

# Getting Started

By Sally E. Stuart

## So You Want To Be A Writer?

I have met all kinds of would-be writers—those who have always wanted to write (and may have been closet writers for years), those who never wanted to write (but have had an experience that must be written), those who are looking for a creative outlet (and think writing might be it), and those who don't have a clue what they are doing, but feel God is leading them in this direction. Most of us have arrived here through one of those doors.

It doesn't matter which door brought you here, the important thing is that you are here and want to learn more about the craft of writing. The problem is in knowing exactly where to start this whole process. There are a lot of different segments of the writing business, many of them equally important, so I have never identified what is truly the first step. For that reason, I am going to start with a lot of general, background information that will set the stage for more specific information to come.

Although we are meeting at this beginning place with different backgrounds in writing, in order to keep us on level ground I will assume that you know little or nothing about the writing business. I will also assume that you are experiencing the same doubts most new or would-be writers are experiencing. At some point we all ask the same questions: How do I know if I really am a writer? How can I tell if my writing is any good? Will people laugh at me if I tell them I'm a writer? Such doubts are common.

At this point I would only try to encourage you by saying that the fact that you have come this far in pursuit of a dream gives it validity. If you care enough about this desire to write to start learning more about it, you owe it to yourself to pursue the possibility until the doors close or you decide this writing business is not for you. By the time you work your way through this book, you will likely have a strong sense of whether or not you are pursuing the right dream at the right time.

We all start with doubts about our writing ability as well. As you get into the process, watch for or seek out opportunities to get some feedback from experienced writers on how you are doing. This can be done through writer's groups or organizations, mail or e-mail round-robins (where you critique each other's material), or by paying someone for a professional critique. We will talk more about these options throughout the book.

Now it is time to put aside the doubts and move on to learning all you can about the business of writing so you can make an informed decision about moving on or opting out. However, at some point you will need to decide in your own mind where you will go from there. Being a writer does not take a special degree or formal training, but it does take the same kind of commitment that you make to any other endeavor.

Many years ago when I first started writing, I was complaining about deadlines and editors or simply about having to write, when my daughter asked why I did it. Why didn't I quit? I had to start asking myself the same question. About that time I was reading one of my favorite columns in The Writer magazine, written by Leslie Conger, when she made me face the question head on. She asked this: "If you suddenly came into a million dollars, could you walk away from the typewriter (computer) of yours without a backward look, sail around the world,

live it up, and not care a moldy fig if you ever write another word? Think about it? And think about libraries, bookstores and stationary shops—think about the smell of a new book, reams of blank paper, freshly-sharpened pencils.” The images have changed somewhat over the years, but she contends you are ready to quit only when these things lose their magic—when both the dream and the part of you that was the dreamer are stone, cold dead.

It was then I realized I was a writer because there was no way I could not be a writer. Over the years I’ve discovered that most people fail, not for lack of talent, but for lack of commitment. It’s interesting that once you know you won’t quit—no matter what—that’s the point you start becoming a professional—the point when you know you are a writer.

## **Work Habits**

The real key in becoming a successful writer is learning all there is to know about the craft and continually honing your skills in every way possible. Since there is no college or other course of study required to become a writer or to even call yourself a writer, it is up to the individual to pursue their own course of learning. In my experience, it is those who develop an ongoing program of self-education and hard work that succeed in this business.

The first step is to make time in your life for writing. (See Time Management for specific suggestions.) It does not work to try to squeeze writing into an already too full schedule. You must give up one or more things you are already doing, to make room for writing. Writing takes time.

Initially you will want to set aside time on your calendar to read about writing, study your market guide, and write as much as you possibly can. It is as you write that you will hone your skills, recognize areas of need, and run into questions that this book will answer for you. Don’t talk about writing—write.

Set a schedule that works for you. The ultimate goal would be to write every day, but truthfully I know few writers who do. Look at your weekly schedule realistically and set a schedule you can meet. Get away from the notion that you can’t write unless you have hours at a time, can get away by yourself, or need to accomplish some other task first (like setting up an office, moving to a new house, raising a child, or sharpening your pencils). Writers write. If you are not writing, you are not a writer and never will be. If you are waiting for the perfect circumstances in which to write, you will end up being a waiter, not a writer.

After more than 30 years as a writer, I have learned that I can write under any circumstances when I want to. It has little or nothing to do with the location, how much interference I encounter, how tired I am, or what else is happening in my life. You simply need to plan your work and then work your plan, refining and changing it as needed to keep it and you moving forward.

It is often helpful to divide the available time during the week into segments assigned to certain tasks, such as writing, reading, research, marketing, or whatever. It is important that you give time to all the activities necessary to becoming a successful writer. Initially it may be appropriate to spend most of your time actually writing, but once you reach the place where you are ready to market your writing, you must give time to the other aspects of the writing business.

