

## **The creative process: How to create stories and successfully become a writer**

Here are some notes about how to write and how to learn to create stories. You will find that I have separated the tasks of creating a story from the ability to write and you may find this distinction useful as it clarifies the differences between the two skills. They may help you in your adaptation of Turk Street, and if you are interested, in creative writing in general.

### **The jigsaw technique**

Imagine that you are making a picture puzzle, a jigsaw. You start with a single barely recognizable element and you begin to build from there. After a while when you survey the separate pieces of the picture that you have put together so far and you can see the picture slowly forming into a whole. You can see things that look like they might join together, but you can't quite find the right piece to make it happen at the moment. There are also pieces that seem like they are part of the whole picture, but you have no idea where they will fit eventually. Also, you may not be able see any piece that fits with something you have already done, so something vital is missing. Overall you have parts of a picture, some areas are complete, and there are some large worrying gaps and some interesting little pieces. However, by slowly surveying, comparing, testing, and working to find the matching parts the whole picture gradually comes together. This is how I would describe the creative process of imagining a story. It can happen just in the mind, it could be a story that's told and re-told the author while working out the details, and for a long work, for a screenplay, a novel, or a play, it is a process that is likely to be worked out on paper, gestated in the mind and the work goes back and forth; thinking and writing a plan, thinking and revising, re-writing and re-planning. Making a story happens through trial and error, inspiration and obstacle, solution and problem.

While the idea of the creative process being a jigsaw may seem to be simply a metaphor, I would suggest you treat it as a real and practical solution to the development of storytelling skills. Ideas are fragments; something appeals, something connects and a character or a plot starts to form. It's missing a lot of elements, but if you continue to search for them you may well eventually find them. Stories don't simply appear finished and complete in the mind and if you simply wait for the whole story to appear you are unlikely to ever start writing or to put down more than a few meager notes. A fragment of an idea may seem like a whole story because it inspires you, it feels like a complete idea, but if you don't work on it, think it through, put in the time and effort to develop it, then your story idea is just a notion; it will remain only a morsel of a whole story.

Something that's true of any type of skill is that the more effort and the more time you put into it the better you will get and the easier it will become. In terms of storytelling and writing, using the simple idea of the jigsaw technique as the key to understanding the creative process may seem weak; you might try it once or twice and find that it doesn't give you anything substantial. However, if you try it and try it and keep working then this method of thinking will start to bear fruit. If you want to learn to drive a car or play a musical instrument you don't give up because it's awkward and difficult to begin with. You need the same approach to creating stories. Early efforts will be patchy. Things will be clichéd. Ends will be missing. You might tell an entire story or write the script but no one seems impressed. No one gets it; there is a gap between the compelling, involving story that you think you're telling and how it's understood. Then you learn; how to make sure that there are enough elements in the plot so that stories don't collapse, how to clearly establish characters so that personalities and relationships are clear. You start to understand what will build interest and excitement, you learn to prune and cut what is unnecessary or confusing. Finally, as you develop your storytelling skills you become more adept. The piecing together of fragments becomes quicker, clearer. You don't have so many failures. You can make a specific focused effort and produce an idea to solve a specific plot or character problem. In all you have learnt how to create stories. Using this simple idea, the jigsaw technique, will work if you give it the time and effort to develop. Also, there are ways to start using this method that can make your progress as a storyteller far easier than others.

### **The jigsaw technique: Fiction from fact**

If you're going to create a story using the jigsaw technique you need material: ideas, events, people, places, moments; Elements that you can piece together. You can rely on your own experience, you certainly will use your own experiences, but it is far easier to start from a clearer and more certain foundation; a story that already exists.

So many stories are based on factual events, either famous or little known. If for example one looks at the films directed by, Oliver Stone, though not necessarily written by him, one can pair off the film to the non-fiction material on which they are based:

- *Alexander*, Alexander the Great
- *Born On The Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic, Vietnam Veteran
- *JFK*, Jim Garrison, New Orleans district attorney
- *Nixon*, Richard Nixon, US president
- *Platoon*, Oliver Stone, autobiographical influence
- *Salvador*, Peter Boyle, journalist

- *Talk Radio*, Alan Berg, talk radio host
- *The Doors*, Jim Morrison and the Doors
- *Wall Street*, Oliver Stone, autobiographical influence
- *Natural Born Killers*, Charles Starkweather and Caril Fugate, (Starkwater and Fugate were also an inspiration for the films, *Badlands* and *Wild at Heart*.)
- Perhaps the only film that Oliver Stone directed that is not fact-based is: *U Turn*, while, *Any Given Sunday*, has its base in the recognisable and researchable world of pro-football.

