

What You Should Do to Become a Writer

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A question for fellow ENGE3360 writers, do you want to become a writer in the future, and if you do, do you know how to become one? First and foremost, determine the kind of writer you want to be. Writers who write simply for personal enjoyment? Or writers who write professionally? Many, perhaps even most, professional writers write for fun; but not every writer who does it as a hobby also does it for a living. But anyhow, the first thing you can do is to try to be something, literally anything else. The president of a student society or club. A debater. A dancer. A kindergarten teacher. An influencer. It is best you start exploring different roles or positions you could be in and start experiencing critical disillusionment as soon as possible. That way, you could write long sonnets or haiku sequences about shrivelled desires. Show them to your parents, friends, or peer tutors. Perhaps they will look briefly at your writing, then look up at you with an awkward smile and say, "I can tell you've put a lot of effort into it, but I don't quite see what you're trying to get across." Smile back and thank them for spending time reading your writing while crying inside. This is the required failure and frustration. You are just getting into the pilgrimage of writing.

During your time here at university, enrol yourself in more creative writing courses, even if you know they are onerous and impossible to get a perfect grade. Sign up especially for those that entail a lot of novel and short story readings. When you arrive at the big seminar rooms for your classes, stride in and take a seat at the square tables. You will see ten or twenty other students plop down next to you with their faces blank as a vandalised clock. Need not to worry, most of the people here are novices like you, unless there is an avid reader or writer on Wattpad sitting somewhere at the back of the classroom who answers every question about writing techniques asked by the professor. Reading is core in the process of writing, and it always comes before the step of writing. Keep in mind to read not only all the reading materials of the courses, but other stories or novels of various genres, so that you can confidently discuss your thoughts and insights of different readings in front of the entire class and impress your professor. Expect to write about weird topics or those you will not normally think of. You stare at the intimidating blank page on your laptop, your fingers poised over the keyboard. The cursor blinks mockingly, as if it is taunting your inability of conjuring words. Recall the important events of your mundane life and turn them into a story. If need be, fabricate certain elements of your story or draw inspirations from others. Ask random questions on online forums like Quora or read meaningful answers to any questions about life posted there. Relate to them by recounting the failures in your life and there you find yourself fathoming the purpose of life. That way you can at least analyse the events of your life and put them in your writing.

Meet as many people inside and outside campus as you can. There are people who are either average smart or very smart. Most are smarter than you. And some, you discover, are on par with you or dumber than you. You will continue, unfortunately, to dwell on your pessimistic and insecure way of life and view the world in exactly these perceptions for the rest of your life. Understand that you will not be able to turn into an extremely intelligent person in short terms and stick to your original path. Do not compare yourself to others who are more successful than you, because everyone has their own place in life. Reassure yourself that you are not living the worst life—at least you have a hobby of writing or a goal of making your writing visible to the public. Transform your negativity into profuse emotions in your story or poetry writing. Pour your heart out onto the page. You will realise that unlike other smart people out there who think rationally, you are meticulous with handling and transfiguring emotions. Being emotional makes you creative, and that is where you have the upper hand in the field of creative writing. Let your doubts and insecurities fall as they may, while keep on reminding yourself that every writer faces this battle and press on.