## Goal Setting

As in any endeavor, setting some specific goals will help you achieve success at a more measured rate. Set your goals based on your level of writing expertise, the areas where you know you need help (such as grammar, plotting, research, etc.), on the type of writing that interests you, and whatever other factors come into play. For example, you may want to set goals in a number of specific areas, such as: hours of creative writing per day/week/month; time reading/analyzing target markets; time researching in the library or on the Internet; time sending out submissions; time reading how-to materials; etc. None of us have time to do everything we would like, so concentrate on those areas that are most important to where you are right now. Do not shortchange yourself in the writing and marketing areas if you want to succeed. The length of time set for each task is not as important as actually following through on it. You will be surprised how much you can accomplish in even 10-30 minutes a day of consistent writing time.

You may find it helpful to write your goals in a journal or on a wall chart, and then track the time actually spent in each area.

## Journal Writing

You may have heard that writing in a journal daily is a good discipline for the writer. I won't argue with that; I'm sure it is. If you've never done it, I encourage you to give it a try. I say try it, because my sense is that people are either journal writers or they are not. I happen to be one of the "are nots." I'm sure I could keep a journal if I felt it was important for an experience I was going through, but it doesn't seem to be in my nature to do so naturally or comfortably. I used to beat myself up over that—saying I couldn't be a "real" writer unless I kept a journal. I have long since given myself permission not to keep a journal. I extend the same permission to you.

If, on the other hand, you would like to give it a try, I can make a few suggestions for getting started. Find a blank book, steno pad, notebook, or whatever paper source you are comfortable with, but save it exclusively for your journal writing. It helps to have a set time and place to write in your journal, such as before or after reading or having your personal devotions, first thing in the morning, last thing at night, or any established time during the day that works for you. I know some people who even keep it on the computer.

Don't think you have to write several pages to make it worthwhile. Even a short entry each day, if it reflects your true thoughts and feelings, will have great value. Realize that some days you may only write a sentence or two, while others may naturally produce a few pages. Avoid routine entries like: "Cleaned the house today," or "Met Mary for lunch." A personal journal is not a calendar of events, but tracking the events of your life as you see them through your heart and mind. It is an intensely personal experience. For the writer, it is good practice in expressing yourself on paper and helps clarify your thinking. A journal must be kept private, or you won't be honest. Never tear out pages or edit it once it is written.

Date your entries and number the pages, but avoid printed journals that give you a dated page for every day or restrict you to one page. If you don't write every day, those blank pages tend to make you feel like you've failed. A journal needs to be a "want to" not a "have to" experience, and requires some discipline—especially when developing the habit. I have a friend who types a lot of intimate letters to friends and family and simply keeps copies of those letters as a kind of personal record.

Rather than a personal journal, some of you may prefer to keep a Literary Journal. In this kind, you jot down notes that might later be used in a story or poem, overheard dialogue or speech patterns, news items, unusual phrases, descriptions, etc. In other words, notes that may be useful in your writing. A personal journal may also be used for writing some day. One friend kept a detailed journal through the experience of losing a child, and was later able to use that journal to write a book to help other parents who were experiencing the same thing.

## Reading

Writers must be readers—or so they say. I have met a lot of writers or would-be writers who were not voracious readers, but I would have to say that the most successful writers I know do read a lot. Most of them have always read a lot. If you haven't been reading, I would suggest that it is one of the best new habits you can develop. An editor friend suggests that a good writer should read five hours for every one hour they write.

Most writers I know who don't read or read much, complain that there simply isn't enough time to read all the things they know they should be reading. They are right, there probably isn't for most of us. On the other hand, we all likely have some time that can be "redeemed" for reading. The readers I know don't watch much television, or spend much time surfing the World Wide Web for entertainment or sending their friends e-mail jokes. They tend to carry a book with them everywhere they go and read it in every spare moment. Reading is one of those things you must set aside time for—you simply won't find the time you need. You also need to accept the fact that you will never have the time to do all the reading you would like. Just be thankful for all you can squeeze into your day. At the same time, never be guilty of giving up on reading because you "don't have time." If you are going to be a successful writer, you must be a consistent reader.

The question I am often asked is, "What should I be reading?" Generally it should be a wide range of things. Read books and periodicals on how to write. As a beginner I subscribed to *The Writer* and *Writer's Digest* (that was before there were any Christian writers' magazines), and read every issue cover to cover, even topics I wasn't interested in. I was intent on filling my reservoir of knowledge about writing. That knowledge served me well as I expanded into areas I had never anticipated.

Read the periodicals you want to write for. I try to subscribe to a different one each year so I have a year's worth of samples to study. Also read a lot of the kind of books you want to write. If it is Christian fiction, read the best Christian authors and the best secular authors in your chosen genre.

If you want to write for the secular market, read the best and most popular books available in the secular market. Unless you are keeping up with what is currently being written in the secular market, you can't hope to compete in the marketplace.

In addition to regularly reading the Bible, for direction, inspiration and education, read it as literature. Read the classics.

If you want to write for children or young people, read at least 100 books for the age group you want to write for, before you ever start. Also read books on child development and who they are at different ages.

If you are moving into a new genre or area of writing, read as much as you can in the new area before starting to write.