Starting from fact is a great support and rather than the writer sitting at a desk waiting for inspiration to come from nowhere it's possible to fill in any gaps in a story by doing research; the writer reads up on their subject and finds related material. With this approach you need to use your skills to shape and prune the story until you shape it into a well structured and engaging piece and this can require a lot of work, but most of all you are not starting from a blank piece of paper.

To work from fact you do not necessarily need to use a famous person, and your sources can be TV, Books, newspapers and magazines. For example the feature film *The Fast and The Furious* was developed from a magazine story. If you want to write a script for a short film rather than a full-length screenplay then you would look for smaller stories; incidents, short episodes.

### **The jigsaw technique: A foundation in Character**

As we have seen from Dashiell Hammett and other writers such as Chandler, Dexter, and Hiaasen their stories are based on a character that is used again and again. This approach is probably the most certain way to have a successful writing career that can span both books and films.

While all the characters in a book will have some relationship to their author one often gets a sense that the fictional hero or heroine of the tale is an idealized alter ego of the author. Certainly, the Op and Sam Spade stem from the experiences and viewpoint of Dashiell Hammett, while the characters of the fictional forensic pathologists; Kay Scarpetta and Tempe Brennan relate in turn to the career and knowledge of Patricia Cornwall who worked for several years in the world of forensic pathology and Kathy Reichs who is herself a forensic pathologist.

The link between fictional character and author does not have to be as close in terms of professional life as is the case with Hammett, Cornwall and Brennan. Colin Dexter who worked for the Oxford Examination Board had no experience as a detective, but he created

Detective Inspector Morse. However, like Morse, Colin Dexter is university educated, is intellectual in his pursuits, is rigorous in his use of English, and lives in the environs of Oxford, so it is easy to see how Dexter provides a setting and personality for his fictional character. As another example, Richmal Crompton, was a female teacher, wrote some thirty books of *Just William* short stories about her the young boy, William Brown. Here one can see how an author who worked like Crompton might benefit from creating an alter ego who was able to behave in a way that might appeal to her, but was distinct from her own personal life. Also, she was a teacher who must have had a wide knowledge of the character and interests of boys.

While a fictional character may be created primarily in the mind, as an extension of the author's personality, you can still use fact to support a fictional character. In the Sharpe novels written by Bernard Cornwall, his hero Richard Sharpe, fights with in Portugal with Wellington in the early 1800's and the setting for these stories follows the campaign of the Peninsula War. In *Sharpe's Havoc*, the eponymous hero fights at Oporto in May 1809 and the action and geography of the fictional story closely follows that of the historic battle. In the actual battle the French drove the Portuguese and British across the river and this is what happens in *Sharpe's Havoc*. At the end of the same book, Sharpe and his men set up their defenses in a Catholic seminary, and this building, its shape and position can be seen in the maps of Oporto used at the time of Wellington. The skill with this kind of storytelling is to meld the fictional Sharpe into the historic events and to give him a task to do that will create a specific and significant story for his character. Bernard Cornwall has also used this approach to fiction for a trilogy of books based on the legends King Arthur. From both the Sharpe novels and the King Arthur trilogy work one can see how fictional characters can take on historical roles and the fictional historical novel is of course a recognized genre with films such as *The English Patient*, or *Cold Mountain*, using this type of story.

Another approach to mixing fictional characters when creating stories is used by Anthony Horowitz, who has created a fictional spy, Alex Rider, who inhabits a world very similar to the fictional world of James Bond. Alex rider is a boy of only 14, but works for MI5. In both series of books there are gadgets, chases, and arch-villains who want world domination. This means that in Alex Rider a new fictional character has been created who moves into a fictional environment created primarily by another author. While this approach to storytelling is very specific between Alex Rider and James Bond, it is often used more broadly when authors write using the genres of fantasy or sci-fi, where the type of 'worlds' created by new authors have many of the features established by earlier authors. The fantasy world of the Harry Potter books has some

overlaps with the world of *Lord of The Rings*, where the mystical and magical creatures in these stories have similar powers and characteristics. There is the evil Lord Sauron in Lord of the Rings and the evil Lord Voldemort in Harry Potter and in both a young hero is tasked as part of his destiny to be the one who destroys the evil lord.

