

# Designing Your Writing Career

[By Holly Lisle](#)

Granted, it isn't impossible to simply fall into a best-selling career. You might sell your first book first time out to the first publisher you send it to for a million dollars, get a movie sale on the sequel, hit the Times list, show up on Oprah, and have every succeeding book you write do better than the last. If this happens for you, cool. You won't need what you learn in this article, and I'll be modeling you for guidance in about three years.

Assume, however, that you're like the rest of us and you're going to have to work for your success. The odds favor this – I don't know of any writers, ever, who have had the career described above. I won't take all the fun out of your fantasies and say they can't happen, but I will say "Have a back-up plan while you're waiting for George Lucas to call."

First of all, remember this. Your career consists of your lifetime body of work. In that lifetime, you're going to have some ups and some downs – no matter how brilliant and how lucky you are, some of your books will sell better than others, some will cause you problems, some will bring you a lot of joy. The first key to having a career as a writer is to **keep working**. When you have a winner, write another book. When you have a flop, write another book. When you get rejected . . . write another book. Keep striving to improve your craft. Keep digging for the heart and soul of your work. Don't give up when things get tough, because careers are cyclical, and your luck will improve. And don't get cocky when things are great, because **careers are cyclical** . . .

The second key to career success is to have a plan. If you know what you want from your career, you're a lot likelier to get it than if you just stumble blindly around, hoping to fall

into fame and fortune.

Here's how you design your plan.

## **• Model success.**

Find a writer who has a career like the one you want to have. Choose a writer who:

1. Is writing in the genre in which you want to write.
2. Writes books that you respect.
3. Has achieved a level of success that you would be happy achieving.
4. Is currently active in your field. For this exercise, dead writers, no matter how beloved or brilliant, cannot help you.

If you want to write fantasy, don't waste your time modeling Danielle Steele just because she has the numbers you'd like to achieve. Different genres work differently, and what works for her isn't likely to work for you. And if you want to have your career in fantasy but can't stand Robert Jordan's work, don't model Robert Jordan simply because he sells like ice cream in a heat wave. Your model has to be someone you can simultaneously respect and emulate.

Model a living writer who is still actively publishing. The publishing business is dynamic, and success in writing now requires different steps than it did when Faulkner, Hemingway, and Twain were at their peaks. You model the steps that great dead guys used to reach success, you end up with a dead career.

When you have chosen your model, dissect his career. You may or may not be able to find out anything personal about your chosen writer – if you can, good. Your model's personal life

and writing habits can provide valuable clues about achieving success and living with it (both what to do and what **not** to do). But if you can't find a single personal fact about your chosen writer and how he writes, you still have enough information about him to model. You simply study – and I mean really study – his work.

Buy every book your writer has on the shelves. The good ones, the bad ones, the ones that flopped for mysterious reasons, the ones that soared. Put them in order of publication, and read them in that order, and chart out, preferably on paper, the following things:

- Which book marked the beginning of your writer's rise to success.
- What makes it different from the books that preceded it.
- Which books mark high points in your writer's career.
- What is special about them.
- Which books marked lulls, detours, or places where your chosen writer seemed to lose his or her way.
- What went wrong with these books – what made them flops, either critical or commercial.
- Your writer's growth – did he or she start slow and gather steam? Did he burst out of nowhere, rise with meteoric speed, and then maintain a high level of quality? Has he been coasting lately, or are his books still getting better? Were his best books early in his career?

Go into as much detail on the successes and failures of your writer as you can. Put time into this – the value of the plan you are going to build for yourself is no better than the data on which you build it. If you make false assumptions based on shoddy research, you can spend a lot of words and a lot of years before you figure out what you're doing wrong. The point of this exercise is to learn from someone else's experience,

and in so doing, to cut years off of the time it generally takes to go from slush-pile warrior to best-selling author.

And as a side note, there is no sin in modeling more than one successful writer. The more you know, the more you can use. Yes, this process is a lot of work. But it will reward you richly – you will get out of your writing career exactly what you put into it.

When your data is in place, it's time to go to step two.

