

How to Get There from Here: The Magic of Goals

[By Holly Lisle](#)

When I was twenty-five years old and sending out my first manuscript, I included in my query letter to agents the following little tidbit about my plans for my future – “I intend to write one romance novel a month.”

You can laugh. Believe me, I do when I think back on my hubris. Granted, the **Holly Lisle Novel of the Month Club** was going to consist entirely of 60,000-word category romance novels. And granted, I was demonstrating the understanding that one novel was not going to constitute my life’s work. But as agent after agent pointed out, if I intended to do twelve novels a year, the odds were that none of them were going to be very good.

But I did have goals. And once I learned more about writing, and about writing professionally, I was able to update them to create better goals. I would not have made it as a writer without goals – written out, put up where I could see them on the day I decided I was going to be a writer for real, and checked off as I reached them or updated as I changed them.

Goals change a vague dream into a plan of action. Clearly stated goals are the step between what you want and what you get.

When you complete this workshop, you’ll have planned out your career and given yourself the steps to start it. Please understand that goals change over time, and the career you visualize today may not be anything like the career you want in a year, or five years. But we’re going to plan for that, too.

We're going to define what good goals are, and evaluate which ones to keep and which ones to change and which ones to boot out the door. And then you're going to write your goals.

So. Let's get started.

Definition of Good Goals

Good goals have the following ten characteristics:

1. Good goals are describable.

There is nothing nebulous or vague about a good goal. A good goal is not a fairy-tale castle shimmering, half-described, at the edge of wakefulness. Good goals are not warm feelings, hot hunches, or a nagging itch down your spine. These are all fine and wonderful things, and they can inspire goals, but they are NOT goals. A good goal is concrete, plain, stark, explainable in words of one syllable to people who know nothing about what you hope to do. Good goals require neither the word 'thing,' nor wild hand gestures to get across. "I'm going to write a 100,000 word fantasy novel" is an acceptable starting goal. As for "I'm going to, ah, do this thing, ah, where, a, I sit down and listen to my MUSE, and ah, await inspiration ... and then I'm going to internalize ... ::gesture, gesture:: ...," No. Saints preserve us, no.

You cannot hit a target you cannot clearly see. Words of one syllable. Two syllables tops. Trust me.

2. Good goals are positive.

You can look at this as Norman Vincent Peal-ism or tap-dancing into the realm of the metaphysical or just as addressing your subconscious, but when you set goals, only set positive goals – things you want to do, not things you want to avoid.

"Don't write trash" is a bad goal. The subconscious mind hears

only positives – it'll hear "Write trash" as your goal. What it will do with the goal it hears is hard to say, but it won't get you where you want to go. "Write my best work every time" is the same goal phrased in a way that will help you reach it.

3. Good goals excite you.

You'll find yourself thinking about a good goal at times far removed from the actual process of achieving them. If sailing around the world is a good goal for you, you'll find yourself cheerfully contemplating all the steps that you'll need to take to achieve that goal. If writing a novel is a good goal for you, you'll find yourself considering characters and plot and conflict and imagining how they'll go together while flipping burgers at your day job or arguing with your employee or necking with the love of your life. (Worse, you'll figure out how to work necking with your beloved into the book.)

Good goals arise from your dreams, from the picture you hold of yourself in your heart and mind. Good goals are born from the part of you that yearns to be heroic; they are the path you take from the person you are to the person you want to become.

4. Good goals belong exclusively to you.

This is related to #1, but not the same. Your goals have to be your own. So if your mother always dreamed of having a doctor in the family, and your father can see you as an architect, while you faint at the sight of blood and couldn't care less whether a house is made of adobe or brick so long as it keeps the rain out, it's time to take action. Help your mom find some financial aid so she can apply to medical school, buy your dad a drafting table for Christmas, but realize that this life is the only one you can be sure you get, and you cannot spend it fulfilling other people's dreams. Not even the people who love you most, wonderful though your folks, your spouse, or even your kids undoubtedly are.

