

# FAQS About the Business of Writing

By Holly Lisle

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## How do I keep my work fresh and my enthusiasm up?

Sooner or later, everyone wonders this about any job, and writing is no different, as evidenced by the number of times this question comes in. You want to think you're going to stay as fresh on the fiftieth book as you are on the first, but reading through the works of some of your favorite authors who have been in the business for twenty or more years, you start noticing a tiredness of plot and characterization, a sort of gray sameness that creeps in and leeches the fun out of the latest things they've done. Then there are those other writers who seem to be able to bring everything in them to every single book – they just keep getting better.

I want to be in that second class of writers, and I'm guessing you do too.

Here are the steps I'm taking to improve my odds. I share them

with you in the hopes that you'll find them useful. If you have anything additional to suggest, I welcome your comments.

## **·Read widely outside of your field.**

No matter how tempting it is to say, "Well, I love romances and I only intend to write romances, so why waste time reading westerns or hardboiled detective novels?" you have to resist. This is, I believe, the single most important tool in the professional's arsenal. Read everything. Read fiction and nonfiction, read old stuff and new stuff, read mainstream and genre, read biographies and how-to's and the labels on the foods you buy.

Don't only read things you like, either. If you hate romances, ask someone who is both knowledgeable about the field and a bit discriminating what some of the good ones are. Pick up two or three and read them from start to finish. Ditto if you hate SF or fantasy or mystery or mainstream or whatever. You can find tools everywhere, and you will find more of them in fields that have been fallow for you for most or all of your life than in the fields that you have been plowing and depleting for years.

If you want to stay fresh, you cannot afford to be a snob. Snobbery is one of the characteristics of a rigid mind . . . and rigid minds are not full of freshness and vitality.

## **·Write outside of your field.**

I'm currently working on a novel that no one might ever see. I've been dinking with it for a few years, doing a couple of pages in my spare time or when I'm stuck on the books that I have contracts for and know I'll get paid for. It's not SF, it's not fantasy, and my agent has already let me know that although he loves the idea and the bits of it he's seen, it's

going to be tough to move. I might not be able to sell it, and if I do sell it, I might make first novelist's pay for it.

Doesn't matter. I'm not writing it for the money. Like this page, I'm writing it for love. I love the story, I love the characters, I love the themes and the directions it's taking. And knowing that it's there and that I can work on it whenever I want makes me happy. It reminds me that I am not confined to the walls of the genre in which I work – that I can write anything, that I have no limits except those that I impose on myself.

This page is something else I do for love. Writing it brings me a lot of happiness, and so do the letters I get from readers telling me that something I've said has helped them. And this page helps me to focus on how I write, and helps me to remember why. Both of those things have kept me going through some rough spots.

## **.Work in other mediums.**

I paint; I draw; I write music and play the guitar (though not well); I knit sweaters and crochet lace and afghans; I do beadwork. At times in the past I have spent some time learning the basics of how to play the hammer dulcimer, the cello, and the pennywhistle. I write a middling amount of poetry. None of these things is ever going to earn me a dime (well, maybe the painting might someday, and I have done the maps and such in some of my books, but in general none of this is going to earn me a dime.) It does allow me to express myself in forms that move beyond the structure of words on page and the linear logic of story, and I suspect it allows my mind to approach my work from angles that it wouldn't otherwise get. I've used my experiences with music and art and crafts in my work, too, but the verisimilitude I've been able to bring to the books because of that has been secondary to the gains I get from having other outlets for creating.

You don't have to be good at any of this stuff to do it. You're doing it for yourself. Cut yourself some slack – you can be a lousy painter and still enjoy the delightful smell of linseed oil and the sensual feel of dabbing paint on canvas, or the homely pleasure of restringing and tuning your guitar and playing a few chords that suddenly sound pretty nice together.

## **• Grab opportunities to learn new things.**

Once a week, go someplace in your town that you've never been. Go to a church or synagogue that you don't belong to, in a religion other than yours. Stop by that little one-man museum curated by the old guy at the end of the street. Pick up a book on growing roses just because you've always thought it would be cool to try, and learn all about organic fertilizers and the uses of ladybugs and praying mantises. Take a class in stained glass work or CPR or bookkeeping. Learn to ice skate or tango. Ask the beautician and your accountant and the old woman sitting next to you at the bus stop to tell you about their work.

Sooner or later, these excursions will work their way into your subconscious, and from there begin to filter into your work.

## **• Listen more than you speak.**

You only discover the cool things in the universe when your mouth is closed and your senses are open.

