

Honing Your Talent: A Workshop

By Holly Lisle

“Everyone can be more competent, but talent is innate, God-given – you either have it or you don’t.”

Is that true?

Well, what is talent, first of all? Sometimes if you can define a thing, look at all of its parts, maybe take them apart and play with them a little, you can figure out how to create some of that thing – or some **more** of it – for yourself.

We see the results of talent every day: people who run faster, jump higher, think smarter, write more powerfully than we do. And in our minds, we know that a lot of what they do that sets them apart is training. Long hours, hard work, bloody-minded persistence in the face of downturns, embarrassments, defeats, and **failure**.

That’s what we know in our heads. What we tend to believe in our hearts is that they each have something more. Some magic spark, some touch of fairy dust or the hand of God or one lucky roll of the genetic dice that makes them different than the rest of us – and that makes what they have done therefore somehow unattainable.

Folks, there’s good news and bad news. And I’m going to give you the bad news first. They have talent that you don’t have. Everything they have ever done and everything they have ever dreamed has given each one of them an unduplicatable set of special skills. They have a unique perspective of the world, and an equally unique way of expressing that perspective that you can never get, no matter how hard you work.

Depressed? Don't be. Here's the good news.

You already have as unique a background as any Gene Wolfe or Thomas Harris or Lois Bujold or Robert Parker. By the simple act of being alive, you have a toolkit full of tools that are your alone.

The trick is to learn to use them. And that is the purpose of this workshop.

So let's dig into your personal Talent Toolkit and see what you have to work with. Get a notebook and a pen, sit someplace comfortable and interesting, and brace yourself. We're going to do a lot of writing.

Tool Classification

Writers' tools break down into several basic groups:

Content Tools, Style Tools, and Presentation Tools. We'll unpack each one and play with it a little to give you a chance to see what each will do.

Content Tools:

Tools that Draw from Present Experience

Sight, Sound, Touch, Taste, Smell

In the very broadest sense, these five tools encompass all of your writing and draw from both past and present, but we're going to be using them more narrowly, and in more detail, than in that broader sense. By being present in the moment – any moment – and focusing on where you are and what is going on all around you, you gather in the details that make your writing come alive.

Right now, what do you see around you? Write it down in as much detail as you can muster, from the color of the chenille

bathrobe you're wearing to the way the dust motes float in the beam of sunlight falling through the window. Get the people in, the shapes and masses and colors, as if you were telling a painter how to paint a scene he couldn't see, and your life depended on him getting it right. (Career-wise, at least, it does.)

When you finish, relax your shoulders, close your eyes (as long as you're sitting someplace safe), and listen. What sounds do you hear up close? How about a few feet away? In the next room? Outside close? Outside at a distance? What about any voices? What emotions do they convey even before you listen to the words? And what words do you hear? How about animal sounds, machine sounds, plant sounds, environmental sounds? When you think you have everything, rewrite your previous scene using only sound cues.

Now sensation – start with the itch between your shoulder blades, the feel of clothes on your skin, the weight, texture, and temperature of the air in the room, and move outward incrementally – the seat supporting you, the cat against your bare foot, the hair falling into your eyes, the table beneath you hand, the carpet on the floor. Move outward, being concrete, digging for the truth of the way things feel.

Taste and smell are our blind senses, but do the best you can. What do you taste right now, what do you smell right now?

Before you can write anything that captures a moment or a world, you have to be alive to the world, and to everything all five of your senses are telling you. Practice this exercise until you're used to noticing details.

Past

Memory

Much of the real power of your unique talent will come from your memory. From memory, you'll draw and reshape the

incidents that will give your characters depth and permit them to reach others. The characters in your fiction will not be conceived or born outside of you, in people you know or watch. They'll first come from inside of you, from your hopes and fears, and will then be dressed up in other people's skins and voices so that your stories won't be monotonous.

So –

- Write down the five most embarrassing things that have ever happened to you, in as much detail as you can bear.
- Now write down the five biggest mistakes you've ever made. Again, go for detail, and lots of it.
- The five things you most regret doing to someone else.
- The five things that scare you most.
- The five bravest things you ever did.
- The five people who most changed your life, for better or worse.
- The five places that you remember most clearly.
- Your five biggest failures.
- Your five best friends. (Lifetime)
- Your five worst enemies. (Lifetime)

By now you've probably started wondering, When do I get to list my successes, all the good things I've done, all my happy moments.

Great conflict is not born out of the time you won the spelling bee; it's born out of the seven times you lost, and what you did in order to finally win. Conflict lies in the things that don't work out, so the useful moments in your life will be the screw-ups you've made. And the more public and painful the belly-flop, the better fuel it will make for your work.