### **The jigsaw technique: a foundation in environment**

An author can rely on a single character as the focus for their writing, or work from a range of characters that inhabit a similar environment. The author Edith Wharton writes of American high society, the society she lived in, and uses both male and female characters to carry her own personality and ideas. Scott Fitzgerald writes from the jazz age where his own relationship with his wife is displaced into several of his novels with a range of characters. Once again the key to working in fiction is to start from a clear situation and build upon this foundation rather than trying to create an entire world

### **The jigsaw technique: problems solving**

One way to generate a story from actual places and situations is problem solving. If you wanted to rob a casino how would you go about it? In this case you would create the story by planning the crime. *The Eagle Has Landed* was developed by Jack Higgins from the pre-existing idea that there was a plan during World War Two to capture Winston Churchill just as Mussolini had been rescued by German paratroopers from Italy. Setting himself this problem Higgins found a location for it to happen and created characters to carry out and thwart this endeavor. The same approach was been used in stories about robbing the Crown Jewels in *The Jokers*, and a casino in *Ocean's Eleven*. This problem-solving idea can be used on almost any scheme you want to choose and the difference between this approach and idea based solely in the imagination is that one can research how the Crown Jewels and how casinos are protected, so that it's possible to plan a crime and generate the story through research.

### **The jigsaw technique: Semi-autobiography, Roman à clef** (pronounced: roh-máhn a clay)

Fiction can also be very close to real life with the actual events compressed and re-ordered for fiction and the names of the characters chosen to conceal the person. Writers who have used this method are Charles Bukowski, John Fante, Henry Miller, Sylvia Plath and Jack Kerouac. In this kind of writing the skill is to recognize what will make an interesting story from the events of your own life and how to structure it into a story for drama or prose.

## **Originality**

Given all the writers developing their stories from other lives, their own lives and from other fictions it becomes hard to find any piece of work that could be defined as completely singular and original in its conception. Working for this starting point the work of an author is to create stories through gathering, choosing, ordering and structuring rather than from the far more ephemeral and mysterious thing that creativity and originality is supposed to be. A writer is like a cook gathering ingredients, putting them together, seeing what they like and what appeals to others and this is why the idea of jigsawing and learning how to do this is the key to creating stories.

## **The creative process: learning how to write**

### **Succeeding as a writer**

Creating stories involves thinking and planning, gathering and researching and this work will eventually be put down on paper. However, the task of writing, the skill and the hard work involved is different from selecting and structuring the material for a story. This separation is similar in terms of creativity to the separation between composing the music and playing it, or designing the building and constructing it, or even planning the journey and making it. Creating the story is the conception of the project and writing of the story is the realization of the project.

The comments that follow are about the business of writing, but as there is no single universal approach to writing that will work for everyone you will have to find out by trial and error which of these methods and suggestions works for you.

### **Becoming a writer**

Dashiell Hammett says of writing:

'Simplicity and clarity are not to be got from the man on the street. They are the most difficult of literary accomplishments, and a high degree of skill is necessary to any writer who would win them.'

(from: *The Life of Dashiell Hammett*, Diane Johnson)

While many people have writing skills this is not to be mistaken for the skills needed to be a professional writer. It's more than a short step from being able to play a few tunes on the piano to being a concert pianist, or from being able to master some dance steps to being a spectacular dancer, and developing such a high degree of

ability requires a long-term and sustained effort to move from a competent level to one of expertise.

The view taken by Hammett that good writing is difficult is one that many authors speak of when recounting the effort that it took them to learn to write and it's something that the guidebooks which discuss creative writing echo time and again. The task of becoming a writer is long and need sustained effort.

If one accepts what Hammett and many other authors have stated that becoming a writer is a considerable project, with something like ten years being the agreed timescale for gaining the necessary level of skill, it is therefore essential to learn to write in a way that will make you succeed rather than leaving you demoralized with a sense of failure. You will succeed if you start your writing career the correct way and are more likely to fail if you don't.

### **Good writing**

The first thing to set in place on the route to becoming a writer is the recognition of what good writing is. Here again the quote from Dashiell Hammett is helpful. What is required for good writing is 'simplicity and clarity'. This aim may well sound too simple to be true, to be all that's required, but it's not that easily achieved, because what it means is precision; stating clearly and succinctly what happens in a story and having dialogue that easily carries both plot and character. What makes this difficult to achieve is that when someone starts to write their story ideas are unclear and then their writing skills in terms of structure, style, grammar, spelling and punctuation aren't fully developed and so what gets put on paper is confused; Sentences aren't completely clear, paragraphs lack purpose; as a piece of writing grows longer the many small faults multiply until they become a severe problem and what's essential to a good story; clear effective storytelling, is lost within a myriad of weaknesses.