## Ideas - Finding Them

The question of where a writer can find ideas comes up quite regularly, but usually only from beginning writers. Most writers who have been at it for any length of time have more ideas than they will ever be able to develop. It is not that you find more ideas once you get into writing, it is that you learn to recognize them. Good ideas are everywhere, the trick is in learning to recognize and evaluate them effectively. When you come up with an idea for a piece, work with it and refine it until you can put it into one sentence that captures the essence of the piece. If you are not able to refine and define it to that point, it is probably not a workable idea.

The world around you—in concert with your brain—is an incredible Idea Factory. That factory needs to be in the business of constantly generating ideas in a conscious, deliberate, and intelligent way. However, like any new factory, you may need to “prime the pump” to get the ideas flowing. Here are a few activities that may help:

1. Make a list of five things you know well enough to teach (look in your job history, personal life, hobbies, interests, etc.). The answer to “What do you know?” is the article idea. “Who would want to learn it?” suggests the target audience.
2. Read the newspaper every day, looking for potential stories. The TV news is not a substitute for the paper. It is the details from the newspaper accounts that spark the ideas. Use your own interests as a guide for what to look for. Find at least one article idea in the newspaper everyday to keep your idea generation in full production.
3. Look at every magazine as a potential market. When you pick up a new magazine, determine at least one article you might write for that magazine. Look beyond the obvious. Even specialized magazines carry some general articles on topics of interest to most of their readers. Read the Contents page and ask yourself if you could have written any of the articles listed there.
4. When you find yourself in strong disagreement with something you see or hear, decide if you can turn that passion into an article, or at least a letter to the editor.
5. Talk to people every chance you get. Listen to their experiences, and write articles based on their needs or concerns. Fiction writers should keep a People Notebook that describes the way people look, talk and act.
6. Fill your life with “unreproducible experiences.” Be open to those things you have never done before and will likely never do again. Most of us spend the majority of our time doing and seeing the same things over and over again. We see the same people, eat in or go to the same places, attend the same church and civic functions, volunteer for the same jobs, etc. As a writer you want to constantly be challenging yourself to step out of those comfortable places into less comfortable ones that help us learn and grow—the places where ideas are born.
7. Skim the classified ads, personal ads, news sections of your favorite magazines, or even the yellow pages.

Every time I have what I think might be a good idea, I start testing it to see if it is “big” enough. In order to sprout into a full-blown article and idea must have enough potential facets to create something full and whole. If I cannot conjure up enough facets in my mind—something like a three-point sermon—then I abandon it. If it does come to full bloom, then I have to ask how many people would be interested in it, and who are they? Most ideas require nurturing—few come fully developed.

The last piece of advice I have about ideas is to always write them down. I would be rich if I remembered all the great ideas that “got away.” Carry a small notebook with you in your pocket or purse, and keep extras in every room of your house and at work. Never assume that you’ll remember the idea later and write it down then. If you are generating a lot of ideas, one seems to simply bump the last one from your mind—never to be seen again.

## **Resources For Writers**

I will not try to name specific resources in this section, but simply alert you to the different types of resources that are available to the writer.

Magazines - Read both secular and Christian periodicals directed toward the writer. If you can’t afford to subscribe to them, many are available at your public library. Keep in mind that the techniques of writing are the same for both Christian and secular writing. The differences lie in the purpose or presentation of the content. A Christian publication will help you better understand the unique needs of the Christian market. These publications are important tools of your trade.

College or Adult Education Classes - Some people feel they have been away from the classroom so long they want to take some kind of refresher course or creative writing class to get them started toward their dream of writing. Such courses can be helpful if you have the time and resources to take advantage of them. There are, however, some things to look for in selecting such a class. First, keep in mind that “creative writing” is not necessarily the same as “writing for publication.” Creative writing is often of a more literary nature, and not what most publishers are looking for. Find out what the curriculum will cover and what you can expect to learn in the class.

Even more important is finding out something about the instructor. Call the school ahead of time and ask for information on the teacher. If they have not written for publication and been published, they will probably not be able to give you the kind of help you will need. Check around until you find the best teacher and curriculum.

Correspondence Courses - These courses are a good option for those who are unable to get out to attend a regular class or writer’s conference. There are all kinds of correspondence courses available, both secular and Christian. Some of the more popular ones are listed under the Resources Section of the Christian Writers’ Market Guide. Even if you choose a secular course, such as one offered by Writer’s Digest, you can ask for a Christian instructor, as they do have several. No matter what course you choose, again be sure that the instructor you work with understands and has experience in writing for publication.

Note: The Resources Section of the Christian Writers’ Market Guide contains a wealth of additional resources, many on the Internet, which will provide invaluable help and instruction at little or no cost.

## **Writers’ Groups**

Writing can be an isolated and lonely business. It is the writers’ group that most often brings the writer out of isolation and also gives much needed help in polishing those manuscripts prior to submission. I was asked to join my first writer’s critique group after the second or third conference I attend. Some of the writers I met at that conference were starting a group and wanted me to join them.



I liked the others writers and wanted to get better acquainted, but was scared to death of having to read them my work and let them criticize it. I wasn't a rank beginner, in fact was as well or more published than most of them. It was that I had always worked in isolation and even though I was submitting regularly, it was to faceless editors I didn't know personally. If they rejected me, I simply submitted elsewhere.

