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The Writers' House UK

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.
Confucius

☺ Or should we say a single word!

Foreword

This guide has been written to help aspiring authors complete their first novel with a view to publication. When you were growing up, did you dream of becoming an author? Perhaps it's an ambition that you shelved many years ago and now is the time to dust off the dream and make it a reality. I know I certainly dreamt about writing a novel. When I was 8 years old I created an image in my mind of a Dalmatian called Spot. I even wrote the first twenty pages or so, complete with illustrations, although it never got any further than that, but then I was only 8 years old ...

In today's rapidly developing publishing world, we realise how difficult it is to get your book published unless you are a politician or a celebrity, with guaranteed sales, or a recognised author. Too many authors these days are getting missed, as many publishing houses and agents are no longer accepting unsolicited manuscripts or debut authors.

Maybe you want to write a book or have a book idea in you, but don't know where to start. Or perhaps you have already written your manuscript and want to bring it up to the best possible standard before submission. Either way, this guide will help you through the writing process, providing you with all the key aspects, skills and techniques to enable you to create and develop your writing, giving you the ability to make an income from your gift so that it becomes a rewarding career.

At the end of each chapter you will be set exercises to help put you in the right mindset for moving on to the next stage. You will find that with practise, writing will come easily. You will gather inspiration from the world around you and the quality of your work will improve. The idea behind the exercises is to 'fuel' your imagination. After all, this is your talent and we aim to draw this out of you so that it becomes your work that you can be proud of. And if you enjoy yourself in the process, then what more can you ask for!

☺ What better career to have than one which is a hobby!

We will also help you approach your work systematically, so that your chapters flow and appear in logical order. This will begin by getting you to plan your work, but you will always work better if you remove self-imposed deadlines. If your approach is relaxed and you are enjoying yourself, you will generally achieve a better outcome.

Initially, it is advisable to be open-minded when trying to ascertain into which genre of writing your talents lie and what type of book sells best or has a longer print-run potential. For instance, you may intend to write a book of short stories or poetry but decide that you would prefer to create a crime thriller or a romance novel. This is why we explain the various options available to you and it is also the reason why we start you off by doing exercises, getting you to observe your surroundings. Using this method you will find that you begin to notice more and more in everyday events that can add substance, atmosphere and detail to your work.

Between us, we have a wealth of knowledge and expertise available to us which we will share with you and we suggest that you complete each chapter to maximise results. Whilst with writing there are no rules, we recommend that you don't take any short-cuts; the time to experiment is when you are an accomplished writer. This

guide is delivered to provide you with guidelines only whilst you are still learning your craft and any repetition is to emphasise a point and has been included for a reason. Now the rest is it is up to you – so good luck with your endeavours and commit to enjoying the process of creating writing! As Benjamin Franklin once said:

If you would not be forgotten as soon as you are dead, either write things worth reading or do things worth writing about.

Remember, producing your own book can be a hard slog, but if you study the market and do your homework, who knows? You might even have a best-seller on your hands ... In the meantime, we have added coaching tips to help you along the way as well as things that make us smile. There are more than one of us contributing to this guide and we'll leave you to guess which one of us has written each smiley point ... ☺

Chapter One – Developing Your Craft

☺ Every story should have one: a beginning, a middle and an end – just like chocolate cake ... unfortunately!

Introduction

In writing this chapter, we are assuming that you have not yet started your manuscript. We take particular interest in nurturing the new talent of absolute beginners and Chapter One enables you to start writing from week one. However, don't worry if you have already decided what your book is going to be about, as this section will enable you to follow a logical process so that you can be confident in your choice. It will also determine whether or not you have done it correctly, as well as extending your knowledge and writing technique. We have the advantage of having various resources at our disposal, as well as a publishing and editing background. Furthermore, we have a personal coach, who will both inspire and encourage you to achieve your goal.

This first section addresses how you can move forward from an initial concept for writing a book, helping you to achieve our common objective – publication. Most people find starting a book a scary prospect and many excuses are given for not actually getting started – arguments for this being: 'I haven't got the time', 'I don't know where to start', 'I have writer's block'. This is a negative attitude and will definitely hinder you in getting your work published.

As Henry Ford famously said, ‘Whether you think you can or you think you can’t, you’re probably right’ – but more about motivation in later chapters.

There is no set timetable for completion of the chapters and exercises and you should work at your own pace, taking as long as you want, adapting it accordingly to what suits you and your lifestyle. However, we suggest you return to the content and apply yourself as regularly as possible in order to maximise results. This will depend on the amount of time you have to commit to writing if you are working or have a family to look after.

It is common to begin with great gusto and enthusiasm, throwing ourselves in, getting caught up in the excitement, but most of us will run into problems at some point, some even abandoning our writing altogether. Perhaps it is worth mentioning here that only a very few writers get past the halfway point, because let’s face it, writing a novel is a massive undertaking and it is going to take time and work to produce. The important thing to remember is that you are not alone, stumbling blocks are commonplace, but the difference between you and other people is that you have the benefit of this guide behind you, helping you to avoid the common pitfalls, so that you actually get to write the words ‘The End’.

☺ As the old adage goes, ‘there’s a book inside everyone’.

Coaching Tip:

Make your book real. Give your book an image. For example, if it’s a sci-fi novel you are writing, it may look like a little green Martian, or if it’s a romantic comedy, perhaps it conjures an image of hearts and flowers. There really are no rules, but the unconscious mind works best with images. We had The Writers’ House UK logo of a door in our hearts and minds from day one.

When embarking on writing your first manuscript, you need to be mindful that creating a novel is a long-term project and can take anything from six months to several years to compile, if you are to include the time it will take to research your material. Few people

can afford to take this amount of time without any returns, so you might need to supplement your income by selling short stories. However, this is unlikely to bring in sufficient income for most people.

If you are working part or full time whilst writing your manuscript, it is vital to enjoy your time spent writing so that you are getting pleasure from your leisure time, because if you don't enjoy it, how will your readers?

Writing an entire manuscript will take a lot of self-discipline and commitment, but with dedication and determination, you will succeed.

A Potted History of the Book

Have you ever wondered where the book came from? Most of us love to read and books are a great way to share knowledge, spread the word and to simply entertain. Perhaps that is why the UK is the world's largest publisher. But where did our love affair with books begin? The printing press was introduced into Britain from Bruges in the 1470s by William Caxton, a Kent-born merchant and diplomat. This technology made it feasible to mass produce books and there are now a staggering 800 million books printed every year across the world.

But the history of books starts much earlier. I find it incredible that it was back in the fourth century, over 1,600 years ago, that Bibles were first written on large parchments. I can't claim to have seen it myself, but it is believed that the *Codex Sinaiticus* is the oldest New Testament, made around AD 350 in Palestine, Egypt. It was written on 800 pages of parchment made from roughly 365 calf skins. One can only imagine the number of hours it must have taken and how annoying it would have been if you got to the end of a page and realised you had made a mistake. So it is hardly surprising that it is the most-altered biblical manuscript, with approximately 23,000 corrections. That's roughly thirty errors a page on average, which is an excessively high rate of corrections. I wonder if we would be happy to accept so many errors these days. One hopes that the rapid growth of unedited e-books does not mean we will one day find a high level of errors the norm.

☺ We become frustrated when our laptops don't instantly respond or we run out of printer paper. Imagine the tantrums the average person of the twenty-first century would throw if they had to prepare calf skins these days!

The British Library is now home to some 14 million books with shelves stretching some 600 km and it is entitled to receive a free copy of every book printed; indeed, around 300,000 new volumes arrive each year.

The dawn of the early twentieth century saw the arrival of the paperback, which made it possible for books to be mass produced in their thousands at a much lower cost. Thankfully, this meant that the joy of reading was more affordable. Paperbacks with printed covers evolved in the 1930s, when Penguin, who were the first publishers to introduce reputable authors to the mass market, used colour schemes to denote genres.

☺ But this is not meant to be a history book, so we will now move on to the part where you will start to learn to write your own work of fiction.

Readers of fiction expect to be entertained and to be fully absorbed into the world of the book. It needs to be a page-turner, so that the reader wants to get to the end of the book to see what happens and yet at the same time they don't want it to end. There needs to be a good plot and the style needs to work so that the reader doesn't become irritated. An element of suspense should be injected, so that it is not always predictable. The characters need to come alive on the page and they should be believable as they develop with the book. And the reader should be made to care about what is happening to them. For instance, if it is a bad character, do they get their comeuppance?

The reader should experience the emotion expected having read the blurb on the back of the book. If they are expecting a chick lit to make them smile, then that is exactly what the book should deliver. Facts and figures – plus place names and spellings, etc. – should be accurate, so that it doesn't bring into doubt the plausibility of the

rest of the book. A well-edited and formatted document is a necessity. It is these things that we will be addressing throughout the following chapters.

At the end of the book you want your reader to feel eager to discover the conclusion, possibly even a little anxious that things work out in the way they hope. They will also want to feel satisfied that all loose ends have been tied up. They need to see that the book is complete and that it doesn't just suddenly have a rushed ending, where the author just finished the book in a couple of pages as though they needed to get it finished before *Coronation Street* started.