In his article, *Politics and the English Language*, the writer George Orwell, formulated what he saw as the essential guidelines to good writing. Firstly, a writer asks themselves these questions:

1. What am I trying to say?
2. What words will express it?
3. What image or idiom will make it clear?
4. Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?
5. Could I put it more shortly?
6. Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?

Secondly, the writer can adopt the following in relation to considering their writing:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive when you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than saying anything outright barbarous.

Orwell's aim with his guidelines is to write clearly and succinctly so that the reader can understand what he wants to say. And moving on from Orwell's view in order to use it to cover storytelling in general: being direct makes it plain what is happening, what the characters are like, what the plot is, and succeeding in this aim to communicate precisely leads to the reader's involvement in the story with all the emotions and empathy that good storytelling will embrace. Complexity in a story is not based on the complexity of the writing, but on the situations that are set up and a complex story can only benefit from careful, clear and concise telling.

### **Writing but not creative writing**

Undoubtedly the best way to learn to write is to start in a way where you avoid facing the double challenge of creating original stories and developing your writing skills at the same time. Many people become fiction writers after they have worked in journalism and Charles Dickens and George Orwell are two examples of this.

Journalism teaches a writer to gather the facts, structure them into a concise recounting of events, write the story to a set style for a specific publication, to a precise word count, and meet a set deadline for getting the work done. This makes journalism a terrific training ground for a fiction writer, because the writing challenges are not too daunting or too precious, material is gathered, just as needs to be done to create a fictional story, and then these narrative elements are written up into a coherent narrative. While non-fiction is bound to an ethical code that forbids inventing events or dialogue there is no difference between the creative process of journalism and creative process of fiction writing. As a former journalist the author Bernard Cornwall is able to write to a high standard and produce more than one novel a year and in the golden age of Hollywood (1930's and 40's) being a journalist was the surest route to becoming a screenwriter. The discipline of journalism gives a writer the skills to move into fiction.

Other routes can be used to gain writing skills. Dashiell Hammett was a copywriter for a jewelry store before he was an author and wrote the following:

'Every young man knows that the diamond ring he chooses for the lady of his heart must run the gauntlet of critical friends and relatives. It behooves him, therefore, to make his selection with great care, choosing a diamond ring that will reflect his good taste – a tribute to the girl he loves.'  
(from: *The Life of Dashiell Hammett*, Diane Johnson)

As another example the Pulitzer prize winning playwright and Oscar winning screenwriter David Mamet, had as a first writing job the task of making up copy for the captions to go with the pictures in girlie magazines. He wrote:

'Tolstoy said that a nap after dinner is silver, a nap before dinner gold. Gretchen prefers a nap to dinner altogether.'  
(from: *Make-Believe Town*, David Mamet)

What is interesting to note about both Dashiell Hammett and David Mamet is that while both became extremely successful, and even famous as writers, their early anonymous work did not cause them any later regret or embarrassment. Presumably, this was because of the skills and opportunity it gave them.

Besides journalism and copywriting an aspiring writer could write reviews or keep a journal, or undertake business or academic writing, all of which will provide a non-fiction environment in which to develop. Just as musicians practice so writers need to practice. Similarly musicians learn by performing the music of others and this gives them the skills and understanding necessary to develop their own work. The same is true for someone who wants to be an author; it's far easier to develop your writing abilities if you don't have to wrestle at the same time with the intricacies of fictional events, plots, and characters and settings.

### **Define yourself as a writer**

While it may seem very pretensions to declare yourself to be 'a writer', when you have nothing published and this kind of statement might well not be one to make a declaration of in public. If you want to be a writer you have to make a conscious sustained and determined commitment to learn to be a writer; the skills just won't grow unless they are worked on. Then when you make this commitment must also take on board the amount of work that needs to be done.