## **.Write out your goals.**

What these goals are will depend heavily on where you are in your career. If you've already started selling your work, you don't need to have "Complete a story" as goal number one. If you haven't dared put anything in the mail to an agent or publisher yet, your first goal needs to be a bit more modest than "Sell book for one million dollars." Your objective is to give yourself achievable steps to follow on your path to greatness. Here are some rules for the goals you write for yourself:

1. **Devise your goals based on your model writer's successes.** If your model writer wallowed in mediocrity for ten years, writing little books that went nowhere, then shot straight to the top with a big, brilliant book that was the first in a series, **skip the ten years of mediocre wallowing!** Dissect the hell out of his first big success, figure out why it went to the top when his earlier novels didn't, and then copy his success. Plan to design your own series, emulate your model writer's scope and scale, emulate the size of his masterwork.
2. **Don't waste your time copying his book.** He sold it and you won't be able to resell it, and you shouldn't try. Don't try to rub off the serial numbers – if all you're doing is copying someone else's work, you guarantee that

you will never be better than second-rate, because **all** copies are second-rate compared to originals. But if your model leapt to fame and fortune by developing a charming, roguish PI with delightful friends and setting them in a city that people love and flock to, **use that**. Don't reinvent the wheel. Refine it. Give it ball bearings and your own cool wheel covers, and then slap it on the vehicle that will take you to success.

3. **Make your goals specific.** Instead of "Write daily," make your goal "Complete five pages daily," or "Write fifteen hundred words five days a week." Instead of "Outline book," make your goal, "Outline 100,000 word fantasy novel."
4. **Keep your goals within your control.** The areas that you can control in your writing are your output, your quality, your regularity, and your professionalism. You can't control your marketing, your sales, the awards you receive, or your level of fame, and if you base your goals on these indicators, you're setting yourself up for disappointment. Repeated disappointments can start to feel like failure, and this perception of failure where none exists can destroy you emotionally and wreck the parts of your career that you can control. So don't make one of your goals "Write New York Times Bestseller." Make it "Write NYT Bestseller-caliber novel."
5. **Plan for both the short term and the long term, starting with where you are right now.** If you haven't actually finished a story or book, then completing work has to be your first goal. Sending it out has to be your second goal. Getting a sale is probably going to be your third. But you need to have the long view in there, too. "Develop series character and series world," "Outline ten-book series," and "Acquire top-notch agent," may all figure into your future plans, and if they do, you should have those goals written down.

## **·Create a time line.**

Put your goals into a logical order, starting from where you are now and working up. When you have them all written down in order, figure out where you want to be next week. Next month. Next year. In five years. In ten years.

Do allow reality to enter into your equations. If you've never sold anything and never even completed anything, don't plan to be making your full-time living from writing by next year. There's a learning curve to writing just as there is to being a doctor, and both are about equally steep. The fact that you know how to write and punctuate sentences and how to break your writing into paragraphs does not mean anyone is going to be ready to pay you to do this just yet.

What has worked for me has been to put my goals on index cards, then pin them on a board in order of desired accomplishment. When I first got started, I wrote down the date for each of the goals I set, then left a blank just beneath that for date achieved. Every time I succeeded in one of my goals, I wrote in the date. This gave me a steady sense of accomplishment, and a clear view of where I was and what I needed to do to move to the next goal.

Be prepared to revise your goals as you go along. You discover things about writing as you're doing it for a number of years – you may find out that you want to switch genres, that the goals that seemed big when you were getting started suddenly seem small and confining, or that you don't need to write the number-one best-selling novel in the world in order to be happy with yourself. When you discover any of these things, set new goals, remove the ones that no longer apply to you and your desires, and get back to work.

## **·Finally, realize that, as life**

## **happens while you're making other plans, so do careers.**

No matter how carefully you model your career, how carefully you set your goals, and how carefully you follow your plan, you're going to make mistakes. You can misinterpret the factors that caused your model writer to achieve success. The field can change. The field can just plain vanish (witness Gothic romances and the entire horror field as examples of this latter grim phenomenon.) Life is going to put some bumps in your path, and some of them are probably going to hurt.

I know this from experience. I've had to revise my plan a number of times – I'm in the process of revising it even now. My mistakes have hurt, but I'm still writing. I'll still be writing in five years, and in ten years – that's the biggest part of my plan, and whatever changes I have to make to make that true, I'll make.

Consider a certain amount of flexibility as much of a virtue as thick skin and persistence – you're going to need all three. What I told you at the beginning of this article, I'll repeat again. No matter what happens, keep working. Because one book, no matter how successful or how wonderful, does not make a career. Your career is built a page at a time, a day at a time, a book at a time, and with determination and careful planning, it will last you the rest of your life.

**What do you want to do with your writing, and how are you going to do it?**

NOTE: Making a living as a career novelist takes dedication, focus, massive work... and a knowledge of what to do and what to avoid. [If you're already writing fiction regularly, and you need how to get your show on the road, take a look at my class in building your career, \*How to Think Sideways\*.](#)

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