Developing the 'Write' Mindset

Step One

Acknowledging the fact that you are a writer is the first step to becoming one. Many people would feel embarrassed when telling people that they are a writer or even that they are attempting to write a novel, play or short story. Often, people will scribble away in secret, hiding their passion for writing as though it's something that they should be ashamed of.

Coaching Tip:

Be brave – put yourself on the line. If you haven't told anybody yet that you are studying this self-help book and you are going to write a novel, choose at least one – but we would like you to be brave and choose three – friend or family member and tell them what you are doing.

Why would we put you through this? Well, it's quite simple, really. This is because it is easy to procrastinate. But don't pick people who you know will be critical and put you under pressure. Choose positive people who will encourage you and be supportive of your goals.

Step Two

The key is to set aside some time each day when you will write, regardless of what it is that you are writing. If you are currently employed in some other way, it is still important to set aside time as you would for any other hobby and make a commitment to yourself to develop your skill. It is widely recognised that people who excel in any craft or skill, such as playing an instrument, are those who put in the most hours. Very few people are born with an exceptional talent and even if they are naturally gifted in this area, there is a direct correlation between the number of hours practised that anyone puts into developing any talent and the level of expertise that they achieve.

If you allow yourself to become disheartened every time the words don't flow or you don't get it perfectly right the first time, the chances are you will never achieve a published work. Likewise, it is almost impossible to progress if you are constantly going back over your work looking for mistakes.

It's far better to write a piece of work, i.e. a short story or chapter, and then leave it for at least three days before going back to review it. If you can't think of anything to write, at least keep a diary. You can always make it up and add spice if you feel you have nothing worth recording in a diary – perhaps including something you would like to have done – or try writing it from the perspective of an entirely fictional character, perhaps your alter-ego. Rather than writing purely about the events themselves, include the emotions that you would have felt in relation to the events.

Coaching Tip:

Don't kid yourself. When I first set out I was rubbish at painting, but after spending an hour a day for two months painting, I was thrilled at how quickly I progressed. Suddenly people were telling me how great my paintings were, which spurred me on further.

So be honest with yourself, get feedback from others – more about that later – and work on your weaker areas until you are better at them.

Step Three

In many areas of life successful people are renowned for setting goals and then achieving them. But in the case of writing a novel or book, if you set yourself a goal to have it finished within a certain number of weeks, this may apply unnecessary pressure, frustration and perhaps even lead to writer's block as you become anxious about the fact that your words aren't flowing and you are not meeting your deadline. It is far more productive to set yourself goals around being organised and structured in your writing and commit to doing so for a short length of time every day as better results are achieved by working daily, with regular input, rather than long bouts of activity and nothing in between. This is because writing is a habit which is a bit like a muscle in that it gets stronger the more it's used.

Whilst George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is short at around 100 pages, its simple narrative and momentum adds to the impact. Experiment and see what works best for you. Why do you have a deadline? Where has it come from? What will happen if you run over by a month or even three? You might be able to complete your manuscript within your deadline, but if it is not of a good-enough quality it may never get into print or be read by anyone else but you!

Coaching Tip:

As with any person who runs their own business, it is very easy to feel that while there is daylight or even electricity you must be writing. But this is a sure-fire way to burn yourself out. So unless you are completely in the flow and really enjoying yourself, set yourself a number of words to write each day and when you have completed your goal, stop and do something else – after all, experience of life is the food of writers.

☺ In writing your novel you are growing an orchid, not a weed, so be prepared to give it time to flourish. However, once you've learnt your craft, you may want to join celebrated authors such as Barbara Cartland, who wrote prolifically.

Take regular breaks because the average concentration span dips after ninety minutes and the quality of your work will begin to deteriorate. Taking a short break of just ten to fifteen minutes and doing something else that is completely different, preferably that involves getting some fresh air, will enable you to return refreshed and far more productive.

Coaching Tip:

It is impossible for us to tell you how long to write for each day or to predict how long you can write for before the quality of your work deteriorates, so here are some pointers as a guideline. Stop and give yourself a break if:

- You have physical discomfort from sitting, etc. – e.g. back or neck pain.
- You are struggling to find the words.
- Your mood is changing and you are becoming irritable.
- Your eyes are beginning to sting from staring at your computer screen.
- You find that you have been repeating yourself.

Equipment

☺ Did you know that the first novel ever written on a typewriter was *Tom Sawyer* ...

You will need to decide what equipment you will need and what medium you are going to write in. The chances are that once you start collecting material from your research, you will find yourself writing notes on all manner of things, such as napkins in a restaurant, cheque books, receipts, the back of your hand, whatever happens to be handy. It is therefore important to be prepared and to organise yourself, so that you perhaps carry a notebook around with you ... and a pen, of course!

It is worth considering the fact that your work will need to be submitted in electronic format. If your work is handwritten or has been recorded in digitally, you will need to ensure that someone can type it up in electronic format. These days it is vital to be able to communicate electronically, cutting down on time and paperwork, and publishers and agents will invariably dismiss submissions out of hand if the writer doesn't have access to the Internet. It also demonstrates a professional commitment from you and ensures that your work is properly presented.

It is therefore worth investing in some sort of basic computer course or evening class before you get started, if you haven't already done so. Access to the Internet enables you to do all sorts of things quickly, efficiently and easily. It is also an excellent medium/tool to enable you to market and promote your book once it has been released, so you can create a fan base or reader platform, enable others to comment on and review your work, generate sales through social media, perhaps offer free giveaways, or a reduced price for the first ten people to buy the book off your website, etc.

☺ Life Before the Computer:

- An application was for employment
- A CD was a bank account
- A cursor used profanity
- A hard drive was a long trip on the road
- A keyboard was a piano
- A program was a TV show
- Memory was something that you lost with age
- A mouse pad was where a mouse lived
- A virus was the flu
- A web was a spider's home.

Basic items of equipment include:

- notebook/diary/dividers
- pen/pencil; perhaps in different colours

- dictionary/thesaurus
- computer with access to the Internet
- files for storing correspondence, snippets and articles.

There is no need to have brand-new equipment and the best of everything. It doesn't have to be top of the range to be serviceable. Do your research beforehand so that you make the right choices and don't rush into anything as making hasty decisions can prove costly and unnecessary. Ask others for their views and decide what works best for you and your lifestyle. There is no point buying a desktop computer if most of your work is done on a train when commuting to and from work. Equally, a tool which uses voice recognition would be no good in a noisy environment. You might consider investing in a dictation machine or carry a notebook.

Borrow reference books from the library; you can always buy your own copy later if you find it a useful resource. These days we are fortunate in that most information is freely available on the Internet. But you need to be careful when relying on information or facts and figures from sites such as Wikipedia, for example, as it may not necessarily be accurate. If your local library doesn't have what you want, they can always obtain a copy of a title from another library for a small fee. And with the growing potential of e-books, you might decide that this is a better route to take, especially as they take up less space. If you get the right application, you can bookmark pages, write notes and zoom in and out without marking a single page. Even the pages turn synthetically like the physical act of turning a page. But opinion is divided as some still prefer the actual feel of a book.

An e-book – short for electronic book and also known as a digital book, ebook and eBook – is 'a portable electronic device used to download and read books or magazines that are in digital form'. Digital books are definitely a growing market and it is certainly a worthwhile option to consider when looking at the various methods of publishing your work, which will be addressed later in this guide. E-books can be convenient as it is very easy to carry around several hundred books at a time on a reader. The one thing that lets the e-book down is the potential lack of proofreading and editing, thereby leading to errors in some e-books, which is becoming a common complaint but also the accepted norm.

A good dictionary and thesaurus is a must and it is worthwhile investing in a good one. When you come across a new word, look it up in the dictionary or on the Internet. There are plenty of online resources, but ensure you use a reliable, recognised site if you are to avoid making mistakes. We recommend the Oxford series, but other useful resources include:

- *The Oxford Style Manual*
- *New Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors*
- *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage*
- *New Hart's Rules*
- *Penguin Guide to Punctuation*
- *Fowler's Modern English Usage*
- *Judith Butcher's Copy-editing*.

If your spelling is weak, always use the spellcheck facility. Another useful program is PerfectIT, which is downloadable for a small fee. This package checks for spelling and hyphen inconsistencies, amongst other things, and is really useful. It is by no means a replacement for good editing, though certainly a good tool as a last check. Words such as 'there' (as in over there) and 'their' (meaning belonging to them) might be spelt correctly in their own right but used in the wrong context and no computer is able to read a sentence for meaning and check you have used the right one – at least not yet, anyway – which is why you shouldn't rely on it.

It is also a good idea to keep a notebook by your bed for when thoughts come to you in the middle of the night or in your car/bag as you can guarantee you will have forgotten whatever it was by the morning or by the time you get home. You can also use this notebook to record ideas or plots for if and when you get writer's block. If you don't want to keep a notebook, you could always record the information onto a Dictaphone, but make sure you have spare tapes and batteries as you can guarantee you will need them the day you have left them behind.

☺ I keep one notebook on my desk and another in my handbag and am forever taking information from them ... they have become my 'best friend'.

