

Stuff about Writing, Writing about Stuff **SAMPLE**

Writing advice that actually works!
Tips from a top published author,
and useful stuff to try.

Alan Dapré



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Introduction

‘Dad, lots of social media influencers give out writing tips. They don’t have your experience. You should write a book about stuff that actually works!’ - Isla

Good advice from my teenage daughter. After all, I had been scribbling down plenty of tips and writing-related thoughts over the years. Maybe it was time to gather stuff together?

This isn’t a book where the author dredges information from the internet. It is more personal, with advice that comes from years of professional writing across many genres. It contains plenty of practical information that works for me, and should help you too.

Sixty-one picture and chapter books traditionally published for children and teenagers. Several stage plays. A bunch of broadcast BBC Radio plays, plus a hundred or so television scripts transmitted worldwide. A regular magazine column.

I've been busy, even though I'm far from being a household name. I prefer to let my writing take the limelight and any applause.

See this book as a handy tool for starting out on a professional path. More established writers may wish to remind themselves of things they have forgotten. Or grumble that some of the stuff is just an opinion.

To be clear, nothing in here is set in stone. It's just writing-related stuff that works for me. Each chapter has a broad theme, typically broken down into smaller elements. You can explore each element via a set of stuff to try. There are also quotes to give context and inspire and motivate.

The key to professional writing is to write as much as you can, when you can, as best you can.

See this book as a springboard, a smorgasbord or ... an ironing board that will help you write more smoothly.

Happy writing!

‘Why be ordinary when you can be extraordinary?’ - Alan Dapré

Reasons for Writing

For Yourself

The first draft of any story is For My Eyes Only, so I never have to worry about what anyone else may think. This subjective approach helps me to relax and concentrate on the essential elements of the story.

There are enough thoughts going around a writer's head without having to worry about what other people might think. If writers are disinterested it will show on the page. Write with enough passion.

Not having to impress others is a great thing. If you are hoping to have your work published, it makes sense to initially keep external critics at bay while you learn to master your internal one.

Stuff to try

- Having an emotional connection is important. Write about a subject you passionately love.
- Or write about one you actively dislike.
- Write about a secret that is a burden.
- Write boldly about a fear or hope for the future.

'Better to write for yourself and have no public, than to write for the public and have no self.' - Cyril Connolly

For Enjoyment

It is tempting, though very distracting, to see what other writers are doing.

Be happy for them but focus on enjoying your writing. The only important writer is you.

If the writing process becomes a slog, build in days when you play with words and write just for fun.

Enjoyment is key. Though we all have tough days where words do not flow, where the creative muse has left us with a blank page.

The more you enjoy seeing your words on the page, the more likely your readers will too.

Stuff to try

- Reflect on how you feel about other writers. Is it all positive? If not, consider why.
- Focus on yourself. Write about an emotional memory that has deep meaning for you.
- My most favourite sounding words are obfuscated and defenestration. My least is lorry. What words do you enjoy saying (or not)? Consider why.

'Find a subject you care about and which you, in your heart, feel others should care about.' - Stephen King

For Others

Writing words for other people to read can be daunting. It is never easy to work out what is taking place inside someone else's head, so I find it easiest to start from what is inside mine.

I always begin with a story that I want to tell. The best, most engaging, story I have. A story so interesting that someone - somewhere - will want to read it.

Of course, the hard part is teasing it out of the imagination and onto the page. Every story begins with just one word. That's all. *Begin.*

Stuff to try

- Read a favourite story and consider its attractions. Was it the strong characterisation, a pacy plot or a satisfying ending?
- Take a single word - such as friendship, fear, rejection or peace - and make it link to a personal experience so it is meaningful for you.
- Observe people as you go about your day and reflect on the nature of stories they might want to read.

'A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song.' - Maya Angelou

To Sell

Agents, publishers, editors and marketing teams know what it takes to sell a book. A lot of time and money. So they seek out stories they hope readers will buy.

Whenever a book becomes a bestseller, imitations follow. But there is no point trying to jump on a bandwagon, because by the time you see one it is already disappearing into the distance!

Better to write well-rounded characters into a memorable setting and give them dynamic and interesting conflicts to solve. Fully engage your characters and you will fully engage your readers.

Keep in mind that what you see on the shelves was created a while ago.

Stuff to try

- Read books in your chosen market.
- Pick a few publishers and see if you can identify each one's house style.
- See if you can detect a trend going on in bookshops. Popular themes involving vampires, zombies, pirates, etc.
- Every genre has a formula. Explore book clichés.

