

How to Tell Who WON'T Make It in Writing (and How Not to Be That Writer)

[By Holly Lisle](#)

I've met thousands of unpublished writers since I started selling my work. I've corresponded with at least a couple thousand more. I've heard every possible hope and dream about writing, commiserated with sad tales of rejection, cheered over jubilant good news, and listened to more plots than the FBI and more dirt than the parish priest sitting in his confessional.

And I've discovered something important. I couldn't in a million years tell you who among those thousands of hopeful writers will eventually succeed. But I can tell you in about five minutes which writers are guaranteed to fail.

The guaranteed failures among writerdom carry their amateur beliefs and attitudes and methods like a bad perfume – an ever-present cloud of Eau de Doom that rolls off of their bodies and wafts into the noses of publishers and editors who might otherwise be interested in the writer's work, sending the pros fleeing to green rooms and bathrooms to escape.

If you're wearing this particular scent, you need to lose it. Fast. Read below for a quick sniff-test, and for the best ways to come clean.

The Writer's *Stench O' Doom* Checklist

• The Big But

I'm a very good listener, I'm patient, and I'm interested in seeing beginning writers succeed. In consequence, I spend much of my time at conventions and writers' conferences leaned up against a convenient wall or doorframe, listening to the dreams and aspirations and tales of woe and book descriptions of unpublished or rarely published writers. These writers usually want a listener more than anything, so mostly I just listen. But from time to time, a hopeful writer will ask my advice. I always take my time, give the question my full attention, and try to offer the best answer I can, based on my experience and what I know of the markets and the industry.

About two thirds of the time, my questioner's immediate response starts off with, "But I can't do that because . . ."

At which point, I'm out of the conversation. I'm starting to look for a quick exit and just about any exit will do. It isn't that I think my advice would turn this writer into an overnight success, or even necessarily get his or her manuscript looked at; it isn't that the writer has hurt my feelings by ignoring me (you don't get this far in the business without developing a pretty tough hide).

The problem with people who say "But . . ." is that they have already decided that they know everything they need to know about writing. They may be chatting me up in the hopes of networking, or because they want me to tell them that theirs is the most brilliant idea I've ever heard. But they aren't interested in getting published. And they aren't going to get published.

Of all the possible sins that the hopeful writer can commit, The Big But is the worst. **You cannot make excuses for your writing and hope to succeed.**

If someone who knows the industry tells you that your

manuscript isn't right for Knopf and you need to submit to other markets, don't say, "But I only want it to be published by Knopf."

If a pro tells you that your plot is hackneyed and your characters are thin, "But I intended it to be that way . . ." is decidedly the wrong answer.

If an editor tells you that you're going to have to give the story a real ending, "But I want to leave the reader in suspense . . ." is going to get you round-filed and lose you a big opportunity.

Here are some of the amazing excuses I've heard.

"But the editor can clean up the spelling and the grammar."

"But I don't want to write a second book until the first one sells."

"But the first book is the start of a twelve-book series – the editor **has** to buy that one first." (Not necessarily. The editor can buy someone else's book. If it isn't selling anywhere, write something different. Something that stands alone, maybe.)

"But if there isn't sex in every chapter, no one will read the damned thing."

"But I want it to be hard to read – I want to sell my books to intelligent readers."

"But it doesn't need to have a plot – it's literary." (This may, in fact, be true – but since the book hadn't sold, I'm willing to bet that in at least this instance, even the editor of literary books would have welcomed a story that seemed to be going somewhere.)

"But I'm a published writer now; I shouldn't have to revise." (I didn't understand this one either, but I add it for your

edification. The writer had sold one book many years earlier and had failed to sell anything else.)

One more time, then. **You cannot make excuses for your writing and hope to succeed.**

. Open Mouth – Closed Ears

They sit in the front row of each writing panel at a convention with their arms crossed over their chests, smug smiles on their faces. They know all the answers, and they talk over not just the other attendees, but also the panelists. They corner the pros in the hallways after the panel is over and launch into long spiels about their future publishing career.

Their entire goal in attending is to prove to the writers, editors and publishers there that they know as much about the field as the pros – that they have done their homework – that they are a part of the inner circle.

The problem is that they never shut up long enough to listen to anyone, and as a result they miss the important information they could have gained, and kill the good-will they could have won. Yes, they are smart people; I've been talked at by a bunch of 'em. I've been amazed by their erudition – but appalled by their ruthless head-on charges and their utter obliviousness to the fact that the very people they hope to impress are gnawing off the arm they're clutching at the wrist in order to get away from them.

So, if you recognize yourself as being the adult version of the kid in class with his hand always up going "Me, me, me," here are a couple of tips.

Life is not school.

There is no test.

You don't get an "A" for shouting out the answers.

Nobody cares how smart you are – they care how willing you are to treat them like equals.

The art of conversation does not consist of thinking of the next witty thing you're going to say while waiting for the other person to breathe so you can jump in and say it. It consists of actually listening and responding.

If you cannot learn to listen, you will not succeed.

- Sacred Writ-ism

The third leg of the Holy Trinity of Doom Signs is the phrase "I don't believe in revision."

Robert Heinlein offered some wonderful advice to writers, and created some brilliant books and some unforgettable characters, but he also offered this one piece of advice that simply leaves me open-mouthed with disbelief. He said, in his list of rules for writers, "Rule Three: You Must Refrain From Rewriting, Except to Editorial Order."

This is a great rule if you're already writing publishable prose. But I've had this rule quoted back to me with a sanctimonious little sniff by people whose sentences didn't parse, whose grammar indicated that the story had been written in one language and translated into a second by someone who only spoke a third and unrelated tongue, whose characters were dead on page one and who wouldn't have known a plot if one reached up out of the open grave of their manuscripts and strangled them to get their attention.

If you are not writing professionally publishable prose, the only thing that will get you an editorial order for revision is a whole lot of un-ordered revision while you learn what you're doing. And the best way to find out if you're writing

professionally publishable prose is to ask yourself this one easy question. “Have I ever had a professional editor (or reputable agent) send me a personal response, telling me that if I fixed something specific in my story, he would buy it (or represent me)?”

If the answer to that question is “no,” you have two choices. You can assume that your work does not yet meet professional standards, or else you can hope that it simply has not yet found its market.

While it would be nice to believe the second, repeated submissions will either confirm this for you (someone will buy it or tell you it’s great and with a few changes, she’ll buy it) or deny it in pretty short order. If you never get any feedback that indicates that you’re close, assume that the work is not yet of professional caliber and get busy revising.

And the variant here for self-publishers is, “Are my books selling steadily and do the people who read them leave mostly positive ratings, and buy my next book when it comes out?” If the answer to those three questions (sales, ratings, and repeat readers) is “no,” you have the same two choices.

If you assume that the words that flow from your fingertips were dictated to you by God and are thus sacred and immune from revision, only you and God are ever going to read them.

Now here’s the good news. No perfume – not even Eau de Doom – sticks forever if you wash it off. Even if you’ve been making excuses, failing to listen, and believing that revision was evil, you can leave your doomed past behind. You can sell your work. Go to it.

NOTE: If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, [come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community.](#)

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