Keep cuttings and articles for future use and file them. Invest in some A–Z dividers so that you can retrieve information quickly. Be selective when keeping articles or you may end up becoming inundated, not to mention spending too much time filing.

☺ If you're the type of person like me, I'm a complete neatness freak who can't stand having lots of paper in files, so why not consider investing in a cheap scanner? It's a great way to organise clips, articles or photographs that will inspire you once you begin writing your manuscript.

Another useful investment is the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* and *The Writer's Handbook* which are updated yearly. The Society of Authors is a useful organisation to join and for a fee they will check publishing contracts for you. The important thing to remember is to take your time and experiment to see what works for you. Try different things, one at a time, so that you don't become overwhelmed.

Being Organised

Accept that your writing venture is a business and start getting yourself into the habit of keeping receipts for expenses such as books, equipment, magazines, newspapers, postage, etc. This will be important for the accountant and the Inland Revenue service at the end of the financial year when you have completed your Tax Return – having made an income of your talent. All expenditure can be offset against your income. Remember, it is a requirement by law that you retain receipts, invoices, etc., for six years. It would look more professional and would demonstrate that you are serious if you could design some simple letter-headed paper and invoices.

☺ Invest in a simple lever-arch file and store your receipts as you make the expenditure – don't become an accountant's nightmare (or dream, because they can charge you more) by walking into their office at the end of the year with a carrier bag full of receipts.

Coaching Tip:

If you are someone who struggles with time management, this could be useful:

Every day, write down a list of tasks you need to complete by the end of the day. Choose three to five of the most urgent and don't allow yourself to be distracted from what you need to do – remain self-disciplined and resilient. This task will help you to become more organised and will add structure your day so that you get the most out of it, without becoming sidetracked. There will be more time-management tips throughout later chapters.

When to Write

This comes down to a matter of personal preference and there is no right or wrong way. Different methods will suit different people for different reasons.

A lot of authors have expressed their view that the early hours of the day work best, when they are mentally alert, before distractions kick in and before they are disturbed by the phone ringing. Others work best in the middle of the night, when the creative part of the brain becomes inspired and ideas flow naturally. Then during daylight hours they put the creative process into some semblance of order. It might be that you prefer to keep to office hours in order to maintain some sort of discipline to your schedule. Or perhaps your creative side works best in the morning and then you type in the afternoon, reviewing your work in the evening or the next day.

As with deadlines, you should experiment to see what works best for you. My least creative time is just after lunch, when I have a dip. Sometimes I have a late lunch to compensate. Another time I find myself becoming more creative is after supper ... or is that dinner...? Only you will know what is right for you and it might be that you need to adjust it according to personal circumstances and mental ability. Once you have decided what time of day you are at your most creative, we would suggest keeping to this rather than further experimentation, so that it becomes a habit.

Where to Write

Again, this is down to personal preference and circumstances. First, you will need a pleasant and comfortable environment in which to work, with no distractions or interruptions. It is well known that if you can see greenery, you will naturally be more creative. It is suggested that this makes you feel more relaxed because growing things represent the possibility of food.

☺ But I would not fancy eating a cactus or rose bush for lunch.

This is because the concept of growth calms the mind and allows it to become more imaginative. If you don't have a stunning view to look out on, you could always put a potted plant in the room or install a window box.

Some people prefer a quiet environment in which to work while others need background noise, music, the TV, a nice view or a busy street to look out on for inspiration. Consider whether you want to face a blank wall or a view from a window; this may be something out of your control owing to physical reasons but it is still worth considering. As long as it is a place where you can lose yourself in your own creative world that promotes writing, it is ideal.

☺ I have located my office in the middle of the house, towards the front. From this position I have a wonderful view of the countryside, I can see who has turned up on my doorstep ... and I can see what mischief the kids are up to as they have to get past me before they go into another room or outside. I can also hear what they are watching on TV to check that it is suitable – although this can work in reverse if they become noisy!

Choose where you work carefully and ensure that you are ergonomically positioned, that your chair is comfortable and that you are not sitting in a stooped position or with your shoulders hunched. Take regular breaks from the screen to avoid repetitive strain injury (RSI) or eye strain, which may lead to headaches and all sorts of other complications. Look at your keyboard and mouse positioning. The best position for your screen is at eye-level directly in front of

you if you are to avoid neck strain. If you already have a medical condition, such as rheumatism or arthritis, for instance, this will be especially important.

Rejections

☺ Basically, just get used to them and don't be disheartened!

Coaching Tip:

Just as with my clients, the ones who hire me do so because what I have to offer is right for them at that time. For the ones who don't hire me it's because what I have to offer is not right for them at that time – nothing personal!

Very few authors or writers have their work accepted on their first submission. If your manuscript is rejected, it doesn't necessarily mean that it should be tossed in the bin and that you are a failure who is never going to become a writer. Simply put it to one side for a few days and then review it, looking at each aspect of the work to ascertain why it may have been rejected

As a general rule, when you submit your manuscript, most will only have read the first few paragraphs. So if you receive a rejection, rather than feeling disheartened, look upon this as an opportunity to improve your work even more and ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the title fit in well with what you have written?
- Does the opening paragraph grab the reader's attention?

This will be covered more in later chapters. The important thing to remember here is that if many of today's most famous authors had given up at the first rejection, we wouldn't be blessed with many of the great works that we have today, such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, by Eric Carle, who was told: 'I suggest you take a course in entomology before submitting another such fantastical tale'.

There seems to be a general reluctance in today's market for publishing houses and agents to accept manuscripts from unknown authors. Publishers are extremely selective in what titles they are prepared to accept these days and so they tend to take only best-sellers, which include titles by Peter Andre or Tony Blair, for example, or ones which have a guaranteed market for sales. We are currently in the world of *Big Brother* and other people's lives sell. This means that previously unpublished authors struggle to get their work noticed and they have a hard time breaking into the publishing world, unless they choose the self-publishing option.

The media are under the misguided, preconceived idea that any author should not have to invest in their book. Self-publishing has been labelled 'vanity' publishing for many years now. Well, let us tell you who did it in the past: James Joyce, Deepak Chopra, Mark Twain, Virginia Wolff, e.e. cummings, Rudyard Kipling and Benjamin Franklin, perhaps the most surprising being Beatrix Potter. It is worth noting here that famous authors such as George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, Theodor Seuss Geisel's *Dr Seuss*, Anne Frank's *Diary of Anne Frank* and Stephen King's first four novels were rejected and not just once, by both publishers and agents. And throughout his life, Herman Melville only sold 3,715 copies of his book *Moby Dick*. Indeed, some examples of famous authors who were rudely rejected include:

- William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* was rejected by twenty publishers before finally receiving a deal. One stated: 'an absurd and uninteresting fantasy which was rubbish and dull'. If only they had known!
- Anne Frank's *The Diary of Anne Frank*: 'The girl doesn't, it seems to me, have a special perception or feeling which would lift that book above the "curiosity" level.'
- George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: 'It is impossible to sell animal stories in the USA.'
- Rudyard Kipling: 'I'm sorry Mr. Kipling, but you just don't know how to use the English language.'
- Richard Adams' *Watership Down*: thirteen publishers didn't agree with his two daughters who encouraged him to publish this book. 'Older children wouldn't like it because its language was too difficult'.

- Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*: his novel was never intended to be published in the first place, but one comment was that it was 'an irresponsible holiday story'.
- D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: 'for your own sake do not publish this book'.

According to Judy Blume, who received 'nothing but rejections' for two years:

I would go to sleep at night feeling that I'd never be published. But I'd wake up in the morning convinced I would be. Each time I sent a story or book off to a publisher, I would sit down and begin something new. I was learning more with each effort. I was determined. Determination and hard work are as important as talent.

So don't be disheartened and be prepared to persevere and to research different options. As Ray Bradbury once said: 'You fail only if you stop writing'. And as Frank Sinatra once said: 'The best revenge is massive success'.

Coaching Tip:

Many authors make themselves miserable by constantly worrying about whether or not they will get published or sell enough copies. This can create tremendous and unnecessary pressure. We are all prone to worrying about the future, rather than celebrating it, in that we find it easy to imagine that negative things will become a reality, whereas positive things are unlikely to happen. The best thing is to take on the following mindset:

- I don't know if this will be published, but I am going to write it anyway.
- I don't know if this will be a success, but that doesn't matter because I just want to write anyway.

By adopting this attitude there is no pressure around success. The best outcome is that you will achieve all your goals and enjoy the journey. In the worst case you may not achieve your objective but you will have had a great time anyway.

Summary

Right now you may well be feeling like an eager learner after their first driving lesson: disappointed that you have not been let loose on the road or even allowed to drive the car. But just imagine what it would be like if new drivers were taken onto the motorway without even being shown where the controls are.

Taking a little time to achieve the right mindset and understand what works best for you will in the long run make the writing process far more enjoyable and less disappointing.

If you have ever attempted even the simplest DIY task you will already know how much easier it is if you have the correct tools for the job, so don't make life difficult for yourself – 'tool-up' correctly from the outset.