It is often the case that someone wants to define themselves from the start as a particular kind of writer; sometimes as a screenwriter, but not a novelist. However, and while it might be a hard to accept this suggestion, it is far better to leave the matter open. An emerging writer should try writing short stories, novels, screenplays, plays, fiction and non-fiction. While a writer may well end up specializing in one area of writing, because that's where their strengths lie, very few authors have written nothing but one type of work. In terms of screenwriting many authors begin as playwrights, or novelists and their screenwriting career starts later. This was the case with Harold Pinter, David Mamet and Christopher Hampton, all of whom have written very successful screenplays and even come to direct their own work.

Overall it seems wise to define yourself as a writer, meaning that you have the skills that enable you to write, and keep your creative options open, rather than just being a novelist or just a screenwriter, because it gives you more scope to write. Besides, not every story can be successful as a screenplay, but it might make a great novel, or a play, so it is good not to feel limited to one particular format.

### **Make time to create stories and make time to write**

The novelist William Burroughs made the interesting observation that if you're going to be a writer you're going to spend a large part of your life on your own. This may make the task of writing sound somewhat punitive, but you do have to allot a significant amount of time to your writing and you do need to make sure that you keep writing and you need to make time to do this.

The Oscar winning screenwriter, William Goldman, has noted that the most difficult thing for a writer to protect is their writing time because it's essential to have a structure and a schedule for when you write, but there are always everyday pressures and commitments that continually work against this. In terms of keeping a pattern and a sustained effort in their work individual writers' organize their time in different ways. Maya Angelou writes new material in the morning, teaches in the day and corrects her work in the evening. Tennessee Williams and Woody Allen are morning writers and the Japanese author Yukio Mishima was able to start his writing at midnight and would complete a novel in six to nine months. The authors, Virginia Woolf, George Bernard Shaw and Roald Dahl, each had a place, a shed, hut, a lodge, a hideaway, in which they could get away from day to day interruptions and get on with their writing. TV and film writers who work in partnership often keep a small office in which to get the job done. What seems

to be true of almost all writers is that they establish a pattern and habit for their work and this helps them in what they do.

It might be argued that the idea of setting a specific time slot each day to write is too restrictive, because a person needs inspiration to be able to start work. However, to wait to start work while hoping for inspiration is a far too much of a mercurial option to use if you want to be a committed author and in relation to this Joyce Carol Oates, who has written over thirty novels, makes the observation that when you sit down to write you may not feel like writing, but by starting to write the desire to write will come; a writer needs to develop the habit of writing and this will support rather than hinder creative work. Again, this idea can be compared to a musician who needs to practice in a concentrated environment to build up their skills; it has to be done.

Looking at the benefits of regular writing it is easy to see the influence it will have on your skills. If you were to write just an hour a day over the course of a year and even have quite a few days off you would have done over three hundred hours of writing. Extending this to two or even three hours a day would give you six hundred to nine hundred hours of experience.

Also, as a point to mention, in terms of the difference in work and effort you might need to make in regard to writing a screenplay or a book, Robert McKee, the author of the screenwriting guide, *Story, Substance, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, states that it will take as long to write a feature film screenplay as it will to write a novel. The fact that a screenplay has less words, and might therefore seem to be a smaller task than book, is counterbalanced by the fact that a polished screenplay will require many drafts to refine it so that it is the best that it can be. Of course there are times when a writer will rush through a piece of work, and William Goldman noted that he wrote the screenplay for *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid* in a fortnight, but he was already a very experienced writer when he did this and he also commented that it was a ten year process from beginning to work on the idea for the film script and producing the final result.

### **Learning from Reading**

It has been said that *every writer is a reader*, which expresses the sentiment that a love of books, of reading, will be the touchstone that leads someone to want to be a writer, and presumably a love of film will lead someone to want to be a scriptwriter. This is likely to be true in many cases, but it is possible to get a more certain

and more direct return from reading in terms of a person developing their writing skills by using a few simple techniques. These additional ways to approach reading are needed because when a person reads on a day to day basis they read quickly, skimming across the individual words, sentences and paragraphs and their thoughts are not concentrating on the writing style or skills of the author, but are overtaken by the images and narratives that the book creates. In order to see how a piece of writing is constructed it is necessary to slow down the reading process and there are few easy ways to do this:

- Read a book or script aloud so that you have to clearly form each word
- Listen to a book or play as an audio tape where the words are carefully and professionally read
- Choose a piece of writing from a book and type it out in full, or study a film and write out the dialogue.

Using any of these methods of reading will offer you a stronger sense of how a piece of writing has been put together and how the story is being told. And in relation to your own work:

- Read your own writing aloud or record it and listen back to it.
- Have others read or perform what you have written.

