

Ten Lessons for New Writers



What I learned as a new writer, all

writers learn repeatedly.

became the tools for developing my craft. I learned the following ten essential lessons by talking to other writers, agents and editors, and by studying.

Let's Begin:

1. For an idea to become a book, it has to be written down.

This sounds simple, but think about all the people who say they always wanted to write a book. The basic difference between those people and an author is that the author had the guts to put the story down on paper.

The Complete Guide to Writing Fiction and Nonfiction and Getting it Published by Pat Kubis and Bob Howland, helped me to revise what I had written. I knew nothing about point of view or three-dimensional characterization when I began my novel. When I read this book, these concepts and many others became clear. The section on plotting helped me add reversals, complications and catastrophes—definite musts in fiction.

They're not secrets; you'll recognize every one; but they rank in the top ten list of things beginning writers need to understand to decrease frustration and increase sales.

I wrote my first million words the easy way: I didn't know the rules.

When I tell people that I am a writer, often I hear that others have always wanted to write a book. That isn't my story; my first novel began without my setting out to write one. After purchasing a new computer, I started writing a story to teach my daughter about word processing. When I got up the next morning and read those five innocent pages, I decided I liked the story and I stayed with it until the page count reached 500.

As I created those pages (and hundreds since), I fell into a strong learning curve, absorbing everything I could find on my new career. Books on writing

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Bibliography of the best writer's resources included



Other books I found helpful in exploring plotting techniques were *Plot & Structure, Techniques and Exercises for Crafting a Plot that Grips Readers from the Start* by James Scott Bell, *The First Five Pages* and *The Plot Thickens* by Noah Lukeman. I don't always follow a strict plot, but whether you choose to or not, the next lesson is essential if you want your writing published.

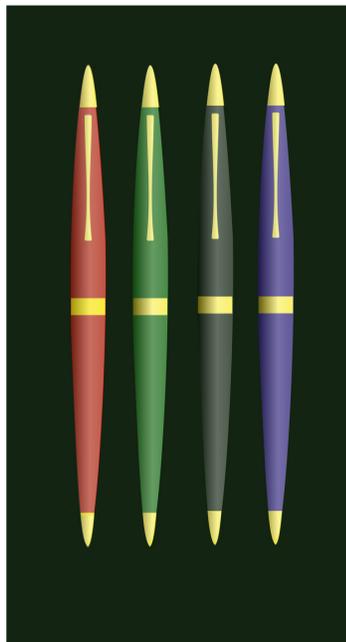
2. Books are not written; they are rewritten.

No one can emphasize this lesson enough. I thought I had a book, until I learned to reduce, rearrange, rethink, restructure, and reword. Then I learned to expand, condense, connect, eliminate, tighten and prune. Use strong verbs; eliminate excess adjectives; remove the forms of *to be* wherever possible. All these things are essential to sellable writing.

Fortunately for me, I found *Getting the Words Right: How to Rewrite, Edit & Revise* by Theodore Cheney, and *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* by Renni Browne and Dave King. Reading those books, I realized that getting my story down on paper was the easy part. Revising it developed the real creativity, the real art. The more I learned, the more I found rewriting a hard, but pleasurable experience. I also discovered an important pitfall to avoid, which is lesson number three.

3. Passages can become overworked.

This one caught me off guard. I groomed the first section of the first chapter of that book until I grew a big, fat purple patch. That's what Jack Bickham calls "a pretty but cumbersome and distracting effort to get at the finest detail, when presentation of such detail isn't necessary" in his book, *The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes (And How to Avoid Them)*. In aiming for a hook (the promise that something different is happening), I crammed my opening pages full of description, adjectives and flowery language. By doing that, I lost any chance of hooking anyone, let alone a publisher. Needing to understand how to write a better hook lead me to seek yet more information.



4. Read everything you can on writing.

As a beginning writer, I didn't know about workshops, conferences or critique groups. I did what any determined entrepreneur does: I went to the bookstore to find out more about my craft.

Most writers attack bookstores by diving in and climbing through the shelves as if they were big zoos. I was no different. I discovered, in the reference section, several helpful books and magazines designed to empower me to rewrite what I already had begun. I bought grammar books (my two favorites are William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White's *The Elements of Style* and *Write Right! - A Desktop Digest of Punctuation, Grammar, and Style* by Jan Venolia), writers' market guides and how-to books.

One of the most entertaining books I read is *The Complete Guide to Writing Fiction* by Conrad Barnaby and the staff of the Santa Barbara Writer's Conference.