Key Points

- Tell yourself you are a writer and relax and enjoy the process!
- Practice makes perfect.
- Make sure you are computer literate and have access to a computer.
- Fuel your imagination using our exercises at the end of each chapter.
- Approach your work systematically and put it in some semblance of logical order.
- Organise yourself and ensure you have the right equipment, etc.
- Remain self-disciplined and persevere.

- Remove any unnecessary deadlines or self-imposed pressure around success, taking regular breaks.
- Manage your time effectively – using time-management techniques if necessary.
- Complete the chapters in sequence.
- Structure your day and set aside time to write on a daily basis.
- Find out where and when you write best.
- Review your work after a period of time.
- Make a cuttings file.
- Always continue to learn and improve your writing.
- Don't be disheartened every time you receive a rejection.

Exercises

1. Experiment by writing at different times of the day and in different locations. Try:
 - Getting up an hour early and perhaps writing in the study or the kitchen with a cup of coffee while the house is quiet and everybody else is still sleeping.
 - Mid morning in the garden.
 - Late afternoon in a cafe, in a park or by the river.

Come up with your own places and time slots, but we suggest you try out at least three different time slots in three different locations that fit in with your life and family; these locations can all be in your own home. You might just surprise yourself where the words flow best ...

☺ I can't even take a bath without being disturbed ... I just learnt the art of switching off. My boss used to get infuriated if the phone was ringing and I didn't answer it. But the fact was that I genuinely didn't hear it as I was completely self-absorbed in my work.

2. Write down a list of all the experiences from your past – just a brief synopsis of them – that you feel might be able to form part of a book at some point. Not necessarily the first one you are going to write about but that might be interesting for someone to read about. You might be surprised how many simple things from your past could amuse or intrigue someone. If you look at many of today’s most popular novels, they are filled with amusing incidents that occur in everyday life and we all have some of those things we have seen, done or said that are often forgotten.

☺ One of the things I have done for many years is write a list of amusing things the children have said. My daughter once said on Bonfire Night when we were letting off fireworks, ‘Does it hurt God, Mummy?’. I don’t know when I am going to use this – it might even be used as part of a wedding-day speech – but the important thing is that they will never be forgotten and they make me smile!

3. Make a list of your favourite top-ten books of all time and then analyse them in terms of:
 - why you enjoyed them and genre they were written in
 - what it was about the opening few pages that made you want to read it – was it the author’s style?
 - what it was about the blurb, the title and the cover that made you pick the book up in the first place
 - what the author did to build tension, amusement, intrigue that kept you turning the pages.
4. Picture a scene in the Peak District. The view is of a small stone cottage on top of a hill with a babbling brook at the bottom; the weather doesn’t have to be conventional:
 - Describe the same scene at five o’clock on a January morning.
 - Describe the scenery and the beauty of it all on a summer’s day in July.

Chapter Two – Research and Preparation

By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.
Benjamin Franklin

Introduction

Whilst it would be great if you could just sit down and pour out the next future classic that will still be read and taught in schools for generations to come, let's be honest – that is unlikely to happen without preparation. It's widely known that J. K. Rowling knew the ending of the seventh *Harry Potter* book before she wrote the first one! Her phenomenal success is undoubted and as with most things in life, if you are going to learn from other people's experience, then learn from those who have achieved success.

From the moment we are born we begin to learn from others. Much of our learning is completely unconscious. In actual fact, most learning is done by copying.

☺ Yes, I know, we are all taught at school that it is wrong to copy, which is why we are not suggesting you copy another's work or even style. But if you wanted to learn to dive it would take you a lot longer to get there if you were watching someone do a bellyflop. You might be able to work out what to do from their mistakes, but it would certainly take you longer.

Most successful authors plan out their work. They know what they are going to write about and they understand how the story is going to unfold from the outset. In this section, we are going to take you through the key points that will help you to prepare, so that once you begin to write your manuscript you will be spending your time productively.

☺ This way, you won't be disappearing under a mountain of waste paper or developing RSI from typing 50,000 words into your computer that are later discarded!

Reading Widely

It is always worthwhile reading widely prior to deciding what type of genre your work will fall into. Read genres that you have never read before, such as military, romance or science fiction. If you normally read books written by Catherine Cookson, choose something different such as Ben Elton for a change (see Suggested Reading at the end of this chapter). Reading widely will enable you to see the different styles available to you, from which you will be able to ascertain what works and what doesn't, such as different types of format, layout, style, structure, characters, etc. This will give you more ideas before you decide what to write about. When reading, consider the following in order to improve your expression:

- What made a passage exciting, interesting or boring?
- How did the author finish an old subject and start a new one?
- How were things said?
- Was the dialogue realistic?
- What made the characters convincing?

We have suggested reading widely, but you may be wondering where to start – I know I would. Throughout this self-study guide we have mentioned book titles to highlight particular points we are making. There are millions of books in circulation from which we could have made our point, but we have chosen just a few to use as illustration. For a complete list of the books mentioned see the end of this chapter. Look at how the authors have used many of the

techniques we are sharing with you to enrich their work. We know you might feel you want to be writing, not reading, but all reading is research and it will help you to improve your writing.

Don't forget to use your local library and always read content that you enjoy. You can never read too much and you can learn from other people's styles to see what suits you. Remember to adopt your own style, rather than trying to copy another's. Try not to worry too much about style so that your writing becomes self-conscious and stilted, otherwise your reader will give up and you can be sure of poor reviews.

As well as reading other novels, it is also useful to read other types of literature such as newspapers – both tabloids and the broadsheets – to see how they use language to attract the reader's attention and influence them. The purpose of a newspaper is to report the news; however, it is an interesting exercise to read a report in a newspaper and see how easily you can actually identify the writer's own opinions or that of the newspaper. Generally, you will find that they are not impartial; everyone has an opinion on something or other. This is simply because it is almost impossible to write something without being influenced by your own beliefs and values. In fact, it is almost impossible not to judge a world event or the behaviour of another human being. This is because we all operate within our own model of the world and see things through our own past experiences and current situation. Often we judge within seconds without realising.

Know your market and adapt your style to your chosen market. You will be familiar from reading different newspapers that the writers of these newspapers use different styles for the benefit of their own readership. *The Telegraph* and *The Times*, for instance, capture a different audience to that of *The Sun*. Purchase a couple of different papers and compare how they report the same event or subject matter. See if you can spot any differences, such as the type of language and style they have used. Notice how the sentences and paragraphs vary in length and how the language used differs.

Target Audience

At some point you will need to decide on your target audience for your work and how you will reach them. Consider what kind of people and age group you want to write for. Is it to be historical, with

accurate facts and figures, or should it be a teenage or young adult book that you are aiming at? In each genre, you will need to decide what material is acceptable.

When considering your target audience, there are certain magazine publications – such as *The People's Friend*, aimed at ladies in the second phase of life – who actually refuse to publish anything that is too explicit or sad. Neither will they confront controversial topics such as cancer unless it is done in a vague way and the end result of the short story is uplifting. This is because they know what their readers want. It is very easy to obtain the guidelines for submissions for such magazines on the Internet or by contacting the magazine direct. Bear in mind that whilst certain subjects can be touched on, such as nursing a husband or wife dying of cancer, the readers will want to see a good outcome.

From a personal point of view, although there is a market for it and it is a proven selling tool, with titles such as *Our Little Secret*, *Look What Daddy's Done*, *A Childhood Lost*, while they create intrigue, some may find them off-putting because you can invariably tell from the title that the contents are going to be about an abused child. Please note, we have made these titles up, just for illustration purposes.

If you are writing for the young adult market, you need to be aware that any publishing house or agent you may submit your work to is going to be very conscious of the fact that your readers are teenagers and that the language and nature of the work should be appropriate. If you were to write a novel for the teenage market that very graphically depicted a teenage suicide and the despair of a teenager, whilst this may happen in real life, for it to be published it would have to be done very sensitively as teenagers are very impressionable. Also, when writing for children or young adults this will have an affect on the average chapter length. For example, chapters overall will be shorter than those produced in a book aimed at adults. This is because younger age groups may have a shorter concentration span and they could feel overwhelmed by long chapters. They might prefer to read bite-sized chunks, where they can pick it up and leave off without losing the thread of the story.

Never write or talk down to children. You certainly won't keep their attention if you are patronising them. A good example of a children's author is Jacqueline Wilson. Her books are well worth a read and

the ones aimed at older children contend with issues that many children have to deal with in real life but which are done in with the correct tone.

☺ Being the good parent that I am, I read many of them before suggesting them to my daughter when I was trying to encourage her to read. It worked. Several years later she is an avid reader – just like her mother!

Her books are divided into suggested age groups and some examples of titles include:

Age Group	Title
5–7	<i>The Dinosaur's Packed Lunch</i>
7–9	<i>Sleepovers</i>
9–11	<i>The Bed and Breakfast Star</i>
12+	<i>Girls in Love; Girls in Tears</i>

Getting the language right

As a child I loved reading the *Milly-Molly-Mandy* books and Enid Blyton's *Malory Towers* about a boarding school. They were great books, but it is unlikely that today's children could relate to them. Another example would be the *Famous Five* series by Enid Blyton and although they are still great stories and very well written, many children today would not be engaged simply because the language used is not how people speak today.