I hate to admit it, but I think it took two or three years before I finally agreed to join the group. It didn't take long to realize that it was the best thing I had ever done for my writing career. When I had worked alone, I never had anyone to point out the areas where my writing tended to be weak, where I was short-sighted, or to pick up on those silly little mistakes we all let creep into our writing. My writing matured and improved considerably during the years we were together. And so did theirs. We all became published on a regular basis, and many moved on to book writing as well. Several of those who were in that original group are now teaching writing in conferences, adult-education classes, or correspondence courses. Every one of them would give a great deal of credit to what we learned together in that group. A bonus was the lifelong friendships that resulted.

Obviously some groups are more successful than others, but the important thing is to find a group in your area or get together with other writers to start one. Some groups are area-wide or state-wide groups that meet for instruction on a regular basis, and others are critique groups that meet monthly (some more often) to read and critique each other's work.

In the group I belonged to, we each brought an articles, short story or book chapter to read each month. Each person read their piece, then we went around the circle having each one give their reaction. The reaction was to include at least one positive comment, followed by any suggestions for improvement. There were, of course, differences of opinion, so the reader is left to take the suggestions, process them, and decide which they will incorporate and which they will not. Since we were from various religious backgrounds, we were not allowed to critique the person's theology, only the writing.

Obviously with 4-8 in this group, these meeting sometimes went until midnight by the time everyone had a turn. I know some groups that limit the number who can read, or the length of time allotted to each reader. That time limit would include the time to read and for the critiques combined. That way you can ask how many are reading and divide your time by that many, and keep everyone on schedule. Use an alarm clock to keep things moving, if necessary.

Our meeting usually started with each one reporting their successes and rejections for the previous month, which proved to be very encouraging. We took turns being up or down so were an ongoing encouragement to each other. We also took turns bringing refreshments to share at the end of the meeting during an informal social time. Some groups skip that part.

When you set up a group, you will need to plan the components in a way that meet your particular needs. Some groups meet in the evening, some during the day, and some provide both a daytime and an evening meeting. Some of the smaller, more intense groups, may meet weekly or biweekly. Some groups don't read, but each brings enough copies of their manuscript so the rest of the members can read and critique them on their own.

Another possibility, especially if you live in a remote area where you aren't able to meet with other writers, is to do a round robin, either by snail mail or e-mail. In that case you send each other manuscripts to critique and then return. This doesn't provide the fellowship, but you can keep in touch with other writers and get the personal feedback you need. Every writer can benefit from such groups.

## Writers' Conferences

I am often asked how important it is to attend a writers' conference. I believe it is very important, on more than one level. First it is the best place to go as a beginning writer to give necessary knowledge and background in as short a time as possible. You have to read a lot of books or articles on writing to learn even a portion of what you will assimilate at one conference. Even if you've read a lot before attending, the workshops and talks you hear at a conference will help you put it all into perspective and answer those nagging questions that have come up but weren't answered.

I suggest that beginning writers attend a conference every year or two to continue to learn and grow as a writer. One of the frustrating things about attending a conference is that you can't take in everything that is offered and you know you won't remember everything you hear. That is all right. I often remind writers that when you attend a conference, it is to learn the things you need to know for where you are right now, or will be in the near future. You will pick up and remember those things this time.

The next time you attend, you will be at a different place and will pick up on the things you need then. That is the value in attending as often as you are able. Also, as you move into new areas of writing, you will be able to take new workshops in those areas—constantly expanding your field of knowledge. The beginner to intermediate author will look for conferences that offer the best teachers and a well-rounded teaching program.

For the more advanced writer, the conference serves a different purpose. Although the advanced writer will look for interesting classes and experienced teachers, they will be most interested in the number and quality of editors present. It is the personal contact with those editors that the advanced writer needs. In Christian publishing, like in any other business, it is not what you know (or can write), it's who you know (or who might buy it). As it gets more difficult to find editors who will read unsolicited submissions, it will become even more important that advanced writers attend one or even two conferences a year where the largest number of editors are in attendance.

Any writer who attends a conference and doesn't take advantage of every opportunity to meet and interact with the editors present is missing out on one of its greatest advantages. You may not have something to sell to a particular editor right now, but you need to get better acquainted with both editor and publication or publishing house to begin paving the way for future projects.

I suggest that you look for a conference that boasts a good number of editors (some have as many as 10-20, or more) and let that be at least one of the determining factors in your selection. After registering, begin to prepare to meet with those editors. Make a list of the editors you are interested in and either find some appropriate manuscripts or write a query, book proposal, or manuscript to take along to show them. Even if you don't have time to make such preparations for every editor, either come up with an idea to pitch or take along a published manuscript that would fit their needs to use to launch some other ideas that might interest them.

I can remember one of my first conferences where I took an idea for a children's picture book. I showed the manuscript to seven different publishers during the week. Of those, five showed an interest, but only one was interested in the book as I presented it. The other four gave me ideas for variations, different approaches, or other products that I could develop from that same basic idea. It was that experience that first taught me the value of talking to an editor about



any idea. It is best to have several ideas to present to each editor, as the first one may fall flat. Sometimes simply discussing the smallest kernel of an idea will develop into a “mighty oak.”