Yes, they want the best for you. But they can't know what that is, simply because they're not you. Is this selfish? Maybe. But it's also self-preservation. Ask people with careers they never wanted – that they let their parents or spouses or guidance counselors pick out for them – to tell you about their lives. I've spent years doing this. You'll hear about ninety-five tales of misery for every five that worked out okay.

Don't go there. Your passions, your life, your goals, dammit – because if you don't follow them, no one will.

5. You can achieve good goals by your own actions.

Deciding to win a Hugo or a Pulitzer or to hit the New York Times bestseller list are bad goals. Nice dreams, especially nice if they become reality. But bad goals. Why? Because nothing you can do can make them happen. You can write brilliant novels, editors can love them, publishers can bring them out in wonderful editions, bookstores can stock them by the zillions, and readers can buy them in vast numbers and adore you as the Second Coming of Twain – but whether or not the New York Times deigns to notice you or award committees give you a second look is something you cannot hope to control.

Goals dependent entirely on the actions of others are destructive. If you set out to win an award and you don't, you'll take the hit for a failure – but it isn't the sort of failure that has any up-side. When an editor rejects your novel, you can do something about that. You can revise, resubmit, figure out where you went wrong and learn from it. When an award committee passes you over, it says nothing about your work and everything about the award committee. But you still see yourself as having failed. And you don't need that.

6. You can lay out the path to a good goal.

Writing a novel may or may not be a good goal for you. If you can look at it and say, "Okay, first I'll do worldbuilding and then a timeline, then develop some characters and put together a plot based on who my characters are and what they need, then I'll outline my story and then I'll write a thousand words a day on the first draft ..." then writing a novel is a good goal for you. If you just say, "My goal is to write a book," but you see writing a book as a single task, then writing a book is likely to be a killer reef of a goal – one that sinks you.

7. You reach good goals regularly.

You're on the right track if, when you break down your big goal into smaller goals, you actually accomplish the smaller goals. If you're setting 3000 words a day as one of your goals, and you're writing 500 words a day, rethink. There's nothing like the forced failure of impossible goals to make you want to roll over and die. Or at least flush your dreams down the toilet and walk away forever.

You're going to hit good goals, the same way your feet hit the treads running up stairs. Nobody makes the rise on stairs three feet tall, because nobody could use stairs like those. Make the steps you build for your career usable. If your goal is a certain number of words and it's the right goal for you, then every day, or almost every day, you'll sit down and reach your goal, and feel great when you're done. Maybe you'll run a bit over – but you'll know that you did enough, and you'll be ready to do the same thing tomorrow. It's like doing the right amount of exercise; when you're finished, you should feel like it would be fun to do the same thing all over again.

8. Good goals leave you hungry.

Hunger is what got you into this in the first place, of course. Hunger to do more than you're already doing, to be more than you were yesterday, to create something wonderful. Good goals are going to address that hunger. Write goals for yourself that send a little chill down your spine. Pretend you're a little kid, and the world is brand new and everything is possible. Then look at all the endless possibilities, and identify the ones that give you goosebumps. Pick those. Tell yourself 'I want to do that.'

9. Good goals withstand repeated kicking.

Bad news. The world is ungentle with dreamers. It injects repeated reality into the dreamspace you build for yourself, and until you reshape the world to fit your vision, you can expect a certain amount of ... er ... hostility. Scorn. Derision. Even after you've succeeded, the world will come after you. People, much as they like success stories, also like disaster movies, and more than a few will be happy to leap in and trash you. Your goals are going to have to bear up under assault from both expected and unexpected fronts.

Beyond active opposition, you're also going to hit low points, bad markets, changes in tastes, and other things that can really hurt you. Failure is a necessary part of success – it tells you you're still daring to take chances. But failure and rejection hurt. Good goals will help you fall back and regroup, focus past the obstacles and give you something to shoot for even when times are hard.