Even more than adults, children have been raised in an instant-access world. They live their lives through digital media and computer games with graphics so real that they feel they can reach out and touch them. These days they can actually interact with the games and become fully engrossed. If the written word is going to compete, it has to have enough detail to capture the imagination. It should also be fast-paced enough to hold one's attention and it should contain characters who spring to life off the page so the reader actually feels involved. If you want to write for children and you have not read a *Harry Potter* book or one by Jacqueline Wilson, I strongly suggest you do so. They could not be more different and yet both are exciting to read. Other interesting titles include *The Big*

Alfie and Annie Rose Storybook by Shirley Hughes, *Eat Your Peas* by Kes Gray and Nick Sharratt, *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury and *Faster, Faster, Little Red Train* by Benedict Blathwayt.

Many people believe that children are the most challenging audience, but it can also be great fun and extremely rewarding when writing for this market. If you are thinking of writing for children or young adults, ask yourself why you want to write for this market. If the answer is that you think it is an easy option – think again.

However, if you are full of enthusiasm and really want to give it a go then you have to decide what to write about. Why not conduct some market research on your target age group to see what interests them. If you are on good terms with your local school or library, they may be able to help you with this.

Contrary to popular belief, teenagers do read – but they like to read about matters that they can relate to. Unless you are living with a teenager or indeed working or volunteering within a teenage group, it is unlikely that you will know what is 'in' or 'out' as regards bands, slang expressions, etc. You may need to do some research and this can even mean understanding a bit about controversial topics such as drug culture.

Gender specific

Just as with adults, there is no absolute rule. But the fact is that girls do tend to read more about love and lads about science fiction and war, etc. Read some magazines aimed at teens for ideas or search online. *Twilight* has created a cult following – though not in a bad way. There is no denying it that vampires have become alluring and it is in no small part thanks to novels such as the *Twilight* series.

☺ From a person who is terrified of vampires, I found them to be well written and engaging. Before these books were released I would not even have entertained the idea about reading one.

For those of you who don't know, *Twilight* is a series of four vampire-themed fantasy romance novels by the American author Stephenie Meyer. Since the release of the first novel, *Twilight*, in

2005, the books have gained immense popularity and enjoyed commercial success around the world. The series is most popular among young adults, winning multiple awards and selling millions of copies worldwide, with translations into at least thirty-eight different languages around the globe – a success story in itself.

Language

An essential part of language is the creation and spread of new words, which often appear in subsequent editions of dictionaries. For instance, I wonder if how many of you know what ‘peng’ means. It actually means attractive and will no doubt find its way into a dictionary one day as it becomes more recognised and accepted, if it hasn’t already. Without their introduction, a language would remain cemented in the past and it would soon become an ineffectual tool. English evolved and continues to do so. It is an amalgam of many languages and the English nation has always embraced other languages. There are many French expressions which are frequently used in our language for which we have no equivalent: *laissez faire*, *raison d’être*, *savoir faire*, *fait accompli*.

Bad language and obscenities have their place and you need to be realistic according to the character and the era in which it is set. Indeed, it is rarely used in non-fiction and only serves to seem crude. Equally, it would be no good having a prostitute or a soldier not using the ‘F’ word in dialogue, as this would not best represent the person’s character and the situation in which they may find themselves. For example, a workman who had just stubbed his toe or dropped a sledgehammer on his foot would be unlikely to say, ‘Oh, gosh!’ An obscenity here would be both effective and appropriate. Prudishness should not inhibit your style. Foul expletives can be startling, amusing or shocking – a famous example being Eliza Doolittle when she stated ‘Not bloody likely’ in *Pygmalion*. Equally, an upper-class lady from Victorian times would be unlikely to be heard swearing. Swearing is most effective in dialogue, when swearing is true to the character. All things considered, if you don’t gain anything by using an expletive then leave it out, as some people find it offensive and unnecessary.

Explicit sex scenes are down to the individual and what you are comfortable with, but leaving people at the bedroom door can be more effective. The reader’s imagination can be equally effective by

filling in the blanks ... but some people like it to be very graphic. You need to judge what is correct for your novel and the market for which you are writing.

What to Write About

It is generally considered safe to write about what you know about from past experiences and personal or specialist knowledge. The benefits of writing about what you know can make the writing process much easier. Imagine trying to explain to a friend how to make a curry if you had never tasted it, let alone cooked it. In the same way it is more difficult to write about an environment or situation you have never experienced. How would you describe a flower if you had never seen one, or even snow for that matter?

If this is too limiting, consider extending this into personal interests. It is a good idea to try writing about all sorts of subjects and in different genres so that you can determine what works best for you. Content usually comes from life experiences, observation, and your immediate environment, landscape, climate, music taste, books, décor and personal choices.

If you have a specialist subject, interest or hobby, take advantage of it as you are more likely to enjoy writing about it and you will find the whole process easier. This is because the subject matter will just come to you without much thought, as you are knowledgeable in it. Your writing will also appear more natural and unstilted.

When most people start writing they begin with writing short stories, which is fine, but what they fail to realise is how difficult it is to write a short story and we aim to help you understand the many and varied pitfalls into which many new writers fall. If writing a short story you have got to make everything happen in very few words, so it has to be very fast-paced using tight dialogue; you cannot afford to waste words on extra dialogue. Be absolutely sure that it is a short story rather than something bigger before you begin, as it will have a direct affect on the type of style you adopt in your writing.

Once you have decided what you are going to write about, you will need to see if it is sustainable. In other words, can you source enough exciting and interesting material on your chosen topic to write a complete manuscript? Are there enough twists and turns to keep your reader interested? Can you have any subplots running

parallel to the main story? Or is it just that you have a short story or starting point that cannot be eked out into a novel? In which case perhaps you should consider selling this one to one of the popular magazines which print short stories and develop another plot for your novel.

In the adventure novel *Swiss Family Robinson*, Johann David Wyss began with an initial concept of a shipwrecked family in the East Indies on their way to Australia. This was developed in that he and his family survive and learn how to become self-sufficient on a remote island, using their natural surroundings, with plenty of adventures and mishaps along the way, but with a geographically impossible array of animals: camels, kangaroos, zebras, elephants.

You could come up with your own version, such as two rival entrepreneurs, perhaps similar to those on the TV series *The Apprentice*, or Duncan Bannatyne and Theo Paphitis from *Dragon's Den*, stranded on a desert island, now dependent upon each other for survival, neither of whom may have had the experience of struggling or fending for themselves, now having to 'get their hands dirty'. Either way, your initial concept needs to be expanded upon if you are to turn it into a fully fledged plot.

Memoirs/Autobiographies

When writing a memoir or autobiography, many of the same elements are required as that for a novel, as you still need to engage with your audience. But what is it that makes a memoir become something that someone wants to buy to read?

It may be as simple as the title or the cover design that first catches the reader's eye and then perhaps the blurb on the back cover. People then tend to look for general indicators along the line of their particular interest, e.g. women's issues, adventure, horse racing, sport. Once the general area has been identified, the reader will then ascertain whether or not the memoir appears to have any other specific relevance to them. Perhaps it is based around something or someone in your own hometown. Maybe a family member or friend has asked you to write down the things you have done over the course of your life because they have found them interesting and they don't want these memories to go to your grave with you. These are all reasons for writing and reading memoirs.

There is lots of general interest in celebrities, including Jeremy Clarkson, Ian Botham, Jamie Oliver, Ben Fogle, the Beckhams ... But let's face it – most of us aren't celebrities, so if we want to create some interest in your life, bear in mind that you will need an excellent hook to catch people's interest.

It is a very individual thing as to what draws you in as a reader, but invariably it will be having one's curiosity aroused, so that they find themselves wanting to know more about something or a need to have revealed some hidden detail that we might not otherwise get to find out about in someone's life. People want to look behind the doors of other people's lives and learn about those hidden worlds. But first, you need to ascertain whether or not the story is interesting enough to sustain a storyline.

Memoirs give us more than the facts – it is a craft of literary work. Another question which often gets asked is whether or not falsehood or inaccuracy in a memoir is ever acceptable. When memoir falsehoods come to light, readers invariably feel betrayed. They expect the truth and it is this that should be delivered, if they are ever to trust you again and if the rest of your work isn't to be brought into question. As Mark Twain once said:

A lie can travel halfway around the world
while the truth is putting on its shoes.

When writing a memoir we rely on our memory and our own interpretation or perception of the facts and events as we see them (see Chapter Five for more about perception). Memory is inaccurate, so it could be construed that all memoirs are false. And let's face it, who doesn't embellish on the truth to make something sound better than it actually is? No one has such an exciting life all the time and all of our lives are full of the mundane, as well as the exciting ... hopefully. But if we were to include the mundane, it would make for a very dull reading.

It's no wonder that truth is stranger than
fiction. Fiction has to make sense.

Mark Twain

Memory deletes certain details it considers unimportant or if it wishes to forget when it's too painful to confront. The mind does not store an exact replica of an experience and it can also alter

timelines and rearrange or fabricate facts. For instance, if you have an argument with someone, each of you will place significance on different aspects of what was said. Memories can become dimmer or increase with time and different people will remember the same event in a different way, according to what level of importance or significance they put on it. In a sense, all writing is fiction in which the writer aims to tell a story, promoting their own point of view. By altering the facts slightly, it can be seen that they are in actual fact only making it better.