If you don’t feel comfortable making an appointment to talk with an editor on a more formal basis, at least try to sit next to one at meals and learn all you can about the editor and the periodical/house represented. Even listening to other writers discuss their ideas will give you insights you can use later in your own marketing.

Advanced writers should also look for conferences that offer an Advanced Track that deals with the special needs of the advanced writer. Such tracks often deal more with the business of being a writer, rather than with actual writing techniques. They may cover topics such as negotiating book contracts, income tax, marketing or trends, as well as providing editor panels where the writers can ask questions and have closer interaction with the editors and speakers.

One of the best by-products of a writer’s conference is the people you meet and the contacts you make. I met writers at my first conferences over twenty years ago that I still consider among my best friends. Nearly all of my closest friends I met originally at a conference. In addition I have met many others who have proved exceptional contacts when I needed information in their areas of expertise or someone who could refer me to other resources I needed. Writers help writers and the writers’ conferences becomes central to making that happen.

See the [Christian Writers’ Market Guide](#) for a complete list of conferences nationwide. Write to any that interest you and ask them to send a brochure as soon as available. Read the brochure carefully and note any special services the conference offers, such as pre-conference sign-ups with editors or the chance to send manuscripts ahead of time, a manuscript critique service where for free or for a fee you may have complete manuscripts or book proposals critiqued by professionals. These extra services are often worth the cost of the conference.

## **Start With Articles**

I have met a lot of writers who have never written anything before, but are working on or want to write a book. I usually try to discourage that as a first project. You certainly can start with a book, and many people do, but I feel every writer can benefit by writing for periodicals first. There is so much about writing that you can only learn by writing—and writing in a number of different areas. Working your way through a lot of stories or articles prepares you for writing that book in a number of different ways.

First, it polishes your writing skills. You learn how to get the words on paper; how to write tightly; refresh your technical skills in grammar, punctuation, and spelling; and develop your own voice and writing style. Many first books show obvious lack in some of these areas. Many of the writers I know who have started with a book, often regret it later, wishing they could go back and rewrite it with the skills they have learned in the time since.

Starting with articles has another benefit most people aren’t aware of—it can help you establish your credibility in a certain field or with a particular topic. As a writer, you want to become known in your field of interest, both by the readers and by the editors who will publish your material. If you are published regularly in connection with a particular topic or type of writing, you will start to develop a reputation among those readers and editors. As a writer, one of our goals is to become so well known in a certain topic area that the editors start coming to us with assignments when they need something in that area. If you never establish that reputation,

you will never get on anyone's assignment list. The same is true for types of writing, such as feature articles, historical material, humor, marriage or family topics, material for children or teens, bible studies, etc.

Once you have established that reputation, you will have a better chance of selling that book. Being published frequently in the topic or type of writing establishes you as an "expert," even if you don't have formal credentials or a college diploma in your area of expertise. The publishing credits alone become your degree and badge of authenticity. For example, after 20 years experience in Christian education, I started writing regularly for every Christian education periodical, then later wrote 7 books in the field of Christian education. Did I have a degree in Christian education? No! Did anyone ever ask me if I did? No! Because I had established myself as an expert by being published regularly in the field. You can do the same in your area of expertise or interest.

## **Honing Your Craft**

One of the beginning writer's greatest desires is to learn how to be a better writer—to learn how to hone their craft. I was fortunate to sell the first things I ever wrote. I realize now that it was probably God's way of keeping me interested until I realized this was my calling, but it wasn't as star-crossed as it sounds. I was delighted with those early sales, but it wasn't long before I realized that I didn't know what I was doing right and what I was doing wrong. It became my heart's desire to find someone who could help me become a better writer—someone who would point out my weaknesses as well as my strengths.

I attended a big conference out of state with that goal in mind. Those answers weren't easy to find, and it wasn't until I attended the next conference that I was able to sit down with someone who could point out those specific areas.

My point in all this is that writing is a skill as much as a talent. I do believe some people have an innate talent for writing, but that talent will never reach its full potential without a lot of work and skill-building. Over the years, I have seen a lot of very talented writers fall by the wayside because they weren't willing to put in the effort it takes to be successful in this business. At the same time, I've seen writers I never thought had the talent to succeed, make a credible showing as writers because they were willing to work hard to hone their skills.

The question then becomes—how do we do that? Reading this book is one of your first steps. Simply finding out what needs to be done and following those steps will get you off to a good start. The initial phase is read—read—read—write—write—write. There is nothing that will substitute for those basic skills. Throughout this book you will find information and suggested activities that will set you on the right road toward becoming the best writer you can be.

## **Finding Your Voice**

As we start writing for publication, we suddenly become very aware of how our words "sound" on paper. Unfortunately too many of us feel like we have to sound very literary. We start looking for big words and high-sounding phrases. It isn't until we get a few more words—or a few rejection slips—under our belts that we begin to realize that something is wrong. What's wrong is that the big words and high-sounding phrases are not what makes a good writer. In fact it is just the opposite.

