

HOW TO BE A WRITER

By award-winning writer and New Writing South script reader, Rob Young

It's easy to become a writer, you just say these words:

I'M A WRITER

See, I told you it was easy. It doesn't matter if someone gives you a million or says your work sucks, that's out of your control. The good news is, you're a writer, already. Everyone else, including me, is just a subjective opinion that you're free to accept or ignore. Even if you're a terrible writer or a terrible person, you're still a writer. Even if you're just 'thinking' about writing something, one day, you're still in our gang. If you're illiterate, Dyslexic or have a cocktail of health issues that prevent you from writing, you are *especially* welcome because those are the voices that I'd like to hear. All voices are equal because every voice is unique.

But what about being a *professional* writer? That's what you want to know. How do I get paid to sit and make stuff up? So I don't have to work in Greggs? People ask me that question all the time (apart from the Greggs bit) and the answer is graft. Graft and craft. Here are some tips, from me to you.

Imagine a car factory that produces one car a year and it's wonky. The factory owner thinks, "Now what?" At a loss for what to do, he writes 3 letters, one to Lewis Hamilton, one to Jeremy Clarkson and one to... err... who else likes cars? I dunno. The factory owner posts his two letters, waits three months but no-one buys his wonky car. They don't even write back. How very rude. So, what does the factory owner do? Learn from his experience? No, he goes back inside his factory and starts building another wonky car, except this time he's bitter.

Daft, isn't it? No-one would be surprised if that factory went bust. Yet that's the business plan of most writers. We write one wonky play a year then wonder what to do with it. Send it to the National, the Court and... err... who else? I dunno. Then we wait, and wait, and wait. Then when no-one wants it, we write another play. And another. We blame everyone else for our failure, those evil gatekeepers who turned me down and robbed me of my glory! Boooo! Hiss! It's all their fault! Except it isn't. It's us.

The reason most people start writing is to make sense of the world. Why am I short? Why am I fat? Why doesn't the boy in Carphone Warehouse fancy me? Why didn't I get that thing that I really *really* wanted? That's what makes us a writer.

We dream about writing those wrongs. We process each thorny dilemma by working it out on the page. With the benefit of hindsight, things work out well. It's why rom-coms and detective stories are so popular, because out of the chaos comes sanity. The crime is solved, the couple marry, and we all live happily ever after. It's fiction but hey, it's still great to win.

Very few of us *train* as writers. We start off with an emotional splurge then Carry On Regardless. We ride that wobbly bike, faster and faster, until... hey look, Mum, I'm a writer! My hands are typing and actual words are coming out! How totally *cool* is that?

No vet does that. No vet fiddles around with a dog, with no training whatsoever, then one day he yells, hey look Mum! I'm yanking the leg off a horse! Yet as writers, that's what we do. Stumble on, hoping our untrained voice has enough raw talent to power through regardless. And maybe, just maybe, it'll be recognised. An agent will see us. Or an Independent Producer. Or Prince Charming. And he'll whisk us away and do all the boring stuff, so all we have to do is turn up and receive all the love, money and awards.

The moral being, the way to become a 'professional writer' is to have a professional attitude.

Writing is a notorious labour-intensive process, so know your destination before you begin the journey. For example, an average script is one page per minute, so, if you're writing a radio play and the time slot available is 15 minutes, why waste months writing a 97-page script? It sounds obvious but it's a really common mistake. How do you know the radio time-slot is 15 minutes? Because you've done your research.

It's an ambitious thing writing wanting to write for Radio 4, FilmFour, Channel 4 or anything with a 4 in it. It's just as ambitious wanting to write a fringe show that needs a team of people to work on it for weeks. Think about it, why would they do that for a complete stranger? The least you can do is play nice: get the format right, the time-frame right, present it in a way that is easy to read. Give them inspiration, not pedantic instructions. If it's a comedy, make 'em laugh, but whatever genre you write in, make it a thriller. If you don't know what a screenplay format looks like, go read one! It's *that* simple.

But I don't know anyone at the BBC or the National Theatre, I hear you say! I live in Worthing! I work in TK Maxx! I'm not part of the Media Jet Set! And I don't have an agent!