Real life is always messier than literature. Things and people are more complicated or unknowable than depicted on the page and as we have and will continue to state throughout, if it doesn't add anything to the story, leave it out. Stories have to add to the point of what you are trying to say or they aren't worth telling.

Material or content for memoirs, as with all fiction, is selected, organised, structured. Even dialogue, whilst it may be accurate, unless transcribed word for word from a recording, won't be verbatim. Characters can be changed to protect identity and they can be created from several different people, so that no one can identify themselves in a particular person. Equally places, names, locations can all be changed, especially if we are to avoid getting sued (more on this later in this chapter; Libel and Slander). But inventing a story from raw data is not the same as inventing the facts or data. If you are going to alter things significantly it might be a good idea to let the readers know in some form of disclaimer. Remember:

If you tell the truth you don't have to
remember anything.

Mark Twain

A biography is different from an autobiography in that the former is an account of someone's life written by someone else and the latter is an account of a person's life, written by that person. The fact is we all have a story. Working as a coach I have listened with fascination to thousands of stories. Whilst I find all my clients' stories fascinating from a professional point of view, there is no doubt that some lives are more eventful than others. For an unknown person to write a biography, they first have to ask themselves what it is about their story that would interest complete

strangers. If you do not feel you have enough in your story without embellishing it, then perhaps just use it as a starting point for a fictional work. I shared part of my story in my self-help book – *Forget Fibromyalgia: Putting the Pieces Together* – because it was relevant to the subject. I did not go into great detail, but I still had to take into account that some of the things that I wrote about might affect members of my family if they were to read it, so I had to be sensitive to that fact.

Choosing Your Title

Like it or not, people judge a book by its cover and in just a few words, your title needs to capture your reader's imagination and give them a strong indication as to the topic and style that your novel is written in. A good example that we feel does this really well is found in the war title by Harry Patch, *The Last Fighting Tommy: The Life of Harry Patch, The Oldest Surviving Veteran of the Trenches*, in which the title gives a clear indication of the book; my husband thought it was great, by the way. A great example of a chick lit with a good title is *Miranda's Big Mistake* by Jill Mansell, which has a great tag line: is he the answer to a single girl's prayers?

It is important to research your title and come up with a good name for your book. For non-fiction, the title has to be something that says what it is on the tin. It needs to be catchy or to hook people. Consider whether or not it is something that can be serialised, such as the Chicken Soup series by Mark Victor Hansen and Jack Canfield: *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. Another widely recognised and well-researched title is *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne. Jennifer Donnelly has serialised *The Tea Rose*, *The Winter Rose* and *The Wild Rose* trilogy, in which she portrays very endearing characters. And Jilly Cooper did it in some of her titles, including *Riders* and *Polo*. Check if there are any similar titles and consider having more than one-word titles, which can limit search results. If your book was called *Eden*, for instance, and someone searched for this on the Internet, they would more than likely come up with The Eden Project, thereby missing out on valuable sales. Whereas a title such as *The Mists of Eden*, which is more specific, would bring up results for just this book title and so aids potential sales.

If you want your book to be a series then consider this when choosing your title. The *Chicken Soup* books have over 100 titles. Catherine Cookson wrote the *The Mallen Trilogy* and the *Tilly Trotter* books, which are good series titles. If you called your book *12 Hannings Lane* it might be difficult to make a serial and *The Storm* is a similar example – just so you don't go trying to look for them, these are made-up names. ☺

If you are considering a title for a work of fiction, you need something that immediately draws the potential reader in by creating intrigue. For instance, titles such as *We Know What You Were Doing* automatically draw attention as does *Tuppence Across the Mersey*. But it can also work in reverse, where someone looking for a historical romance or drama might not select a title called *Winchester Cathedral* if they think it might be to do with religion, as this wouldn't be what they are looking for, in which case they might be missing out on reading a good book; we have made this title up to give you the general idea. Titles such as *Confessions of a Shopaholic* automatically create intrigue. What did she do? What did she confess to? In the title alone, you have created or whipped up a sense of curiosity, drawing the reader in.

When researching your title, see whether or not other authors have used the same title, so that you don't become associated by default with their work. This can work in both the positive and the negative, in that a book with the same title as you that receives a good or a bad review can be connected mistakenly with your manuscript. Have a look at what other titles you are competing with.

Try not to get too hung up on your title while you're actually writing your manuscript. Just come up with something that you like and accept that it is a working title. But be prepared to adapt it and rework it once you reach publishing stage.

Getting Started

Ideas, inspiration and motivation come from within. The only way to get started is to commit yourself to writing and then just sit down and get on with it. You may find this difficult at first, but it is worth persevering. If you compare the human brain to an athlete, both are better when warmed up. A runner trains for a marathon and stretches beforehand and you preheat your oven to get it warmed

up before using it. It is for reason we have given you exercises at the end of each chapter, so that you can practise exercising your writing muscle. ☺ Anything that will get the brain functioning and words on paper will suffice. It doesn't have to be about anything in particular, as long as it achieves its purpose. It doesn't matter how rough or poor the quality – the main thing is that you will have started writing and the words and ideas will soon keep on flowing.

A way to get yourself noticed and to start to practise and perfect your writing skills is to start by producing articles and material for newspapers, magazines, local radio, blogs, tweets, postings on Facebook, etc. Ensure the copies you submit are 'clean' in that they should be well written, spellchecked and edited; this should be the foundation of your writing.

Facts and figures should be accurate and it should address something current, that people are interested in. Keep an eye out for factual statements that are clearly wrong, e.g. Stockholm being the capital of Norway, or *The War of the Worlds* written by Charles Dickens, because if not you will not give credibility to your work and the rest of the material you have written will be brought into doubt. You may even find that it affects future submissions you may wish to write.

Have a look on the Internet or in specialist writing magazines for guidelines on submissions and do your homework prior to sending it out. For instance, there is no point producing a page of A4, if all they require is a paragraph of just 150 words.

One of the simplest ways to begin to receive payment for something you have written is to send in a short letter of just 200 words to one of the popular magazines which carries a letters page and states that they pay for letters printed. Even if you only receive a payment of £15–20, it would at least give you a boost, as it is a great feeling knowing that someone is actually willing pay for what you write.

Maggie McCullough, the author of *Jubilee Lane*, of whose writing it is said 'must rank amongst such great novelists as Catherine Cookson', was paid for an article she wrote in the *Take a Break* Winter edition from the *Take a Break* series, in which she wrote about her life. Later in this guide we have used examples from her work for illustration purposes as we feel that this is a good example of a well planned first novel.

Writer's Block

We feel that this is something which can happen, especially to the debut novelists among you, so we have decided to dedicate a section to this in order to address this very real problem.

There are many different opinions on this and a lot of people feel that there is no such thing as 'writer's block', including Terry Pratchett, who stated:

There's no such thing as writer's block. That was invented by people in California who couldn't write.

Writer's block is when you become mentally tired and stale, unable to source and process new material. When this happens the quality of your work suffers. But if you have planned in advance the structure of your novel, it is unlikely that this will become apparent in that you will already know where you are going with your work.

All experiences – happy, sad, frustrating, amusing, tragic – should be seen as potential material and recorded in a notebook so that it can be drawn upon if you experience writer's block or simply need some inspiration, including the human emotions and your immediate environment. This will also help you to become more aware of your surroundings so that you generally become more observant and enquiring. Ideas are all around you, if only you can recognise them.

The first thing would be to take a break and do something completely different before coming back to it later. You could change activity and go and do something else, such as walking, watching television, gardening, exercise, watching the world go by – anything that will rest your mind so that you become more alert. Other options available to you would be to go to the library, conduct some research online or look around you for inspiration. You could also consult your files and notebooks. If writer's block continues, you may wish to consider taking a longer break so that you can return with renewed vigour.

If you constantly sit at your desk feeling frustrated and negative about your writing, this will actually act as an unconscious anchor, which may be triggered every time you sit down to write in the future. So if you are feeling any of these symptoms, get up and walk

away from your desk. The place where you write should be somewhere that your unconscious mind associates with you feeling happy, relaxed and creative so that you can really enjoy what you are doing.

Coaching Tip:

Russian physiologist and physician Pavlov is widely known for first describing the phenomenon of classical conditioning (anchoring). In the 1890s, Pavlov was investigating the gastric function of dogs. He noticed that the dogs tended to salivate before anything was actually delivered to their mouths and so he set out to investigate further. As a result of carrying out a long series of experiments, he discovered what he called 'conditional reflexes' – i.e., reflex responses, such as salivation – that only occurred conditionally upon specific previous experiences of the animal.

Unconscious anchors are stimuli that call forth states of mind, which are thoughts or emotions, and then corresponding actions. We are constantly affected by and respond to automatic unconscious anchors, but we may not know what they are.

This is because the anchors have been built up accidentally, over time. In fact, we often think that our mood has nothing to do with us and that they occur by chance, because these anchors work automatically and you may not be aware of the triggers.