Explore as many writing genres as you can. Horror. Thriller. Short story. Poetry. Memoir. It is on the cards that you end up writing lousy short stories, poems, or fiction. You begin to ponder the question of whether to stick to the genre you are good at or venture into others. You decide that you are good at writing romance stories because you have gone through a traumatising breakup with someone you loved. Your romance stories tend to have cozy, small-scale settings—the university campus, your favourite coffee shop, or any places you and your ex-boyfriend frequently visited. You recalled meeting him for the first time at the rustic on-campus coffee house, when he approached you and the person sitting to you whom he knows. He butted in on your conversation and asked you about your interest and hobbies. You told him that you were an English major who was currently reading James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which you identified with Stephen Dedalus's strenuous journey into becoming an artist. He thought you were interesting enough to talk to and enjoyed your nerdy company as you explained to him the nuances of narrative techniques of the modernist novels you read. You love your stories to be bittersweet, so you write about how he finally broke up with you over a frivolous tiff when both of you graduated from university. You indulge in the imagination of yourself as the princess who meets his knight in shining armour, and posts many of your stories on Wattpad. You show them to your friends and family, who fail to understand the purpose of writing romance stories and think you are writing too much about surreal love. Soon enough you become tired of the romance genre and decide to explore other genres. You find thriller novels and movies stimulating. You start writing about young girls and boys disappearing one after another on hitchhikes. Then you become obsessed with horror stories. You write a short horror story about two girls dying mysteriously after visiting a haunted hot spring hotel in Japan. You yearn to challenge yourself in experiment with new storytelling techniques, themes, and narrative structures. You understand that it may require copious research and study to familiarise yourself with

different forms and genres, but you are eager to invest the time and effort needed to explore the nuances of language.

Submit your stories or poems to various competitions once you are done writing them. Do not hide them from the spotlight even if you are not feeling confident about some of them. Explore different topics and themes and interpose your visceral emotions into your writing, like you are keeping a journal of your life. This will enable you to always be ready to turn in your works to different contests as your writing will always match the theme they are going for. When you find the theme of the story or poem you wrote (and expected to submit) do not match with the required theme for the category in the competition, try to turn it the way round: in a poetry competition the theme for the year is “beginnings and endings”, but you want to submit your poem about how the speaker grieves for her grandma’s passing. It does not quite cut it. Think of passing as an ending; now “beginnings” means rebirth. Write that everyone must go through the same life cycle of birth and death, that we all experience a “beginning” and an “ending”, and the speaker has come to embrace her grandma’s death into the idea that she is now someone else’s child living blithely somewhere in the world. The poem is all about the speaker’s reconciliation of the loss of her grandma and you feel that you are having the poetry category award in the bag. *Due to the tough competition this year, your piece, unfortunately, will not be included in this year’s anthology.* Each letter is a tiny dagger that punctures your dreams. But wear these rejections as badges of honour, as they signify that you are daring greatly, taking risks, and refusing to let any setbacks tear you down. Keep submitting. In fact, risk it for a biscuit by sending in your works to literary magazines and publishing houses whenever you feel ready to do so. Perseverance is the key.

The muse is an elusive, fickle creature that visits you at its whim. Chase it through the corridors of your mind, pen it down once you see it in your head as it peters out as soon as it arrives. It may appear amidst a crowded café, where snippets of conversations and the aroma of coffee meld into an ensemble of ideas. Other times, it may come to you in the tranquil solitude of a moonlit night, whispering ditties of prose into your ear. Learn to be patient and receptive to its elusive visits, as eloquence in writing does not come easy.

In the midst of the toil and struggle, it is crucial to celebrate even the smallest victories. The detailed hand-written critique of your story from your kind professor. A personalised rejection letter from the publisher you submitted your novel to. The completion of a long, difficult chapter that had you wrangling with words for days and nights. A kind word from your friend who too loves writing and understands the turmoil during the process of writing. Never overlook these moments, for they are the nitty-gritty of your writer’s journey.

Becoming a writer is not a sprint but a marathon. You encounter obstacles and setbacks, but you never let them deter you. You embrace the moments of self-doubts and fatigue you endure in your journey of writing, because the more you share your writing with others and open yourself up to judgement and critiques, it dawns upon you that there is strength in your vulnerability—you have the power to resonate with others, to move hearts, and to spark conversations. You find happiness and comfort when you write about anything in the middle of the night, your fists damp, your heart pounding. You seek refuge in your words as you let out all your emotions and reflect on pieces of your life in your stories or poems. The more you do so, the more likely you grow assertive in your words and smile reading your own work and say, “Perhaps I’m not that bad of a writer at all.”