The most successful writers are those who can write in a way that is simple and straight forward, avoiding big words, flowery language and simply being themselves. Unless you are writing in a highly specialized field, for a highly educated audience, never use a big word when a small one will do.

At one point early in my career I started wondering about my “voice,” or what some might call my writing style. I knew that some people could simply read a passage from a certain author’s work and know immediately who had written it because they recognized the author’s style. I was curious as to how a writer develops that recognizable voice. It was some time before I discovered that voice, but I did learn some things during the process.

For most writers, your voice emerges when you reach the point where you can write honestly, when the things you say ring true, and the real you begins to filter through in your writing. Often those around you, like those in your critique group, will begin to recognize that voice before you do. It seems to surface more readily when you are enthusiastic or care deeply about what you are writing. At the same time, you don’t want to resort to shouting on paper; let your passion bring power to your words and your voice will be heard. Voice is simply your personality on paper—write until you discover the real you. Some have found that writing regularly—and honestly—in their journals helps to bring their true voice to the surface. Once you have mastered it in your journal, you can start transferring it to other kinds of writing. Constantly striving for authenticity in our lives and our words will bring not only power, but clarity, force and flavor to our voice. Trying to copy another’s style, or writing things we don’t believe passionately will leave our voice flat or without that ring of truth. No one can teach you how to have that authentic voice, it comes from a personal journey in which you open up your life to your readers.

## **Professionalism**

I have preached for years that there is a big difference between being a beginner and being unprofessional. Even the writer who has never submitted or sold anything can be a professional. Being a professional means learning how things are done—as you will throughout this book—and following those guidelines as you reach out into the marketplace. You will notice as you read a number of different books on writing that each one may vary some in its directions or advice. The truth is there is no one right way to do everything in this field. There are only general guidelines that we need to honor. When presented with two different approaches simply use your common sense and do something that honors the spirit of the rule—rather than the letter of the law. We will get into a number of examples of that under The Basics, as we deal with manuscript preparation, submissions, and the like. You can be assured that any instruction from this book will be within an acceptable range.

The rules for writing are like any other rules, you need to learn them well, and following them faithfully until you are comfortable enough with the whole process that you can begin to break them when it makes sense to do so. Ignoring protocol before you have paid your dues can cost you your good reputation as a professional with the editors and publishers you are working with.

Professionalism is a state of mind—an attitude toward your work. It is how you view the business of writing, more than how you actually function as a writer. I started out with no background or education in writing, and no real personal desire to write. I only stuck with it originally because I sold what I wrote right from the beginning. I realize now that if I had not

been successful I would have quit—and God knew that too. It wasn't until I realized God had called me into this role that I started taking writing seriously. God expected a professional response to a spiritual call—I had a responsibility to become the best writer I could be. I have taken that call as seriously as I would have a call to missions or the ministry, and I believe it is that attitude toward the work God has given me, that has at least in part been responsible for the success I have had.

The writer who proceeds with the attitude of a professional will not ignore that calling or let someone else talk them out of it. Over the years I have met a lot of writers and would-be writers who either never believed in themselves enough to actually write, or have let friends and family convince them they could never be a writer. A professional writer—a successful writer--writes.

## **Am I Really A Writer?**

One of the concerns I hear most often from writers or would-be writers is, “How do I know if I have any talent—if I have what it takes to be a writer?” Of course, that is a question only you can answer, but perhaps I can share some insight. Although I know now that I was called into writing and this ministry to writers, I didn't know it in the beginning. I started out following the path laid before me—step by step. I'm a firm believer if that we have the desire and the opportunity to write, we should follow that path until the doors close for us. That may mean we are unable to sell anything or that something more important blocks our path. I don't mean that we simply don't have the discipline to follow through on the writing or that we let less important things fill our time. Much of this comes down to taking this calling seriously until that door closes. The problem with too many writers I have seen is that they pull the door from God's hands and close it themselves—or never walk through it.

Writers are basically afraid of two things—that they have no talent or that they won't be successful. Although some writers have obvious talent—and I have seen them either succeed or squander that talent—I have seen many more develop a lesser talent, with hard work and determination, into a successful writing career. Some of you may have to work a little harder. The important thing is to be a caretaker of the talent you have been given, and determine to become the best writer you can be. Although I recognize that I do have some God-given talent for writing, I also know that a lot of it comes from the hard work of learning the craft over the years. I have no delusions of becoming a literary giant—there are few of those in this world—but I have worked to be the best writer I can be, no matter what the final results of that effort might be. And you must do the same. I believe that real success is not judged by the accolades or royalties you receive, but by how well you do the job. As Joe Bayly, one of my first writing mentors once said, “God is not served by technical incompetence.” I learned years ago that the hard work and professional attitude are my responsibility. God is in charge of the results.

## **Writer's Block**

Writer's block is one of those things you either believe in or you don't. Generally I don't. I'm sure there are times when all of us get “stuck” in our writing, but usually there are good, explainable reasons for it. What I don't believe is that we get in places where we develop a creative paralysis that needs a magical cure.