'The freelance writer is a man who is paid per piece or per word or perhaps.' - Robert Benchley

For Fame

Some authors say fame can bring financial security and stability, leading to more relaxed writing. Others say the worse thing authors can do is chase fame because, inevitably, their writing will suffer.

It is true many celebrity authors have an advantage. Huge fan bases packed with people ready to buy the brand building book, regardless of quality. It can be

disheartening when celebrity books occupy acres of shelf space. Though, if the first book is bad there may not be a second.

Being ambitious is different from seeking fame. Ambition may actually motivate and give writers more confidence in their writing. My view? Write the best stories, poems or scripts that you can and let the fame thing take care of itself.

Far better to have loyal readers who appreciate you for your words, not your fame.

Stuff to try

- Gather quotes from famous writers. Analyse them for a common thread.
- Consider whether fame is really the best measure of an author's success.
- Write a short story about the upside or downside of fame.

'I wanted to be successful, not famous.' - George Harrison

For Empowerment

Maybe you are like me ... and have been writing since you were a child. Happily creating colourful stories in imaginative worlds.

If so, only you will know what drew you to this form of creative expression. I lived in a dismal children's home, where I took refuge in words and worlds. Sat in a corner, scribbling stories on scraps of paper. My fanciful ideas flowed as I let my imagination take me to faraway places.

The act of writing empowered me to take charge of my thoughts and emotions. I wrote because I had to. It gave me control and independence. Something I didn't have in the real world.

Stuff to try

- Reflect on why you (have to) write.
- Consider the triggers that motivate you to write.
- What is it about writing that you like?
- What frustrates you?

'Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing.' - Benjamin Franklin

The Writing Process

Write from Experience

My first play on BBC Radio - *Kenny* - was about two teenagers leaving the care system. A follow up play - *Stranger in the Home* - was a love affair set in an old people's home, voiced superbly by Bernard Hepton.

Both drew on memories.

Kenny riffed on my actual experiences in care, while *Stranger in the Home* was based on my recollections of older people, and how they emotionally relate to each other. I didn't need to be a teenager or old person to write these plays, I just needed to refer to relationships, incidents and people in my life.

When writing from experience it is tempting to pour emotions onto the page. Though, unsurprisingly, a story full of grief or anger will not engage if there is

no structure or plot, or the dialogue and characters are underwritten.

So what makes a story sing?

Truthful details bring stories alive. The more truth us writers experience, the more authentic our writing becomes. Yesterday, an old woman shuffled by with a bulging plastic bag. Today, I'm still wondering what was in it.

Stuff to try

- Keep your eyes open for suitable subjects to write about; a bulging suitcase, a loose rope, a faded curtain.
- Picture a crowded train station. Describe what you see and feel when a familiar person runs towards you.
- Take an evocative memory full of emotion and rewrite it into an impassive newspaper report. Then identify those parts of the story that resonate most.
- Hold a personal possession from your childhood. Recall your thoughts when you first held it. What emotions did you experience back then? Have they changed over time?

'A writer needs three things; experience, observation, and imagination. Any two of which, at times any one of which, can supply the lack of the others.' - William Faulkner

Know Your Audience

I mainly write for children. No longer a child, I ask myself an obvious question. *'What do kids like to read these days?'*

Do I give young readers more of the same with my style thrown in, or something completely different? Children love familiarity but they also love to be surprised, as do publishers!

When I am unsure what to write, I chat to children during author visits. I also browse the children's section of my local library. You name it, I read it. I examine the style, the words, the 'voice', the presentation and the tone. This is not about copying other authors. You have to be a reader to know your readers.

Stuff to try

- Write a diary post about one day last week. Then turn the post into a longer blog, vlog - or whatever the latest online communication method is!
- Reflect on short-form and long-form ways of communicating. Consider the differing expectations of your audience.

- Take a short story and rework it into a longer one.

'The audience dictates what you do or don't change.'

- H. Fierstein

Meet Experienced Authors

Most writers are generous with advice and support, though some may be guarded, even dismissive. Take on board anything that might work for you and ignore the rest.

When you meet successful published writers always value your writing. Ensure you interact as equals. Just because you are starting out, or unknown, it doesn't mean your words have less value.

Maybe you will be fortunate enough to enter a collaborative partnership? I co-wrote scripts with Robin Stevens, a BAFTA winning writer for children's television, who was generous with his time and knowledge.

Stuff to try

- Connect with writers online by interacting with their social media presence. Reply to any posts that interest you. Ask questions at author events.

- Read '*Question & Answer*' sections on author websites. Many will include useful tips, drawn from life experiences.
- Choose a writer and jot down five reasons why you think you would get along (or not).

