

INTRODUCTION

From what I've gathered through your introductory e-mails, we have a range of writing experience here, from early days to those with completed manuscripts who are actively entering contests, and/or submitting to agents and editors. I commend you all!

Think about it. How many people actively pursue their personal goals? Yes--a lot of people *talk* about doing so. Rather like me and my annual New Year's resolution to lose weight and finally get into shape. I talk about it. Mentally deride myself for failures in the past. But...am I jogging three miles a day? Planning meals and weighing portions? Opting for a refill of unsweetened tea when my friends order dessert at lunch? <sigh> The initial enthusiasm wanes, and another year passes. And that's how it can be with writing goals, too.

Just think how amazing you are, the next time you're in a crowded stadium or airport. How many people around you could make the same claim that you can? You not only like to write, but you are working at it, taking ACFW classes to learn and grow. You are showing great motivation, even if there isn't a contract in sight quite yet.

When I teach an online class like this one, or give workshops at conferences, I often preface the material by saying three things.

1. No one was born published. Long before I even dreamed I could ever write a book, I was an avid reader. One day I went to an author-reader luncheon. I was a mother of three young kids back then, with a master's degree and a career--a grown woman. But I was still in awe. Star struck. Listening to those twenty authors speak during the luncheon didn't diminish that feeling one bit. What they had done--becoming multi-published--seemed so far beyond my own world that I didn't even try to *imagine* being like them.

But you know what? Basic talent may be a part of this business, but I'm not convinced that there's a sprinkling of fairy dust or the "luck of the draw" in genetics that separates writers from everyone else. Being a voracious reader instills an instinct for the rhythm and beauty of words; the mechanics of plot, and an "ear" for realistic dialogue. That's why untold numbers of writers have said, in workshops, articles and books on writing, that an aspiring author should write the kinds of stories they love to read, rather than trying to follow the latest trend. And one should read heavily in the genre in which they want to sell.

But a huge part of being a writer is something else: stamina, perseverance, drive, being open to teaching and criticism. When I did start to feel an ember of excitement for trying to write, I considered myself to be on a self-guided college program in writing. I joined RWA--and if I'd known about ACFW, I would have joined it, too. I went to workshops and conferences. Bought dozens of workshop tapes from various chapters across the country, and listened to them constantly when driving--which drove my children crazy. ☺ I entered many contests. I bought critiques from RWA chapters that were doing fund-raising--and asked the critiquers to be super-tough, rather than just trying to be nice.

The fact that you are here, taking this class, shows that you have motivation, too!

2. "If God gave you the drive to write, he also gave you the ability to pursue it." This statement was posted above my computer during the years I wrote before making my first sale. Now, there are a lot of ways you can use your writing....whether in fiction, or magazine articles, materials for the church, or blogging, or whatever. If you have the drive to write, and you are willing to work hard and not give up, some day you are going to reach success.

It's just that sometimes, the goals we set might not be the ones that are the best for us....and sometimes, the schedule we set isn't really what is in God's plan for us, either. That was true for me. When I started writing, I thought I was writing general fiction. Through the contest process, and the editor contacts I made while being judged in final rounds, I discovered that I wasn't...and several rejections drove that point home. ☺ At that time my voice suited series fiction better--and so I revised my goals and thought I was writing just what Silhouette Intimate Moments (a romantic suspense line) wanted. After submitting and then waiting over a year--the answer came back that my writing didn't fit that line at all, and the editor said I should submit to a different line!

If you've submitted your work and have been rejected, consider it a blessing! Maybe your story is ready to sell, but it wasn't right for that house, or that editor. Maybe it will be just right for another house, or maybe your next project will be exactly what that first editor wants to buy. Or maybe, you just need a little more time to hone your craft and develop stronger proposals. I know my early rejections were a great blessing! My first manuscript won the RWA Golden Heart, which was judged on the first three chapters and a synopsis. In my naïveté, I thought that manuscript would sell and I would be quitting my day job very soon. It was rejected by *four* editors during the next eighteen months!

And that was truly a blessing. Depressing, to be sure. But when I look back, it was the best possible result. I was such a newbie. I had so much to learn about the business. I didn't have a second story idea in my head, much less written, and that full manuscript had significant flaws. I would have really struggled with revisions--or would have been unable to do them well enough. If that first manuscript had sold, my "career" would have sunk like a rock.

3. And finally, a disclaimer. Just because someone is published, it certainly doesn't mean that their methods will work for you. The following lessons will take a rather left-brain approach to some aspects of planning a book, and include concepts that have proven invaluable to me. But in any workshop you take, let your tummy be your guide. If you feel your stomach tense and teeth clench at some point, then perhaps that concept or tool just isn't a good fit for your own personal approach to the writing process. If you go through a workshop and find just one or two useful nuggets, then that class will have been a success!

STARTING OFF...

I've sold twenty-eight books, two online novellas, and co-authored a mystery over the past twelve years. That's not a record by any means--many authors are much, much faster--though I was also raising three kids, holding a day job, and the first thirteen books I wrote for Super were under the old 80-85,000 word guidelines, but my actual word count often came in around 93,000 words or more. So, I needed to learn how to be fairly efficient at making progress. In all of those books, there was only one with really significant revisions. This isn't

anything I attribute to talent or luck....it was because I used a simple system for keeping my ducks in a row while writing.

It isn't easy, writing a book, if it's your first or your twentieth. Whether a book is short or long, there are multiple subplots going on. Dates to keep straight. Character growth arcs to maintain. Plot elements that need to proceed logically. So how can you juggle all of those balls and keep them all in the air? From the beginning, I needed a road map with a destination, and an efficient way to remember where I had been. And that system was never more valuable than during the past few years, when I've had some tight deadlines!

NEXT TIME--we will discuss some of these tools, and the first phase of planning a book. By the end of the February class, I will have shared fifteen tools, resources and concepts, plus five big secrets for success. So stay tuned!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What has been the greatest motivator to you in your writing process?
2. Are you targeting a specific publisher, or are you writing a story with plans to figure out the right publisher later?
3. What has been the best piece of advice you've received so far, about the writing process?
4. Have you attended any writing workshops or conferences?
5. Do you have a support system for your writing--friends who are also on the same road?
6. Is your family supportive of your writing goals?
7. Do you have a plan for the numbers of days you write each week? Page goals? Another system to encourage productivity?
8. Do you consider yourself a "seat of the pants writer" or are you a "plotter"?