On the other hand, I do want to offer some practical suggestions for getting the words flowing again if you believe in and experience this mysterious writer's block. The first things to fix are the obvious ones. You may simply be burned out on writing—pushing yourself so hard that your mind and spirit have reached a stage of “burn-out.” Writing is like any other endeavor—you don't work at your peak if you are too tired and have not given your creative juices an opportunity to rest and revitalize. I have friend who has suggested that as writers we need a “fallow” season, just as the land does when it has been overworked producing crops. So give yourself a well-earned break and come back to that blank sheet fresh and excited about writing again.

That block often shows up when your regular editors have stopped buying from you for no apparent reason, your new book is a big success and you are sure it's a fluke and you'll never be able to do it again, or you are overwhelmed with too many deadlines and not enough time. In those cases it's more a case of losing our nerve or belief in ourselves. At times like this you may simply need the objective opinion of a qualified outside person to evaluate your work. If you don't have a writing friend who can be objective, or a writer's group who will tell you the truth, you may want to pay someone for a critique of a recent piece of writing (see the listing of Editorial Services in the [Christian Writers' Market Guide](#)). Sometimes our writing may need a simple tune-up—like a golfer who goes to a professional to help him improve his swing.

Sometimes we simply need to write something different. If you have been writing a serious feature, you may need to take a break to write a children's story or a humor piece. Give your mind and emotions a break or a change of scenery. Also, if you tend to write only what you know, pick a subject that takes some research and research until you have to start writing.

If your problem is that you have trouble priming the pump when you get back to a writing project either from the day before or after a longer lapse, there are a few simple tricks that can get you going again. Try one or more of the following:

1. Reread what you wrote last to get you back into the piece. You also may want to edit or polish the previous day's work.
2. Stop writing in the middle of a thought, chapter or section so you know where you're going when you return. If you stop at the end of an idea or chapter, it is harder to get started again.
3. Do some exercise to get your body moving and hopefully your mind unstuck.
4. Read one of your favorite authors, or start typing a page from someone else's book.
5. Sit down and start typing anything that comes into your head and don't stop until you start focusing on the project at hand or you come up with an idea for a new project.
6. Give yourself permission to write badly. It is often perfectionism that keeps us from starting (you can rewrite it later).
7. Write up one of your own experiences as an anecdote.
8. If it's the lead that is stumping you, skip it for now and start where you do know what you want to say. Writing the lead will be easier once you get started. Besides, if you write it first you'll likely rewrite it later anyway.
9. Switch from the typewriter or computer to longhand, or visa-versa, until you get going.
10. Read an article in the magazine you're writing this piece for and convince yourself you can write yours better.
11. Write at the same time every day, for the same length of time. If you can't think of anything to write, sit and look at the screen until your time is up. Something will come to you.



12. When writing, don't think about the magazine, the book publisher, the money or the fame, think about and write directly to your reader. Put them in a chair opposite you and tell your story.
13. Don't fall into the trap of thinking you can only write when you feel like it. A real writer writes when the writing needs to get done, not just when the muse is present.
14. Put yourself in the position that if you don't write you don't eat. It does wonders for writer's block!

## **Specialize Or Diversify?**

Many writers ask this question at some point in their career. Should they pick one area and stick to it, or try their hand in a lot of different areas? That is a question each of us must answer for our self. Some writers are writing because of a life-changing experience that is the topic for every article or book, or that colors all of their writing. For some that will be enough.

Some writers will gravitate naturally to one area or another based on their interest or experience. For several years I wrote Christian education articles and books, based on my 20 years experience in the field. Eventually my writing moved away from Christian education and I branched out into other areas.

I suggest you start by trying a number of different fields, looking for your strong areas. Even while I was writing Christian education materials, I wrote material for children, as well as inspirational articles. Because I was successful at all three I stuck with all three. Sometimes it is a matter of testing the market to see which markets are the most open or which ones you are most successful in. There is no sense devoting a lot of your time to writing material for which there is little or no market.

Eventually you will want to start developing your reputation for certain topics or types of writing, as explained under "Where to Start." You certainly aren't limited to establishing a reputation or credibility in only one area. After several years in Christian education, I went on to do the same thing with writing and marketing.

One thing I have learned about writing is that each of us probably has certain innate strengths we need to eventually recognize and take advantage of. Even though I have written in any number of different areas, it boils down to the fact that I usually write how-to material. My basic strengths as a writer center on the ability to organize material and teach others how to do almost anything in a logical fashion. Once I recognized those strengths, I was able to better direct my efforts into the areas that would take the best advantage of those skills.

## **Recognizing Salable Themes**

Once you get tuned into looking for ideas for stories and articles, you will find them everywhere. The trick is learning to identify which ones are most likely to sell. I seem to have an innate sense in this area, but I know for many others it has to be learned. Here I would like to share some of the underlying principles that work for me.

The key, obviously, is selecting a subject of high personal interest to your readers. We tend to want to write about what interests us, which is fine as long as the same things interest your readers and the editors. Every piece needs a definable potential audience and you need to have some sense of how large that audience is. For example it may be homemakers, businessmen, retired people, children or home-schoolers.

