

How To Be a Writer In Three Steps

Steve Sorensen © 2004
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By the way...

A handful of newspaper columns does not an expert make, but people are asking me how to become a writer. So, I've decided to conduct a little training class.

Lots of people would give up half their brain to see their name as an author. But think about it. If you give up your left brain (the logical side) and keep your right brain (the intuitive, creative side) you won't end up with anything interesting. If you give up the creative side, you won't do any better. Why, you ask? (Hey, I asked YOU to think about it.) You'd be dead! Normal people don't live with half a brain. (OK. I grant you, writers are not normal.)

Anyway, let's not be half-witted about it. Keep your whole brain. You'll need the creative right side to scour your world for ideas (and to give the disciplinarian left side something to gripe about), and you'll need the left side to exercise a little control over the right side. Only a little, because the right side is like a happy little wiener dog, sniffing out the stuff that his master should probably investigate. In the bargain between these two, the left brain should let the right brain do the driving. (By the way, occasionally I don't recognize mixed metaphors.)

This is a big topic and you have lots of questions, so let's get busy. I hear you saying, "Where do you get your ideas?" Good question, because that's our starting point.

(But how do you manage to ask me questions directly through this column? Get back to me on that later.)

Yes, you start with an idea. "Where do you get ideas, Mr. Sorensen?" (There you go again. And because you're so polite, stay with me and I'll let you in on "the writer's secret".)

I steal them. From you. "How do you do that, Sir?" (Be careful. Sarcasm is something I do recognize.) Here's the answer. It's easy for me to steal what you don't even know you have. Your pockets are full of ideas.

Think of it this way. You're walking down Liberty Street in front of me and you have a bunch of \$20 bills dangling like particles from your back pocket. I just speed up a little, focus on one, and grab it. You don't know I took it because you didn't know you had it. Be on the lookout for those \$20 bills. They're everywhere.

No, I'm not going to pay you for your ideas. (I heard that one before you asked it.) You can steal them the same way from me. I have more than I can use, and many of them just pass me by and lodge in someone else's right brain.

After you get an idea, step two, the actual writing, is harder. If you think it's easy, therein lies your problem. No, you don't touch a fountain pen to the paper and see words magically flow from the nib. If that's what you think, you're either a genius or you don't know much about good writing. (I'm taking bets here.)

Thomas Mann said, "A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people." One of the difficulties comes from living in the tension between the good feeling in finishing a piece, and the bad feeling in knowing it could have been better. In other words, writers live with the frustration of not knowing perfection -- just like everyone but Jesus, and Jesus didn't write anything. Does that mean everyone, except Jesus, can be a writer? (You're getting ahead of me.)

"Where do you get your ideas, Mr. Sorensen?" I'll let you in on "the writer's secret". I steal them. From you.

Probably all of my readers have taken eighth-grade English, most have written high school term papers, and many have written college research reports. So the answer is, "Just about." But that doesn't mean everyone knows what it takes to make a first draft into a publishable final draft. What it takes is humility (don't roll your eyes at me like that) and re-writing. Both of these are hard. I know you don't think writers are humble, but you need humility in order to know that you didn't get it right the first time -- or the second, or the third -- and you need re-writing over and over again until you do. Expand, eliminate, clarify, polish, tighten -- in no particular order. Most people aren't up for many re-writes. Not humble enough. Or too lazy.



The final step is to find someone who will publish your work. The better your idea, and the better your re-writing, the easier step three will be. But for most people, this is the hardest of all. Lucky for you, I promised to tell you "the writer's secret". Now, pay close attention. It's one word: Persistence. When an editor says, "No thanks," that means you swallow your pride (again), decide whether to go back to step one (a new idea) or step two (more re-writing), submit your work somewhere else, and hope for a paycheck. If you get some kind of crazy, demented pleasure in that, you too are a writer -- even without the paycheck. On second thought, maybe you have to be half-witted after all.

Steve Sorensen lives in Russell with his wife and Greta. Besides getting this gig with the Warren Times Observer, he has been persistent enough to impress editors at a variety of magazines including Outdoor Life, Fur-Fish-Game, Pennsylvania Game News, Catalog Age, the Beagle Bugle, the Wall Street Journal, and the New York Times Magazine. He keeps pounding on the keyboard because he thinks that a word is worth a thousand pictures. Jesus' words were often like that, but Steve hasn't yet succeeded in writing one of those words himself. Maybe next time. Greta, by the way, is a miniature dachshund -- just to clear up the pictures that word created.