## **• Pay attention all the time.**

Ask yourself why your neighbor leaves his house at 4:30 every

morning and returns exactly one hour later, wearing different clothes. Why does that woman in front of you in the checkout line keep looking over her shoulder? What are those teenaged girls huddled around over there in the corner of the park, and why are they laughing like that? Notice people, cars, buildings, street names, the way light falls on water and on old brick, the smell of the earth by your back door on a hot day in August.

## **•Don't write more of the same.**

If you write series books, permit your characters to grow and change. Or write books away from your series. If you write stand-alones, write male and female characters, young and old people, those who have had easy lives and those who have had it rough. If you keep writing the same character and just giving him different names, or telling the same story but from different places, you're going to get stale fast, and the joy will go out of everything you do.

## **•Keep the machine in good working order – stay healthy.**

And you're saying, "Eh? Like . . . exercise and shit like that?"

Oh, yes. Exercise and shit like that. You won't be lifting those bales and toting that hay, but to work your mind, your brain still needs a good supply of oxygenated blood, and healthy highways to get it there and back to the heart and lungs. Twenty minutes of aerobic exercise four times a week or better, and a diet as low in animal products (none is best) and as high in raw fruits and vegetables as you can manage will strip the cholesterol out of your arteries and keep them from hardening. Cadavers from apparently healthy children as young as eight have shown fatty deposits and the beginnings of

hardening of the arteries, so no matter who you are or how young you are, this is an issue.

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## **How do I face the computer each day?**

It should be fun most of the time. If you're following the steps I've listed above and you're still dreading sitting down in front of the keyboard, and you're still miserable while you're there, you need to reconsider what you want to do with your life. Don't try to make a career from something you hate.

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## **When should I start marketing my book?**

If it's fiction, when it's done. If it's nonfiction, when you have a good proposal and some good sample chapters, or when it's done.

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## **How do I treat my writing as a business?**

- Write every day.
- Give yourself a page limit and set deadlines for project completion. Write your deadlines in on a desk calendar and meet them.
- Don't answer the phone while you're writing.
- Don't take time off from your writing to do housework or go out to lunch with friends or find the kids' mittens.

If this means that you have to write at wierd times of the day, write at wierd times of the day. My work hours are from five a.m. to noon.

- Create a workspace for yourself that is yours alone, even if it's just one corner of a room and your own particle-board mini-workstation.
- Identify yourself as a writer, to yourself and to others.
- Keep all your writing-related reciepts.
- Don't accept the judgements of others as having any meaning. If your friends or family suggest that what you're doing is just a hobby and that you shouldn't be wasting your time on it, ignore them.

For more on this subject, see [How to Quit the Day Job to Write Full Time](#)

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## **Do I need an accountant?**

If you're spending any money on writing supplies, computers, office equipment or postage, yes. If you're making any money at all, yes. If you're typing with a thirty-year-old Remington on second sheets and only popping for a ream of good paper for your final draft once a year or so, and if you aren't yet selling your work, don't sweat it.

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## **Should I incorporate?**

At the point where this crosses your mind, ask your accountant. You'll already be making money, and will have one.

If you aren't making money yet, worry about selling your work first.

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## What about taxes?

Save all your receipts for everything, follow your accountant's instructions, grit your teeth, and vote.

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## What about setting up corollary incomes?

It's a good idea. If you want to write for a living and you want to keep writing for a living, even if you never become a wildly famous celebrity author, it's a necessary idea.

The old way of making a living as a writer, when you could write a book a year and live on royalties from your backlist while you wrote future books, is just about dead and gone if you're being published by the mainstream publishers. Most books are off the shelves in three months and out of print in their first year. Most writers who get the shot at mainstream publishing are gone after three books. There are exceptions—but those exceptions are big stars, not solid midlisters. If you're building your life on the hope that you're going to be a star, you don't have a viable business plan.

Backlists have become nonexistent unless you regain your rights when your books go out of print. If you own your backlist rights, build your own deep backlist via Amazon.com, Barnes & Nobel, Apple, and other sites that let you republish your work professionally (and protect your work with DRM).

Look at mainstream publishing with some caution—publishing as a whole is going through this bizarre transformation right

now, with no one able to guess how it's going to look in five years. Or ten.

I have some of my work available through the three outlets mentioned above now. I've created writing courses in various shapes and sizes. I write books, short stories, and other things—and some of what I write I'll offer to mainstream publishers. Some I'll keep for myself. If you don't know how the publishing scene is going to shake out...and NOBODY right now knows that...you need to build a broad base with your work so that even if parts you were counting on to work don't, you still have money coming in from other parts while you can figure out what to do next.

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**NOTE:** If writing has stopped being fun, exciting, or joyful, sign-up for my free 5-day Find Your Fiction Mojo class, delivered via email. Have fun getting your writing mojo back. The class includes downloadable worksheets and free writing community support.

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