Unconscious anchors can come in many forms. For example, if you have a habit of squeezing your little finger when stressed and you then repeat this action when you are relaxed, it will stimulate your stress response. In addition to affecting our mood it can produce an automatic involuntary reaction.

So a certain smell such as candyfloss or bacon may take you back to your childhood. A specific song may remind you of a certain person or holiday.

☺ This proves true in all areas of life, including writing. If, like me, when I sit in my English country garden, in the sun, with my laptop, where I just sit and relax, enjoying the moment, the words just flow easily. Sometimes for me it's not always about stopping writing, it's about changing where I am working for a short while. Not always easy in rainy old England!

When you reach an exciting part or action sequence, it can be useful to leave your work to one side for a while in order to avoid writer's block. After all, let's face it, it would give you more incentive to return to your work if you know you have something exciting and dramatic to write about, rather than coming back to something less absorbing and more mundane, thereby avoiding an anticlimax. It has been known for some people to leave their work in mid sentence, so that they can pick up where they left off more easily.

Coaching Tip:

Before you start to beat yourself up about having writer's block, ask yourself some questions to find out where the problem is coming from:

- How do you know you have writer's block?
- How do you feel when you sit down to write – are you feeling anxious even before you start?
- What language are you using in your head? If you are telling yourself you are useless, you will never make a writer.

- Are you allowing the negative comments of others to affect you?
- Now sit down and write something else completely unrelated. Write about your day. Or even what it feels like to have writer's block.

If you found it easy to write about other things, perhaps it is your unconscious mind telling you that your novel is going in the wrong direction or perhaps you have chosen the wrong subject matter.

If you found it difficult to write anything at all then perhaps you need a longer break. When you are not writing are you really relaxing? Or are you berating yourself for procrastinating?

☺ If you are watching TV and telling yourself you should be writing you are procrastinating. But if you are watching TV and don't feel as if you should be doing anything else then you are just watching TV – think about it!

Sourcing More Ideas

There is great potential for new material every day all around us, even from things reported in the media, including volcano eruptions – Iceland – earthquakes, natural disasters, floods ... Ever-changing trends, fashions and inventions can also be a great source of inspiration. It is often said that there has been so much written that there is no such thing as new material any more. In many aspects this is true. However, as we have mentioned before, everybody views everything from their own viewpoint. Your take on events, your past and the way you describe things will be unique to you. So don't be afraid of looking outside of your own imagination for inspiration.

Here are some great ways to get you started:

- Personal interests, hobbies and pastimes are always a good place to begin, including personal observation and experiences.
- Change the type of things you usually read, such as a newspaper, magazine or genre of book.
- Source information from electronic means, such as the television or radio.
- Browse your local library or surf the Internet.
- Draw on cuttings, articles and notes you have collected.
- Look beyond your immediate surroundings; for example, different cultures or spectres of society that you wouldn't normally have a connection with.
- Ask questions and try to see things from a different perspective or another's viewpoint.
- Try to include something new, that people might not already know, to create intrigue.
- Talk to people and become a good listener.
- Question elderly people about the past. Encourage them to reminisce and show enthusiasm for what they say, drawing more out of them.
- In the media and the news things that happen in real life that are current can be used as a basis for a story as long as you adapt it and make your work authentic.
- True-life stories in magazines – again, adapt it.
- Other novels – this is not plagiarism. We are not suggesting that you copy it, but if you read a book about a man who robs a bank, takes people hostage and is tracked down by a policeman, if you like the idea you could then change it to the venue being a supermarket. Make the policeman the father of the girl on the checkout who got shot, etc., and add detail. More on this subject later in this chapter.

Coaching Tip:

Do you automatically assume if someone passes you in the street that they are ignoring you and worry about what you have done wrong or do you just think they must be self-absorbed and not seen you? Next time you are judging somebody's actions, come up with as many different alternatives as you can for what their behaviour might actually mean and how you can incorporate these into a story. Consider why they might be reacting in a certain manner and how outside influences you may not be aware of may have affected them.

Style

Each writer has their own unique style that is peculiar to the individual and it is important to develop your own. Style is the manner in which you express ideas, in the words you choose and the order in which you use them. I have been told I use the word 'indeed' a lot!

Whatever the case, it needs to be grammatical, with the correct spelling and punctuation. The 'rules' have changed and will keep changing, so you need to ensure your work is current. For instance, starting a sentence with the conjunction – a word used to connect clauses or sentences or to coordinate words in the same clause – such as 'and', 'but', 'if', 'so', 'nor' and 'or' is now more widely seen and accepted. The same applies with split infinitives, where an infinitive with an adverb or other word is inserted between 'to' and the verb, e.g. he seems to really enjoy it; we have developed this more in Chapter Eight. But whilst they are acceptable in the right place, it is important that you only use them for the right reason, such as if it makes the passage flow more smoothly, creates impact or makes your meaning clearer. A reader should not have to read a sentence or a paragraph more than once to gain clarity.

You can learn a lot by studying other writers' styles, but it is never a good idea to copy or imitate and we would always encourage you to develop your own. Your style should be allowed to develop

naturally, rather than being imposed upon you or mimicked. Marian Keyes used lots of different styles when she wrote *This Charming Man* and it works very effectively. The thought of developing your style can be overwhelming, but we think it can be as easy as learning ABC, so here is our ABCD to set you on your way:

A: All your facts must be *Accurate* or somebody is sure to notice and probably take the time to point it out. Also, your use of the English language should be correct. Although we realise that styles are becoming far more relaxed, particularly with the onset of texting and tweeting, which leads people to abbreviate things more and more, your readers will generally expect you to have a good command of the English language. We will be dealing more with grammar, punctuation and spelling in a later chapter.

B: It is not always necessary to give long-winded explanations and descriptions of everything that is happening within your novel. In fact, doing so can actually cause your reader's attention to drift, so we would suggest *Brevity*, as long as your point is clearly explained or the atmosphere created. Look at these two examples:

- Stella slowly and tentatively made her way along the narrow, winding lane with no verges and overgrown, thick green hedges, where the sunlight couldn't penetrate, towards the lonely, deserted, derelict, abandoned cottage.
- Stella blinked against the sunlight as she tentatively meandered down the lonely country lane towards the derelict cottage.

Clearly, they both tell us that it is sunny and that Stella is walking down a country lane towards an abandoned cottage; everything else can be left to the reader's imagination, which is far more powerful and enjoyable for them than if you describe every aspect, as in the first example.

C: Before you can write clearly and concisely, you have to have *Clarity* about the point you are trying to relay. If you're not clear on what you are trying to say, how on earth can you expect your reader to understand! And yes, we did mean to use an exclamation mark and not a question mark here.

D: Ensure your work flows in a logical *Direction*. This doesn't mean that you can't go back to recall a past event (see Flashbacks). But if you are doing so make sure that your reader knows that's what you're doing so that they don't lose the thread. In other words, the information should be presented in a chronological order or sequence. Section breaks are a useful tool in this situation and it avoids the scenario of having quotations within quotations.

☺ Think about how confusing it is if you are having a conversation with someone and they keep jumping about all over the place from one topic to another. It can be very annoying unless you are really tuned into them. When I am with my sisters, my husband says he gets totally lost when listening to us all chatting away – usually all at the same time.

In summary, the most important thing is that you enjoy writing and reading work in the style you eventually decide upon. Wherever possible, you should also ascertain that there is a market for that kind of work. For instance, if you were to write in the language that Chaucer used, many people today would find it difficult to understand. Unless they were studying for a literary degree, the chances are that they wouldn't get past the first couple of pages. In fact, it was Chaucer who first rejected literary convention and wrote in English, rather than Latin or French, which was a more accessible language, believe it or not. Similarly, it would not be a good idea to try to baffle the reader by writing in an indecipherable language. While it may have experts intrigued, such as the *Voynich Manuscript*, otherwise known as manuscript *MS 408*, for the rest of us it may as well be hieroglyphs. However, it can be very effective to use made-up words for obscenities. Choosing the style in which you write should be done in conjunction with choosing the genre of your work.

When researching your market, you need to ascertain whether or not there are other books like it on the market. If not, then there might be a reason why. It is well known that most of the models that work consist of books that fit a certain existing market, rather than it being that there are no fresh ideas. Talk to your local bookstore or library and browse the Internet – or should that be surf the Internet...?

If you are writing one of the very popular chick-lit novels in today's market, it is likely that your style will be light-hearted, the language that you would use would be very modern and you would make reference to things in popular culture that your readers would understand and relate to. However, you would have to accept the fact that your work would become dated far quicker if you were to adopt modern terminology. There will be an exercise at the end of this chapter to help you develop your style.

Libel and Slander

Libel is a defamatory or malicious statement in print about a person. Always ensure that a person cannot recognise themselves in a character you have created. When writing about living people, make sure you do not write anything that can be construed as offensive, derogatory or untrue. The defences against libel are: justification (what you said is true); fair comment (if the matter is deemed to be of public interest) and privilege (covering politics, local government, etc.).