Now the good news. If you've chosen the right goals, your response to repeated attacks, obstacles, and crashes will be something along the lines of 'Don't think I can do it? Just watch me.' (Sometimes you get to roll up in a corner and whimper like a whipped puppy for an hour or two first – but no more. Chin up. Remember, these are your goals. They're worth

hanging onto.)

Remember, every successful career belongs to the person who survived it.

10. Good goals make you happy.

Most days you should be rolling out of bed ready to go, excited about what you're going to be working on. If your first thought about your work or your goals is, "Oh, God, again?" you're doing the wrong thing, or doing the right thing the wrong way.

The Goal-Writing Exercise

Let's get to work putting your goals together.

A note – and I cannot over-stress the importance of this. You must write your goals down, in permanent form, in a place where you can find them and see them and acknowledge them. Goal that you just hold in your head are as worthless as goals you can't find the words to describe – you think you know where you're going, but when you actually try to figure out where you are, everything goes up in smoke.

So. Get a pen. Get some good paper, or a notebook, or a stack of index cards. These goals are your promises to yourself that your dreams are more than just dreams, and like any good lawyer, you're going to get your promises in writing.

Step 1

Now. We're going to play a game for a minute. Close your eyes and see yourself working – ten years from now – with a smile on your face. You're pushing yourself hard because you're doing the thing you love. You've been at it for long, long hours because the work has to be done now, but also because working hard at the right thing is a joy. No one has to smack

you with a time-card or a stack of bills to get you out of bed in the morning. You'd be doing this for free, except that ten years into the game, you're making decent money.

What are you doing? When you have a clear picture, open your eyes and write it down.

Are you playing pro hockey? Seeing your fifteenth five-year-old with chicken pox that day? Hammering shingles on a roof? Writing your twentieth novel?

It doesn't matter what you're doing, so long as you're working. Until you can see yourself working at something and loving the work, don't go on to Step 2.

Step 2

You've seen yourself in ten years, and you have a waypoint that looks good to you. Now you have to figure out how to get there.

I'm going to take writing as your long-term goal because this workshop is about writing; if you've discovered that writing isn't your future, hang in with me here, anyway, though, because this workshop will at least give you your first roadmap toward the future you want.

So. Say you're going to be writing novels professionally in ten years. How do you get there?

- **Break down your vision of the future into its component parts**

Say your first goal is Complete my first novel by the time I'm twenty-five. (This was my first big goal, so I'm including it as my example. I wrote it down in my journal on a whim, in list of New Year's resolutions in 1985, when I was twenty-four. I gave myself ten months to learn how to write a novel, and to actually get the thing done.) Break down that big goal – because in its

current form, it's meaningless. Write a novel? I know people who have been "writing a novel" for the last thirty or forty years. They haven't actually put their words on paper yet, mind you – but they're certain that what they're doing is going to make them the biggest thing since J.K. Rowling, just as soon as they do the trivial little task of scribbling out their work of immortal literary genius. "I have it all in my head," they say. You might know some of them, too. Don't be them. They'll dream forever, and never wake to do. Instead, dissect your dream into workable pieces. The component parts of writing a novel are writing, researching, worldbuilding, developing characters, plotting, revising, finding markets, and submitting the completed work. Each of these segments can become a perfectly good goal, if written correctly.

Take "writing". Because if you hope for a writing career you must write regularly, write your goal so that it includes both how often and how much you must write to reach your larger goal.

My first writing-process goal was Write every day. It didn't work very well for me. I only had half of what I needed to make it a good goal. I wrote every day, but without including a "how much?" limit, I never knew when I had done enough. So no matter how much I wrote, I was always unsatisfied with myself. When I changed the goal to Write ten pages every day, I discovered that I was on to something. Some days I wrote more, but I knew that extra was gravy, there just because I was having fun. Some days I didn't make my ten pages. And there were days when I couldn't write at all because of emergencies and the intrusion of Real Life. But I came close to ten pages a day every day, and that was good enough.

