Do Writers Need College To Write?

written by Holly
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By Holly Lisle

Experts, Professionals, and College

“Do I have to have a college education to make it as a writer?”

“I haven’t finished high school. Can I still write?”

“I’ve always wanted to be a writer, and I’ve done a lot of writing, but I couldn’t afford to go to college when I was younger . . .”

This question arrives in my e-mail box about once a week, worded in any of a dozen different ways. Some of the questioners tiptoe around it, embarrassed to ask, pretty sure they know what the answer is going to be, but hoping that it won’t. Sometimes I can feel the frustration and the pain, the barriers erected by poverty or lack of a diploma or lack of time. Some of the questioners are as young as thirteen, some have been as old a seventy.

All of them are pretty sure that formal education is the road to writing; that a degree will confer legitimacy to their words and their lives; that if they could just get more schooling, publishers’ doors would open.

They’ve been brainwashed by experts, by a system designed to create people who fit neatly into categories like ‘accountant’ and ‘nurse’ and ‘manager’. They’ve been trained to believe that the best education is an education that comes from

sitting passively in a desk in an overcrowded room, being talked at by an expert.

Obviously, experts have gone to a great deal of trouble to make sure their potential customers (and perhaps you) believed this. They've tried to get employers to make grades the basis for hiring – a move most employers have so far been bright enough to refuse. They have managed to close many fields to anyone who hasn't sat in the box like a good little drone for sixteen years or more.

You now have to have a degree to be an architect, a doctor, a teacher, or an engineer. Experts are trying to make sure you have to have a degree to become an RN. They'd also prefer that you had to have a degree in order to be a social worker, respiratory therapist, an interior decorator . . . and sooner or later, when they make degrees mandatory to those fields, I imagine they'll get to work on truckers and plumbers and bakers and hairdressers. College-educated experts are trying to close every field, because college education is big, pricey business, and the more people that have to go through it, the more money the experts make.

And if you think I'm full of shit here, and that people really do need college educations before going out and doing great things, consider this – the gothic cathedrals, the pyramids, and the Roman roads and aqueducts were designed and built by men who did not have college educations. Michaelangelo did not have a college degree, nor did Leonardo da Vinci. Thomas Edison didn't. Neither did Mark Twain (though he was granted honorary degrees in later life.) All of these people were professionals. None of them were experts.

Get your education from professionals, and always avoid experts.

An expert is somebody with a degree. The degree doesn't mean he knows how to do what he's an expert at – he might have

absolutely no practical experience. But he has the degree, which confers on him the right to impress other people with his accomplishment (which was the getting of the degree), and to get paid for his expert opinions. An expert gets paid by third parties – his work is never placed in the open market where it will either sink or swim on its own merit. Experts earn more money and more security by conforming – if they conform for a long enough time without annoying anyone or doing anything unexpected, they can earn higher positions or, in college systems, tenure. Therefore, in an expert system, the talented, the challenging and the brash are weeded out, and the inoffensive mediocre remain. Many college professors are experts.

A professional is someone who makes a living working in the field in question. A professional architect designs and builds houses for clients. A professional hairdresser cuts and styles hair for clients. A professional writer writes stories, articles, or books for readers. All of these people get paid by the people who are direct consumers of their work. If they do bad work, they don't get paid. The open market will weed out the bad professionals, so the ones who have been around for a while and who are still working are probably worth learning from.

What I learned from two years of nursing school at a community college was primarily political – "Get involved in your local chapter of the North Carolina Nursing Association, fight to keep the ANA from making a bachelor's degree the entry level for an RN, don't stand up when doctors come into the nurses' station or give them your seat." I learned some basics on patient care, too – but I didn't really learn to be a nurse until I was out in the field working with other nurses. They were the ones who said, "Look, you see somebody who comes in looking like that, don't wait for the doctor to get here before you stick O2 on him and order a twelve-lead. Just do it. And break out the D5W and start a microdrip IV right away,

too. And for godsake, make sure the crash cart is ready and the paddles are warmed up."

In writing, too, I learned the things I needed to know about the profession from a brief apprenticeship with Mercedes Lackey and another with Stephen Leigh. From Stephen, I learned the nuts and bolts of writing: 1. Avoid passive voice, 2. Use active verbs, 3. Eliminate most adjectives and adverbs, 4. Use concrete detail, 5. Tell a story worth telling, 6. Know your characters. From Misty, I learned how to be a professional – and **that** I learned from watching her. She came home from a full day of work and went straight into her office and wrote her ten pages . . . every day, no matter what kind of a day she'd had. Only when she'd done that did she come out and hang out. She was invariably polite and friendly to her agent, her editors, her publishers, and her fans. She worked on ideas for one project while writing another. She didn't have a shit fit about having to do rewrites – she just did them. She hit her deadlines. She wrote stories she wanted to write.

There. I've just given you a complete apprenticeship in writing. You have everything you need to know to become a professional writer, and it took you a couple of minutes of your time and didn't cost you a penny. The rest of being a professional writer is writing – sitting down and putting words on a page, one after another after another.

If you want to pay $40,000 or $60,000 or $200,000 or whatever for a college education, you can do that, and perhaps you'll even have one or two professors in your program who are actually working as writers. They aren't doing it full time, of course, because if they were, they wouldn't be supplementing their income by teaching, so you won't be able to model a full-time writer by watching them. You'll have to spend a lot of time doing things that have no relationship to what you want to do with your life. And you need to remember that most people who go to college to become writers don't. They find their focus shifted to education, or business, and

they give up on their dream. College educations are designed by conformists to create conformists. Even those colleges which point to their radical stance and avante garde teaching are creating students who conform to their mold – **their** sort of radicals, **their** sort of avante garde. Students in college have to earn the approval of their teachers in order to get their grades and graduate. And you don't learn anything new if your main goal in life is seeking the approval of experts.

If you're looking at writing as a career, you're looking at a future of tremendous freedom. You can do what you want to do with your life, and publishers and editors and readers don't ask if you have a degree, and don't **care** if you have a degree. They only care that you can put good words on a page, and that you can tell a story. They'll pay you well if you can do those two things – and you can learn to do them without a college education, without a high school education, without having spent a day in your life locked behind the walls of a classroom.

You'll learn to write if you teach yourself. Put yourself in situations where you can learn new things from the people who actually do them. Hang out with policemen and painters and long-distance runners and carpenters. Get them to show you the tricks of their trade. Learn how to build a stained glass window, how to paddle a canoe, how to swim, how to bait your own hook and tie your own flies and how to identify the flowers and shrubs and trees native to your region. Grow a garden. Paint your own house and fix your own leaky faucet. Go camping with a couple of outdoorsy friends. Read lots and lots and lots of good books. Read fiction, read non-fiction. Especially read lots of books about complicated subjects written for the intelligent layman.

Never, never pick up a textbook – textbooks are worthless. They're politically correct pablum designed to spoonfeed tiny bits of information to people who aren't interested in the subject matter without offending those people's parents.

Anything designed with being inoffensive as its primary goal isn’t going to be worth your time – life itself is pretty offensive, ending as it does with death.

And while you’re doing all this reading and self-educating, keep writing. Have the guts to believe in yourself, have the guts to ignore the experts who want your money, have the guts to take a chance on making your dream a reality. You can do it.

Am I sure?

Yes, I am.

You see, I’m a full-time professional writer, and I don’t have a college education either.

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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