Actually you can take almost any topic and write an effective article as long as you determine how this piece affects people and write it with that slant. Even if you are reporting on a new street being built, the focus of the article is not what kind of blacktop they are using, but on how it will impact the people in the area. That basic principle applies to every article you write.

The underlying question, then, is “what do readers want?” They want to learn about all kinds of things—which you fulfill with how-to or service pieces. They want new experiences—even if those are the vicarious experiences of others. They want to read about themselves—if not what they personally have done, what others in their definable group are doing (housewife, businessman, or whatever). They want to keep up with the latest—developments, gossip, trends, etc. And they want to be prepared for the future—physically, economically, and spiritually.

Obviously you cannot meet all of these needs, but with every idea that interests you, ask how this can meet the needs or interests of your readers. Look for solid life applications. If you are not highly interested and enthusiastic about the topic, you are not likely to interest an editor, or ultimately your readers.

Writers need to keep up with what is happening in the world around them, in the secular as well as Christian, and be constantly on the lookout for current universal themes that, given the right twist, will meet the needs of their readers.

## Criticism

I have been asked why anyone would want to get into the business of writing—a business that is based on criticism and rejection. I suppose that is true, and I understand from experience that it is often the hardest part for beginning writers. Yet, it is also criticism that is the key to success in this business.

Later, we will talk about rejection slips—one of the main sources of that constant rejection, but here I want to talk specifically about criticism. I think the first important lesson I learned about writing is that criticism (as well as praise) is essential to our growth. When we have opened that vein and shared our most intimate thoughts or experiences, we are often tied too closely to our words to remain objective. Even if we are telling how to wash the family dog, we have still created something that is open to criticism, whether it is criticism of our words or our method. Accepting criticism in either case is not easy. To lay a manuscript open to criticism is like asking for an honest opinion of your newborn baby. All we want to hear is how wonderful it is—not that it has big ears, a red face, and its father’s unruly hair. Painful!

The key to surviving that painful criticism is to detach yourself emotionally from your writing. When you seek criticism of your work (yes, I said seek), you have to remember that they are criticizing the manuscript, they are not criticizing you. In my personal experience, I found that I did not grow as a writer until I started seeking constructive criticism.

My first experience with that was when I had the opportunity to attend a writer’s conference that offered an extended session where for a fee a few writers could stay over after the regular conference to work individually with an accomplished and respected author. In my first session with her, I was to take a manuscript that we would go over and critique together. I didn’t have an unpublished manuscript to take, so I took a copy of a recently published article. We went over the article line by line and she showed me where I could cut or tighten it. Although the article was only about 1,100 words, we were able to cut that published article by 50 words. I went back to my room and cut 100 words from an article I was working on. There is no

doubt in my mind that that meeting was a turning point in my writing career. For the first time I was able to view my writing through someone else's eyes.

Although the criticism is important to your success, you need to be careful who you go to for such help. Cross your mother off the top of the list, along with your spouse, children, sister, brother, best friend or favorite aunt. They will only tell you how wonderful it is. If possible, go to a professional who knows how to write and understands writing for publication. Although some non-writers, especially avid readers, can be good critics, you are usually better off to even pay someone to provide a detailed critique of your work.

A word of caution. Do not expect to get such a critique from a busy editor. Although it would be wonderful if we could get a letter outlining exactly why we got each rejection, it will never happen. It will be up to us to find those who can provide those helpful critiques of our manuscripts. Belonging to a critique group is also helpful. If you do get feed-back from editors or others, watch for recurring criticisms. If you hear more than once that your dialogue is stilted, your plots weak, your leads are boring, or your endings lack punch, take note. Instead of defending yourself, get a book or take a class that will help you improve in those areas. You might want to start a notebook of ideas and good examples in those areas of weakness. You can even learn on your own by analyzing good writing and paying particular note to those areas where you need help, underlining the leads, endings, transitions, or whatever. The criticism will serve no purpose unless you are willing to act on it.

If you pay for a critique, go over all the comments and corrections and study them carefully. Learn from those mistakes. Even when you have a manuscript accepted for publication, follow-up after it is published. Compare your original manuscript to the finished product and learn from the changes or corrections that were made. Note that some changes any editor might have made, while others are changes unique to this publication. Learn from both kinds—the first to improve your writing in general—the second to better understand how to write for that particular publication.

## About the Author

Sally E. Stuart (Tigard, Oregon) has been writing for years--full-time for the last 27. She has also put out twenty-six editions of the Christian Writers' Market Guide, the only market guide that specifically targets the Christian market. In addition she has published a dozen other books, and countless articles and columns. As marketing columnist for the Christian Communicator, The Advanced Christian Writer, and Oregon Christian Writers, she is considered the leading authority on the Christian market. She is in demand as a conference speaker nationwide. Sally is the mother of three and grandmother of eight.

Excerpted from *Sally Stuart's Guide to Getting Published* By Sally E. Stuart

© Sally E. Stuart [www.stuartmarket.com](http://www.stuartmarket.com)