I finished my first novel before my twenty-fifth birthday, in spite of writing it on a manual typewriter,

and doing over nine hundred pages of typing for what turned out to be a 60,000-word book (about 240 manuscript pages in the format I was then using). I learned a lot from the process, and even though that first book never sold, it was worth doing. I learned a lot about writing, about marketing myself, and about failure. I also discovered that I had found the thing I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

▪ **Put the parts into a logical order**

After you've figured out what the steps to achieving a big goal are, you need to put them in order. One logical order for the necessary steps in my writing a novel example would be:

1. Research the necessary background in two weeks.
2. Build the world in preliminary form in three weeks, creating one world map, one city map, three major culture descriptions with religion, language, and history notes (3 single-spaced pages per culture), and a flora and fauna list of twenty-five interrelated species, with descriptions.
3. Develop my main characters – four protagonists (the good guys) and four antagonists (the bad guys), in four days, doing one single-spaced first person biography for each one.
4. Plot out the story in one week, using line-per-scene format, planning each scene at two-thousand words and the whole book at 100,000 words.
5. Write the first draft of the book at 2000 words per day, finishing the first draft in fifty working days.
6. Revise the first draft in one month, using one-pass revision techniques.
7. Find publishers that accept unagented queries for this type of novel, and send two query letters a

day until I have covered my field of first choice publishers.

8. Print and submit a copy of the novel to interested editors; write a cover letter and have the manuscript in the mail no more than three days following an editor's go-ahead.
9. Query recommended AAR-member agents to find an agent who will agree to negotiate my first contract, if the book sells; see if the agent would consider representing my other work in the case that the first novel does sell.

Another acceptable way of doing this would be:

1. Write five pages of my 100,000 word novel a day, doing necessary worldbuilding, character and plot development as I write. Finish first draft in 100 working days.
2. Revise the first draft in one month, using one-pass revision techniques.
3. Find publishers that accept ...

And so on.

▪ **Give yourself a time frame**

For your big goals, a general time frame is fine. One year – Will have written first novel. Five years – Will have written and submitted ten novels ... For your smaller goals, be more specific. Sit down and figure out how you work, and more importantly, how you want to work based on what you're capable of. Always include completion times for each goal.

▪ **Include both big goals and the steps to reach them in your plan**

You can do goals for writing the books, for selling them, for the amount of money you want to make, for quitting your day job and writing full time. Remember,

you cannot hit a target you cannot clearly see (at least not repeatedly) – so if you want to work up to making six figures annually, make that a goal, and then figure out what steps you’re going to have to do to get here.

▪ **Provide a way of tracking your progress**

I’m going to make a recommendation here that worked like magic for me. You don’t have to follow it; I can’t guarantee that it will be so spectacular for you. But I’m putting it out there anyway, because it might. Get index cards, push pins, and a largish cork board. Write each of the big goals you’ve set for yourself and each of your step goals separate index cards, using the following format:

Goal	Complete my first novel by my twenty- fifth birthday
Date goal set	Jan. 1, 1985
Target date	Oct. 8, 1985
Date achieved	Oct. 1, 1985

Pin each of your goals on the cork board in a logical order – first novel at the top left, million-dollar- a-year income at the bottom right, for example – and put the cork board up where you can see it from where you work. Keep good track of your progress. Reward yourself for achievements like first submission, first acceptance, first advance check, first publication day. Some of these you may want to put on a calendar and celebrate every year.

▪ **Be kind to yourself**

Remember that you have to build your steps so that they’re usable, you have to accept that every success is born of repeated failures, and that if this were easy, everyone would do it. You have to set goals that you want. Really want. That you are willing to undergo

deprivation, hardship, and disappointment to achieve. Don't beat yourself up when you fail. Remind yourself that you have the guts to pursue your dreams – sadly, most people don't – and that simply the fact that you're tough enough to fight for what you want makes you and your life and your goals worth celebrating.

There is no failure in fighting and losing if you get up and fight again. There is only failure in quitting – in walking away and leaving your dreams to die.

Fight, and plan to win. You can do it. You're tougher than you think.

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