People who moan are really boring, so let's not do that, ever. Sure, the corporate wall of the BBC looks impregnable when viewed from afar, but take a closer look, that's not a wall, it's a thousand tiny bricks and each one of those bricks is a person. A *nice* person. One of them is called (let's just make a name up) *Sarah* and she has just produced a drama that's a little bit like yours. How do you *know* that? Because you looked her up on Google. Or IMDb (International Movie Database, the definitive list of who did what). Now it's no longer a corporate wall, it's one woman called Sarah, who is lovely, wears a cardie and likes similar stuff to yours. Why not write her a nice friendly email to say a cheery hello? That's what I do, and once in a while, it works. My secret weapon is good old-fashioned manners.

As a general rule, if you're in a queue, you're in the wrong place. If you're Script Number 976 waiting to be read, that's a long, slow process. It's much quicker to do some research, find a 'Sarah' and approach her direct. Sure, she'll probably reject you but hey, we're writers, that's what we do. If the odds of getting your script made are 100 to 1 that means you have to contact *at least* 100 Sarahs, Tamsins, Sanjits, all those nice busy people who are your Next Best Friend. Start making a list on Excel.

Another common mistake is that most fledgling writers think it's all about them, when it's actually all about the *audience*. To be frank, it's rude to contact any producer or agent without researching their own work first. Which of the following sounds better?

Dear Agent, please love Me, Me, Me, Me, it's all about Me, Beg, Beg, Look at my script, I'm the special one, Me! And if you turn me down I'll hate you forever.

Or...

Dear Sarah, I saw your vampire documentary last month and found it really moving. It reminded me of that early piece you did with the teenage werewolf that gave my granny such a fright, her teeth fell out. It inspired me to write my own werewolf comedy and I wondered if you'd be interested in reading the first few pages?

It's a crude example, but you get the idea. It's warm, personal and polite. You don't need to big yourself up. Companies want flawed new talent and they can spot a bluff a mile off, so don't pretend you're a game show host. Nobody wants to date the desperate guy on a Speed Date. Nobody likes hustlers or any kind of cheesy sales people, so let's not do that. Let's just be the nice, polite, under-confident people that we are... but on a good day. If your research is pin-sharp, and you're contacting the right person, they'll nurture you. You'll be in safe hands. For this to work, you have to know the landscape.

It takes, on average, about £12,000 to put on a play. More in London. That's a huge investment, a massive risk and chances are, they won't get their money back. So, value that. Don't just bung your script in their generic inbox and wait, give them a *reason* to love you and your work. Don't just write, dazzle! Use craft so sharp, you could shave with it. Clean presentation, tightly edited, jeopardy that grips you from the very first page. And so on. Out with that 900-page script where people just chat and in with... The Next Big Thing! All killer, no filler.

Imagine a 10-year-old footballer who wants to play for Chelsea or Manchester United. He would not just stroll up, knock on the door and expect to be playing on the team by Saturday. Yet that's what we do as writers. We stroll up to a well-known theatre and expect them to put on our play, ploughing weeks of their time and a truckload of money into us. And what do we do for them? We don't train, our craft is all wonky and we've no idea how to edit, but hey, let's ignore that, let's just do our little trick. To me, and them, that's lazy.

There are lots of places you can learn how to develop your writing, that are cheap. Like second-hand books for a penny on Amazon. Try 'How Not to Write a Screenplay' by Denny Martin Flynn or Lisa Goldman's 'No Rules Handbook'. Want a job? Try Artsjobs, London Playwrights Blog and the brilliant NAWE Writers Compass (almost as good as New Writing South). Want a grant? Try Peggy Ramsay, Royal Society of Literature, Winston Churchill and yes, the Arts Council, their under £15k grants are not impossible to get. Sure, they'll probably say no, as there are way too many applicants but you'll never know unless you try. Look at every single listing on the NAWE website, it's wonderful. Lots of people want writers, you just haven't met them yet.

Editing is my big bugbear. Hardly anyone does it. They just type and type and type, churning out dialogue like a long cheap sausage. The general rule is, something should always be *happening*. Every scene ends on a cliff hanger, every page either drives the story forward or reveals a new truth about the character. Lean, mean muscular writing where someone wants something and the audience are screaming, “OMG What *will* happen next?” If it’s a comedy, the BBC once told me, there should be 3 jokes per page. If it’s a tragedy, build up the hope before it is dashed.

Follow the basic rules of the three-act structure, which is Starter, Main, Pudding. If you want to know more, read Christopher Vogler’s ‘Hero’s Journey’, or there are dozens of other examples of three-act structure online for anyone to see.