The safest option is not to use real people or characters where someone might recognise themselves. The disclaimer, 'The characters in this book bear no likeness to any real person living or dead', will not stand up in a court of law; however, there are other aspects to this. In legal terms, a statement is defamatory (libellous) if it:

- lowers a person's reputation in the estimation of right-thinking members of society (ordinary, everyday people)
- causes a person to be shunned or avoided
- exposes a person to hatred, ridicule or contempt
- disparages a person in their office, trade or profession.

The libelled person must generally still be alive; although 'criminal libel' can apply to the dead. There is no protection if you libel someone by innuendo, sly digs or inferences. You don't have to name someone to identify them; as long as you can tell who you mean, you will be deemed to have identified the individual. And remember that anyone who repeats a libel is liable!

Bias

Bias is a form of prejudice in favour of or against one thing, person or group compared with another, usually considered to be unfair. Keep an eye out for bias, e.g. he/she and his/her. Try rewording to 'one', 'they' or 'you', or replace with a general term for a group/individual, e.g. 'customer'. Alternatives you might consider are:

man	people, we, human beings, person
to man	to staff
mankind	the human race
man-hours	work-hours
man-made fibre	artificial or synthetic fibre
manpower	human resources, workforce, staff

Copyright

This is the exclusive right to use an original work. Copyright is usually owned by the creator of the original work until they sell or assign it to another party.

You will need to seek copyright if you intend to quote an original work if the originator of the work died less than seventy years ago from the date of publication. To be more precise, copyright lasts for seventy years from the end of year in which the originator of the work died. After that time, copyright becomes public domain and no longer needs to be sought.

There is no copyright in titles, but you should take care that you are not trying to pass yourself off as someone else and ride on the back of their success. Names are not copyright, either, but if you were to use a character called James Bond, you could be sued for 'passing off'. If your real name was Andy McNab and you published a novel under that name, you might find yourself in trouble. 'Passing off' is the legal term for using a celebrated title, character or author's name to persuade someone to buy your work in the belief that it was the famous book, or about the famous character, or by the famous author.

Copyright is not required for ideas, themes, facts or basic plots. However, there is copyright in the material form in which the idea, plot or facts have been written, and this can include the intricate details of the plot. You must not copy other people's work – do not be tempted to use the same wording or phrases or the same sentence construction. For example, while it is fine to write a novel about a spy, if you were to call him John Bonds 0007 you might get yourself into hot water.

Apply for copyright permissions in advance; this can be done while you are in the process of submitting your manuscript. A publisher will be able to do this for you, but it may save time later as it can take many months to obtain copyright permissions, thereby potentially delaying any publication date.

Coaching Tip:

If you find yourself tempted to copy another person's work, ask yourself why you want to do that. If it is because you do not believe in your own talent, then simply practise writing. If you believe that copying their work is a quick route to fame, success and money, perhaps you should ask yourself why you want to become a writer.

You should be writing because you love writing and want others to read your work. In our case it is to help other writers. If it is fame and attention you are seeking – that's fine, but there are easier ways to achieve this. You could apply to appear on a reality TV show, for example, which constantly push ordinary people into the spotlight for a short period of time – but even then most disappear back into obscurity, because for most people talent is what counts.

☺ But not always – there are a few celebrities who I can't work out why they hold the nation's interest. However, while I fail to understand why people would want to appear on a show to display their private life to all and sundry, there is no denying that millions of people find it gripping.

If you copy another's work without permission, you are in breach of copyright and can be sued. You can quote from another's work if reviewing it and it is accepted practice to quote a brief passage for general use, provided you acknowledge the source. Sometimes a small fee will be required to obtain the necessary copyright, but it is always a good idea to obtain these rights well in advance of trying to get your work published. This is because it can be a lengthy process and you may not even get a response.

The only way around this is to quote only from authors who died more than seventy years ago. When work is out of copyright it is then said to be 'in the public domain'. If you are unsure, leave it out. Contracts can incorporate clauses guaranteeing that the work is original and does not violate any existing copyright. In this case, if someone were to sue, the publisher or agent would be able to claim any costs back from yourself, so always read contracts carefully. The Society of Authors provides such a service.

Copyright protection starts from the moment you have written your piece rather than when it is accepted by a publisher or indeed printed/published. Always retain your copyright and do not sell it to a publisher. If you part with the copyright, the publisher/agent can continue to sell your work, without payment.

Permissions

When seeking copyright permissions, you will need to contact the author direct. The important thing to remember is to provide as much information as possible.

The type of information they will be looking for includes:

- wording to be used
- purpose for use
- whether it is to be an Internet-based thing or produced as a book
- how many copies you propose to sell and at what price
- intended market.

Plagiarism

This is when someone presents another author's ideas or writing as their own, including quoting directly from their work without acknowledging the original authorship. When conducting research and adopting styles from various authors in order to make one for yourself, and by using other resources such as articles, etc., by this we do not mean committing plagiarism. However, reworking an idea and adding your own research, thoughts or wording to describe it using your own words, is not plagiarism as you are not pretending that someone else's work is your own.

☺ As we have said before, your primary reason for writing should be your passion for it – so with this in mind we know you won't be a plagiarist by the very fact you are reading this guide, showing your dedication!

Key Points

- Open your eyes and observe the world, people around you and their characteristics.
- Observation and analysis stimulates the imagination so that you become more creative.
- Plan your work so that your time is spent productively.
- Decide on your target audience.
- Keep an open mind initially before committing and deciding upon the genre in which you wish to work.
- Consider your use of appropriate language.
- Deal with writer's block before it becomes overwhelming.
- Avoid using long-winded explanations and unnecessary words.
- Check your facts and figures for accuracy.
- Keep the ABCD pointers in mind whenever you begin to write to develop your own style.
- Read widely, including articles, newspapers, magazines and various types and genres of fiction.

- Adapt styles from different authors to suit to develop your own identity.
- Write about what you know.
- Keep autobiographies or memoirs factual and don't rely on memory alone.
- Conduct your research and also research your market.
- Choose your title carefully (but don't let it stop you getting started writing – just go with a working title).
- Get yourself noticed. Start blogging, writing articles, joining social media sites, putting your book out for review, etc.
- Find inspiration in your immediate surroundings.
- Research copyright permissions and consider whether your material contains aspects of libel, slander and bias.
- Commit yourself to writing.

Exercises

1. Write two letters or articles to the letters pages of two different types of magazine. Check on the Internet for submission criteria or contact the editor direct. Read the magazines first so you are clear what type of letters would appeal to the readers. Pick a topical subject of something current in the media or something comical that has happened in your own life; for example: I was at the supermarket with my grandson the other day and wanted the floor to open up and swallow me when he turned to the checkout assistant and said ...
2. Write about a school trip to an abattoir. Your character is Lochlan, a typical 13-year-old boy. Write about what he felt/heard/saw/smelled, etc. Actually show the reader what the character is feeling, hearing, seeing, smelling. Use lots of verbs, adjectives, etc., to show, rather than tell, them that it was 'smelly', for example, or that there was a raw stench of blood, allowing the reader to participate in the scenes in order to strengthen them.
3. Describe your hometown in 250 words.
4. Read widely. We challenge you to read a book a week.

5. Keep a diary for the next fourteen days and make observations of events, surroundings and the emotions they bring.
6. Pick three interesting characters and write about what their life would be like.
7. If you were looking at writing for the teenage market you could describe a scene where a 16-year-old girl walks down the stairs into the lounge, which is littered with empty beer cans and fag packets. The smell of smoke lingers in the room and the ashtrays are overflowing. Take yourself back to the night before the party:
 - Describe the situation where the party was held by her and it's now the morning after. Has she done things she regrets?
 - Describe the impact when she learns that it is the fallout following another of her mother's raucous, wild parties which she is left to clean up while her mother lies in a drunken, comatose stupor on the couch.
 - Describe it from the viewpoint that it is the morning after a party her brother has held the previous night, while their parents were on holiday and due to return at any moment.

Suggested Reading

In some cases we may have listed a few titles from one author. We are not suggesting that you read all of them – unless you want to. One would suffice to give you a general idea. We have also not listed all of their works. By all means choose another of their titles, as we are sure you will find them just as inspiring. Of course there are other great authors like Georgette Heyer, P. D. James, Roald Dahl, Graham Greene, Robert Harris, Joanne Harris, Julia Donaldson, Gabrielle Lord and far too many for us to list here, but at least you now have a point from which to start. Some of the books are aimed at young children, others are for teenagers and young adults – and in many cases have become popular with adults. Even if you're not planning to write for a younger audience, we feel that these books illustrate perfectly many of the writing skills required for a great novel. We have also selected books from different genres.

Even if it's not a particular area of interest to you, many of these books have sold millions of copies – so the authors are obviously doing something right. It is certainly worth investing the time to read them to learn from the author's style and technique. But as already stated, don't try to copy their style – develop your own. We have also chosen a variety of titles published over a wide period of time. Other imprints of the titles given are in circulation, but we have provided a guideline from which to start. There is a great deal to learn not only from the talents of the author, but also from recognising how styles, the English language and culture have changed and reflect the type of book that is read today. Please note that we are not affiliated or associated in any way with any other company or organisation and where we have referred to outside sources and material, this has been done merely to illustrate a point.

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