Most libraries also carry reference material and periodicals on writing—*ByLine*, *Writer's Digest*, and *The Writer*. I found volumes at the used book store, and my local library sometimes has back issues on the give-away table.

With each book and article I digested, I applied my new knowledge to my manuscript. My personal reading habits changed along the way, too.

5. Read for pleasure—voraciously.
This was not hard. Most writers love to read. A former pleasure

became a contribution to my work. I had an excuse to indulge in the thing I loved most. Novels, newspapers and magazine articles can teach you more about the craft. Two novels I read, James Michner's *The Novel* and Angela Hunt's *The Proposal*, dealt directly with a character's personal writing careers. I devoured them.

I admit that when I first started picking apart what I read to see how and why it worked, it stifled some of the enjoyment that enticed me to read. Still, I continued asking questions: What keeps me reading this book? What keeps me turning the page? I tried to decide what caught my attention about an article, and what enticed me to read it. By now all this analyzing is second nature. I want to know; I want to learn.

6. Enroll in conferences.

That is where you meet other writers, publishers and editors. You can find listings of conferences in professional writing magazines and newsletters. One I subscribe to is *Writer's Digest*.

At conference workshops you learn how other writers craft words and become published. Be assertive. Call ahead and find out how to get one-on-ones scheduled with editors and agents. Ask questions. Buy books at the book table; sit with editors over lunch; ask other writers how they write, and take notes. When you get home, write those editors, authors, publishers and presenters and thank them for the gift they gave you. Then, get to

A Writer's Library:

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writing and applying what you learned.

7. Set a daily schedule to write.

Write every day, and set specific goals. How many words do you want to write in a session? How many pages do you want to see spin off a printer? How many pages will you edit with a highlighter and pencil today? How much time will you devote to reading about writing?

Some people let the answering machine pick up your calls. I admit I haven't reached that level of discipline yet. I like the random interruptions! (Yes, writing can be that lonely an existence.)

8. Most people will not understand what you do. (Including your spouse and friends!)

It's wonderful if you can find other writers to commiserate with; seek them out. Especially a critique group for your work. But whether you find colleagues or not, look the world in the eye and say without flinching, "I am a writer." Which leads me to the last two lessons I've learned.

9. Part of being a legitimate writer is collecting rejection slips.

(The average person doesn't understand this either.) You must learn how to put your work in the mail. Perhaps you will be able to slipcover a sofa with your rejection slips, perhaps only a small ottoman. But you will receive enough, if you are determined, to cover something.

This is where the writer becomes a professional. It requires deductive market research. Published guides, such as the *Writer's Market* and the *Christian Writers' Market Guide*, can direct you to the right editors, agents and publishers. Learn to write those successful proposals, synopses and query letters, then fling your words to the hard, cruel word.

Three sources I found most helpful are *How to Write Attention Grabbing Query & Cover Letters* by John Wood, *The Writer's Digest Guide to Manuscript Formats* by Dian Dincin Buchman & Seli Groves, and a Writer's Digest pamphlet called, *Getting Published: What Every Writer Needs to Know*.

From experience, I can say it's best to keep writing while waiting to be rejected. That way you can have another manuscript ready to fling.

The last lesson is crucial; you must stamp it on your heart. (See # 10)



For another writer's journey, read *Bird by Bird, Some Instructions on Writing and Life* by Anne Lamott

10. I am a writer, published or not.

Do not lose the vision for even a moment, because there is a wolf inside writers that threatens to get loose now and then. It growls that if you were really a writer someone would buy your work. It conjures up images that real writers could not have had this hard a time getting the words right. It laughs at your dreams.

Send the wolf away. Being a writer is about the first and second lessons: You have to get it on paper for it to be a book; for it to be published, it has to be rewritten. And the third and the fourth . . . and the cycle begins again.

You see, what I learned as a new writer, all writers learn repeatedly, for that is how the craft of writing works. The lessons will improve your performance in the career you've chosen as the finest on earth.

About the author:

Pamela Dowd enjoys creating captivating stories with characters who display candid, relationships with God and man. Besides writing, Pamela has been a private school principal, a pre-school director, a kindergarten teacher, a legal secretary, and a children's clothing designer. On street or treadmill she enjoys reading and walking simultaneously! She loves to hear from her readers about their reading and walking techniques, too. To find more writing tips, website links, or to contact her, visit www.pameladowd.com.