self-employed:** *It's illegal for anyone to ask you to work as long or as hard as you'll be working for yourself.*

Creative control is great. No caveats there. Being your own boss is great, too—except that your boss is probably going to have to be a slave-driver if you're going to make it professionally.
If your reward is the writing, though, even the long hours, the poor or nonexistent pay, and the anonymity will be no big deal.

Question 9 Answers—I've never known a successful writer who wasn't also a compulsive reader. The only real difference between the third answer to this question and the fourth is that some of us are book packrats, and some of us aren't. But if you aren't a big reader, you're going to have a terrible time figuring out what is a truly different approach to a

story and what has been done to death.

Question 10 Answers—You may be asking, "What could it possibly matter where I've written, or under what circumstances?"
Writing at odd times and in unlikely places simply serves as a clear sign of how deeply the writing bug has bitten you.

Case in point—I'm writing this right now on the backlit screen of my Visor, sitting on the floor in the middle of a neighborhood blackout, hanging out with my family. And writing. This isn't the weirdest place, or the weirdest situation, in which I have written. I definitely earn a D "you don't want to know" response to this question.
The presence of that unstoppable—sometime unbearable—urge to put words on a page is a good sign that you have a chance of outlasting the early-career hard times. If you can stay writing long enough to learn your craft, and still be hungry for the next word after years of next words, you just might make it.

I'll leave you with one of my favorite quotes about writers by a writer:

> *"I could claim any number of highflown reasons for writing, just as you can explain certain dog behavior as submission to the alpha, or even as a moral choice. But maybe it's that they're dogs, and that's what dogs do."*
> *Amy Hempel*

NOTE: I offer a comprehensive introductory class based on my fiction-writing and publishing experience. It's called How to Write Flash Fiction that Doesn't SUCK, and it is no-strings-attached FREE, including a private classroom, downloadable lessons, and a friendly, well-moderated forum where you can work with other students. I hope you'll try it out.

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