And if you're getting uncomfortable little warnings about the nature of writing fiction and what sorts of people make successful writers . . . well, hi. People who do well following

rules and coloring inside the lines and fitting in are middle managers. Or guys on the line. People who are unbothered by working for someone else, who keep their heads down, who don't make waves.

If you were one of them, you wouldn't be here. Welcome to Misfits'R Us.

Dream

Maybe I should relabel this one "Nightmare" – but hard as I find this to imagine, there are actually people in the world who don't have nightmares.

If you have terrifying dreams – things that wake you from a sound sleep and leave you shaking, breathing fast, and afraid to leave any stray body parts dangling over the bed – you can get **paid** for them. As a long-time nightmare sufferer, this was a revelation to me, let me tell you.

Happy dreams are pretty worthless. Anything from finding yourself at work in your pajamas to fighting off vampires to rescue your kids, though, has a place in your fiction.

If you have bad or interesting dreams, start keeping track of them. Write down the ones that wake you up, that leave you feeling uneasy. And then look for ways that you can work them into your fiction. In **Minerva Wakes**, I used them straight out of the plastic wrap; in other books, I've drawn themes, characterization, and motive from them.

Future

Hope & Fear

You can't live in the future, but you can write there. List the things you most hope for, and the things you most fear. Five to ten of each. When you're done, consider how you might transfer these hopes and fears to your characters.

Style Tools

Raw talent may come from the mystical etheric realms, but if you can master the technical elements of storytelling, you can turn raw talent into something infinitely better – namely, a dependable skill. The elements you need to master include:

- Characterization
- Point of view
- Dialogue
- Description
- Pacing
- Plotting

(Links are for relevant articles or workshops I've done on the site or in Vision.)

Each of these alone requires more space than I have in a single short workshop. Multiple books exist about each of these style tools; you can be writing professionally for years and still find new facets of each to explore.

The thing you need to remember about style tools is that each of them represents a series of learnable skills – if you're deficient at any or all of these, effort, study, and a great deal of practice can correct the deficiency.

Presentation Tools

- Grammar
- Spelling
- Typing
- Manuscript formatting

I remain flat-out stunned by the number of people who want to write (or more likely, who want to have written) but who lack basic written language skills. Here are the bleak facts – if you don't know the difference between past tense and past participle, cannot figure out when to break a paragraph, or

have shaky or nonexistent spelling skills, you have no more chance of making a living from writing than a carpenter who can't use a hammer or saw or plane does making a living from woodworking.

The good news is that basic grammar skills are learnable. The bad news is that most would-be writers are too lazy to take the time and effort required to learn them well. If you're telling yourself, "It doesn't matter if I mess up spelling or punctuation or stuff like that – that's the editor's job to fix," quit now. I'm not kidding. If you're not willing to learn the tools of the trade, writing for a living is not in your future.

If you're willing to learn but just aren't proficient yet, no problem. The first thing you do is read. A lot. You'll get an instinctive feel for grammar from reading the work of good writers. This means people who are writing in your genre, and those who aren't. I recommend any works by the following writers:

Mark Twain

Robert B. Parker

Lois McMaster Bujold

Roger Zelazny

Theodore Sturgeon

Stephen King

Lawrence Block

There are multitudes of writers who tell good stories, multitudes who write with beauty and technical proficiency. The writers I've listed above consistently do both, and they are members of a rare breed indeed.

Following that, pick up a copy of **Strunk & White**. Read the book; learn the rules. And for grammar practice, you can visit:

- **Guide to Grammar and Writing**
- **The Fundamentals of Critical Reading and Effective Writing**
- **Common Errors in English**
- **Punctuation Made Simple**
- (and one of my personal pet peeves) – **Using the Apostrophe**

It can seem overwhelming. There's so much to learn, you can't get it all in one workshop or from taking one course or from reading one book. The more you learn, the more you discover remains to be learned.

But writing isn't something to do in a day. It's a life course, a path. A journey, not a destination. You'll never be as good as you want to be, and every book you write will be the failure of a perfect idea – but as you progress, every day will also bring its rewards. You'll get closer to expressing your perfect idea.

Your talent is everything about you that makes you unique. With effort, you can shape and sharpen it. So to answer the statement at the beginning of the article – yes – talent is innate. You're born with it. Everyone is. However, not everyone chooses to pursue it.

Do you?

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NOTE: The world is full of talented people who think talent is a free ride, and so accomplish nothing – and hard-working folks who, lacking gifts, focus on building skills – and who through persistence accomplish everything. But no matter where you are on the talent versus skill slider, **you start... by starting**. And you can start here.

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