'I have never experienced another human being. I have experienced my impressions of them.' - Robert Wilson

Write across Genres

Genres are expressed through a multitude of media. Poetry may be presented via the printed word. Stage plays via speech. Portraits utilise the graphic arts.

It is easy to get caught up in one genre, so I purposely write in multiple genres, finding that one often informs another. For instance, picture book stories have a lot in common with radio scripts as each use visual imagery; one via the page and the other through the listeners' imagination.

I use this visual connection to my advantage and sometimes plot stories visually using sticky notes, while loosely sketching all the key beats of the action.

Some authors achieve success and become well-known via one specific genre, such as crime writing. Regardless of genre, I write to the best of my ability. My work carries my name and reputation with it. I want it to open doors, not close them.

Stuff to try

- Jot down a list of all the genres you know. Highlight the ones that most interest you. Identify genres that are expressed via mixed media.
- Explore a genre you don't much care for. Afterwards, reconsider your response. Do you feel differently now?

'Genres aren't closed boxes. Stuff flows back and forth across the borders all the time.'

- Margaret Atwood

When to Write?

Paying bills can be a real headache. On average, a professional writer earns much less than the average salary. A recent U.K. survey suggested only 14% or so of authors have writing as their sole income source.

Many have day jobs to supplement their income. The demands of the real world will often get in the way of writing, so it makes sense to listen to your body. To make the most of your time, pinpoint when you are most productive.

Are you a night owl who writes best in the wee small hours? Or an early bird?

Create a schedule by filling the calendar on a mobile phone with upcoming appointments and family commitments. The remaining spaces indicate potential

times for writing, and should help with creating a lasting routine.

I occasionally pull an all-nighter to get a project done. This is not a sustainable long-term approach, as I never feel like writing the next day. I try not to be too hard on myself when things get tough. Life is a rollercoaster, full of ups and downs.

Write when you can.

Stuff to try

- Log each time you write, the duration of each session, and how you feel. Energetic? Tired? Do this for a few weeks then create a schedule to suit.
- Leave pens around the house. Pick one up the moment you feel like writing.
- Give the key people in your life a unique ringtone so you can judge if you need to stop writing to answer a call.
- Incorporate interruptions into your writing. Have a phone ring, a dog bark or a volcano erupt! Make the interruption change the direction of your narrative. Surprise yourself!
- Try writing at the same time each day.
- Curb distractions by switching off your phone, or by playing wordless background music.

- Study the week ahead and pinpoint any likely interruptions. See if you can work around them.

'I write when I'm inspired, and I see to it that I'm inspired at 9 a.m. every morning.' - Peter DeVries

How to Stay Fresh

To keep my writing fresh, I aim to have two stories going at the same time. While writing one, I take a break from the other and revisit it later. I won't work on stories too similar in style or narrative as this can become hard to manage, or confusing.

One way to stay fresh is to write little and often. Use a Pomodoro 'countdown timer' app that rings after a set time on a smartwatch or mobile phone. This sets the pace for a writing session.

I write in short bursts and take regular five or ten minute breaks to disengage from the pressure of writing. I might listen to some music or fuss the dog. Interesting ideas usually bubble up on my return.

Stuff to try

- Pause your latest story and challenge yourself to write the last line or the final paragraph.
- Devise titles for new stories based on objects you see around you.

- Reflect on the last line of your draft story. Now write the first line.
- Read a story and write a counterpoint argument from the opposite perspective.

'When we engage in what we are naturally suited to do, our work takes on the quality of play and it is play that stimulates creativity.' - Linda Naiman

Avoiding Distractions

Install focus boosting software to clear unwanted visual clutter from your computer and prevent the opening of social media content.

The main benefit of such software is its awesome ability to lock down distracting apps, thereby reducing any temptation to pause writing and browse online.

If distractions persist, try to regain control of your thoughts. Picture yourself inside a giant, clear bubble & let the distractions bounce off. Or imaginatively shoot them into the sky and watch them explode like fireworks.

I have a habit of over-editing while I write a first draft, which affects my creative flow. Too much stopping, starting and rearranging can be very distracting so I aim to write in longer chunks, straight through. That way, I don't constantly interrupt myself. Write at least one chapter before going back to fiddle with stuff.

Stuff to try

- Pick a realistic word count. Start writing. Do you work better with a set word count or a set time?
- Stimulate your writing by going for a walk. Be mindful of the environment you pass through. Check out the sights, sounds and smells.
- Write a story in just 50 words. Allow 5 minutes.

'You can always find a distraction if you're looking for one.'

- Tom Kite