This is a personal one. Professional writers finish their sentences and don’t treat the actors like puppets, so *please*, don’t write this:

‘He begins to walk and yet, no, hesitates, beat, turns to the left, thinks about lifting his glass and yet... somehow... almost. Emily? He asks, tentatively and yet approaching assertiveness her glass delicately poised, Emily replies in a... perhaps, whispering kind of way...’ and so on.

Whilst the above might sound very, very cool in your head it dies on the page then dies again in the hands of the Bush Theatre script reader, who is reading it. She pauses... a little... then bins it.

Which brings me onto rejection. Rejection, re-writes and collaboration are an integral part of the writing profession, so if you can’t handle them, stay in and write for yourself. That’s okay – you don’t have to put a chunk of your heart out there for all to see. But if you want applause, money and adoration (and let’s face it, who doesn’t?) then you have to be resilient.

People often ask me, what is it like to be rejected? And I reply, it sucks. Every single time. It’s hurtful and embarrassing. I didn’t like it when The Stage described my play thus: “The show is as flabby and dishevelled as Young himself” but in hindsight, it’s funny. I bounced back, stronger, fitter and more ironed than ever.

So, to summarise. Here’s how to survive as a writer:

GRAFT

Look at your percentages. If you spend 95% of your time writing and 5% marketing, you’re that guy in the car factory. Time to re-write your plan.

CRAFT

Just because you can do dialogue, that doesn’t make you a playwright. That’s just sitting in a stationary car, fiddling with the radio and indicators. To make the car move, you have to learn how to drive. But lucky for you, learning is cheap. Books are a penny, the Internet’s free and you’re already in touch with the world’s best organisation, New Writing South.

RESEARCH

Don't know anyone in the film industry? That's because you haven't looked. Find the Sarah! Find Sanjit! Find that nice woman in a cardie who will help to nurture your talent and together, you'll bloom. But it's you who needs to work towards that, not her. Find the little theatre company who does work like yours. Who produces them? Who sponsors them? And how can you help?

DON'T MOAN

Ever. If you get to write a movie or telly series, you'll be in someone's office for months and who wants to share a room with a grouch? Writing is a wonderful thing and everything else is just details.

OWN THE BAD STUFF – BECAUSE IT ISN'T BAD AT ALL

Waiting for a reply? Use the time constructively. The producer wants a rewrite? Think of it as sending your script to the health spa, it goes in flabby, comes out two days later, slim, sassy and sexy. What's not to like about that?

EDIT

In my opinion, most scripts are twice as long as they should be. 30 minutes of plot spanning 110 pages. Lots of dialogue and chaff. Learn which bits to cut and what to trim. Every script needs a haircut.

THINK OF YOUR WORK AS A BANK

Spent a whole year writing a play? That's valuable resource is currency in the bank. It's what you're selling. Try changing the stage directions to sounds and selling it as a radio play. Or a TV pilot. Make full use of your core material by marketing it in many different ways. Whichever version is a whacking great hit, that's the genre it is. And once you've sold the film rights, everyone will want the original play!

DON'T FRET IF YOU HAVEN'T GOT AN AGENT, YET

Don't just keep mailing your photocopied script to all the agents in the Writers' and Artists' yearbook. Do something exciting instead, like hold a reading in a lighthouse, make a Renderforest trailer or get your giggling granny to read an excerpt on YouTube. The agents want to chase, not be chased, so serve up something a bit more exciting than Photocopy Number 952. You're a creative writer, so think creatively.

DON'T BE PARANOID

The chances of someone stealing your idea are absurdly slim, mainly because it takes so long to write a script and the chances of getting anything produced are such a long shot... there are easier ways to get money, as any playwright will tell you! UK law is pretty good, so don't sweat. The big picture is, get out there and share your work with as many people as you can.

DON'T OVER-RESPECT THE HIERARCHY

Who is the most important? A BBC big-wig who you've never met or that 21-year-old student who has just left Film School? Or your granny? The answer is, they're all important, so don't rate one over the other. The chances are, that YouTube clip of your granny might

be the one that goes viral and gets you the TV series. You never know. Just because the National reject you, that doesn't mean you're a failure. Conquer the world one granny at a time.

ENJOY IT

None of us have to write. We do it because we love it. Because we can't help doing it, it's in our DNA. There's a voice inside that needs to be heard and every voice is valid. So let's go - create stuff for one whole month, then spend 2 weeks sharing it, and see where it takes you.

I hope this article has been helpful and wish you all the very best of luck.

Rob Young