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1

PREPARATION FOR WRITING

This book provides a short introduction to all the aspects of writing skills which someone aspiring to be a freelance writer would need. This first chapter deals with the fundamental issues of what kind of writer you are, and what subjects might suit your interests and abilities best. Do the self-assessment exercises carefully and really think about the importance of them.

You as a reader and writer

If you are serious about becoming a writer who earns, and who has work in print rather than in a desk drawer, then this first subject is one you must consider now, before doing anything else. Every writer needs to know three basic things:

1. What should I write about?
2. Which language skills and styles are naturally for me?
3. How can I succeed, given my nature and skills?

The answer to these questions depends on whether

you started writing in a constructive way. This means that you should ask some questions which may never have been asked before. These are the basic questions, with some pointers for you in your answers. Do the questionnaire diligently, and write a paragraph for each topic.

1. *Your autobiographical resources*

What aspects of your life-experience are potentially useful for writing?

(Consider your education, jobs done, hobbies, relatives, family history etc.)

2. *Your abiding interests*

What subjects do you find yourself most deeply interested in? For example, what areas of life and knowledge could you write about now - 'off the top of your head'?

(Consider your reading habits, topics of conversation etc.)

3. *Your imaginative nature*

What kind of imagination have you? Do you find yourself being fanciful about history when visiting an historical site? Do you daydream about certain places or people? (Think about any scenes from your past which constantly 'revisit' you in your fantasies or memories).

4. *You as an Observer*

What aspects of life and people do you spend time watching and noting? Do you notice detail?
(Reflect on how much you recall what people wear or say. Do you carry scenes in your head, so to speak?)

5. *Are you most interested in the past or in the future?*

Think about your habits of thought when you need to work on a problem or a relationship - or even a particular event.

(Do you tend to look to past events for answers, or are you usually concerned with achievements to come, with aspiration?)

6. *Fact or fiction?*

Do you find that you are basically interested in information, statistics, scientific data etc. - or are you more interested in the imaginative expression of life? What types of reading would you instinctively choose for holiday reading? A biography, a novel or a dense piece of instructional prose?

All this is meant to make you stop and ask fundamental questions. The only area not covered here is that of language skills. It is assumed that you are proficient in writing clear and accurate English. If you feel that spelling or punctuation may be a weakness, attend to this now. Use a GCSE coursebook and revise these skills. They will be referred to in some of the exercises and case studies in later chapters.

After reflecting on this questionnaire, you should have some idea about these issues:

- Whether you are temperamentally suited to writing as creativity
- Whether you tend to analyse or respond
- Whether you put most attention on people or on ideas and abstractions

Essential Skills

The essential skills for freelance writing come under three areas:

1. Market involvement and interpretation
2. Using language for a set readership
3. Shaping a piece of writing to fit a given format and style

The first skill is about being aware of the publications in your subject-area. You should be sensitive to differences in various outlets which publish for your market. For instance, if you wanted to write pop music journalism, you should be a wide and regular reader of the magazines, and should know the differences in style and format between, for instance, *Select* and *New Musical Express*.

The second is about being able to produce the appropriate language and style for your selected publication. It might involve the use of particular slang and idiom, or writing sentences of a certain type or length.

The final skill is about drafting and editing what you do until it is definitely right for the market. This could involve writing a draft by enthusiasm and instinct first, then changing vocabulary and style to suit a pattern or an average stylistic format.

A Case Study: 'Model Writing'

A useful way to start thinking about these skills is to consider three different ways of writing about the same thing. Supposing that you have been asked to write a short book review on a novel. Look at these three variants:

(a) John Smith's new thriller is anything but thrilling. It is supposed to be set in China in the years just after the second world war, and the idea is that the hero, an American mercenary gone right, is a hopeless romantic.

(b) If you feel an instinctive dislike of people who kill for money, then you'll have problems with John Smith's latest hero.

(c) Fiction these days has stalled in the doldrums of some post-romantic world of barrenness; where are we to look for originality - especially in genre fiction such as thrillers, in which tired old plots keep on appearing. John Smith's is one

of these. A plot to make you yawn and long for the classics again.

It should be obvious what these represent. They show the factors involved in actually writing for very different outlets. The first appeals to regular readers of the genre. It fixes on people and place; the second is snappy, neat, calling on people who need a quick fix of fiction and they want guidance. The last one barely refers to Smith's novel. It's for the literary buff.

These are the kinds of distinctions to note and observe when you start out. A book review is one of the best ways to begin freelance work, and it is being used again to conclude this chapter, in order to make some basic points.

Think of your target reader

Supposing you start by attempting one of the most uncomplicated tasks: write a book review for your local newspaper, and offer to do so regularly. There must be several local evening papers which have no regular book column. Most will have the occasional review, usually a book by a local author or something similar. A useful first opening is this type of market. What considerations should you make? Here are some ideas.

Stage one. Think of length, style, readership and 'angle'

Stage two. Note these particulars. You might have - length: short. Say 300 words. An editor will look on this item as a 'filler'.

style: This outlet usually needs something chatty but informative. Certainly not academic and abstract.

readership: People not specifically interested in book information. A newspaper is about news! But you offer leisure - surely equally as important now?

angle: Inform and entertain. Bring out the fun in the reading. Only mention the positive.

The reader is the crucial factor here. Consider the methods at your disposal of finding out about the reader of any specified publication you might wish to write for.

The reference book:

A writers' publication such as *The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* will give just a brief note such as 'for the amateur photographer' or 'specialist articles only'.

Specialist Magazines:

These offer the best advice. A magazine such as *Writing* gives updates on markets of all kinds.

Your own reading:

The best of all. If you read the publication regularly, you know by instinct what you want to read - so write for others like you. Register what it is you like.

Finally, remember that readers have different reasons for buying publications, and that the main reason is the common denominator, and is also decisive in the editorial decision as to whether or not to accept your article. Your review might be aimed at one of several readership groups, but if you start with a non-specialist group and think in terms of leisure, the net is wider.

Now read the KEY POINTS from chapter 1 overleaf.

KEY POINTS FROM CHAPTER ONE PREPARATION FOR WRITING

- Assess your own disposition and interests, then relate these to your aspirations as a writer.
- Check your competence with the basic skills of language and market knowledge.
- Use a form of 'model' writing first, and base your first trial piece on that.
- Always consider the nature and needs of your hypothetical reader. Use all sources of information to define this reader's tastes