Using either of the options above will enable you to carefully hear the words exactly as they have been put down on paper, rather than as you might normally speed through them in silent reading and the effect of this will be twofold. Firstly, the quality and detail of what you have written will come through if the writing is good, but if it is not you will sense the gaps and misunderstandings and poor expression that you need to return to in order to re-write and improve. Secondly, you will experience what you have written as though you are not the author, but as a third person and from this perspective you will be able to sense how your story is working in terms of story, style and emotion.

### **The basics: Grammar and punctuation**

No matter how able the writer, no matter how experienced the writer, no one knows the spelling of every word and every writer

will have questions about the correctness of what they have written in terms of grammar and punctuation. Keeping dictionaries, thesaurus, and books on punctuation and grammar to hand are not signs of weakness or incompetence; they're invaluable tools. Louis De Bernieres, the author of the highly successful novel, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, was asked by the household goods store chain Habitat to design a piece of furniture that would be essential to him. Louis De Bernieres' response was to create a portable book case, which he could use to trolley around all the reference books he needed for his writing.

As a small addition to this need for reference books; this might well be a better choice than using the Internet, because of course the Internet leads to browsing and searching and much time can be consumed while the writing is still waiting to be done.

### **A problem to avoid: Setting the barrier too high**

A first novel, or play or screenplay is started with excitement and enthusiasm. It's a joy to begin. Then the writing falters, there's a pause, a longer pause and then the work has effectively stalled. The writer may tell themselves that they're still writing, but the idea is drained out and is never finished. Why has this happened?

It may well be good to be ambitious in any field that you wish to succeed in but to start with the feature length screenplay, the full-length novel is far too much of a challenge. A composer doesn't start with a full orchestral symphony; they start on smaller pieces and develop. The same approach should be taken with writing and if this seems like time wasted it may instead be stored material for the future. An author might take the setting, plot and characters from a short story and later in their career build them into a novel. For example Joseph Conrad successfully reworked elements of his short stories into long novels.

Sometimes a first time writer completes a long screenplay, or even a novel, but it's a mess; the plotting is unclear, the dialogue unrealistic, the writing is hard to read. This means that the writer has the stamina for a long piece of work, but does not have either the writing or storytelling skills. It's not an easy thing to face, but one may have to write one or two bad books, before being able to plan well and produce better work. The alternative is to put a long time into revising and rewriting a complete book where the first draft is weak.

### **A problem to avoid: The writing stops**

Besides setting the barrier too high an inexperienced writer will try to rely on what might be called; gushing; short intense periods of

inspiration and excitement when ideas flow out. This kind of writing is very enjoyable and feels extremely productive, but as already stated it will not sustain a writing project that needs to be planned and pushed forward with a conscientious effort. A writer cannot wait for the right mood to come in order to be productive. When working on stories which have a basis in fact if the writing gets stuck then the writer can do research and produce new material to work from. Research is a creative process, waiting for inspiration is not.

### **Choosing what to write**

This is the most difficult area on which to provide useful advice even though many or even most neophyte writers choose badly and do themselves harm in their choice of subject matter. This problem happens in several ways:

The writer does not have enough material for the topic they want to write on. For instance someone may want to write a crime story, but has no experience of crime, or policing, and has done no research and little reading in the field. What is produced in these circumstances is usually very clichéd, it lacks verisimilitude and this happens because the story is based on previously seen film or TV programs, or a few books.

Frequently new writers choose to write what is popular at present. For example the publisher Bloomsbury is now unable to consider any more children's books for publication, because with the phenomenal success they are having with J.K. Rowling's, *Harry Potter* books they have been deluged with manuscripts for children's books. Of course some of these works will be good, but many will be following a trend. (For my own part my first years teaching scriptwriting were cursed with what I call *The Tarantino Years*; with a large percentage of students fashioning stories from watered down versions of *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*.) The contradiction in suggesting that following what's popular may be a bad idea is that successful authors do follow trends, genres and use established formats and plotting, but there may be a crucial difference between what is successful using this approach and what is not.

If a writer decides to write a particular type of story and this choice is taken primarily because they like that type of story this may prove an unhelpful path to take. Perhaps, what really inspires and motivates a writer will instead have a far more personal basis rather than just the appeal of a topic based on their own enjoyment in reading or the idea that a genre that has widespread popularity is a good one to select for themselves.

The advice for those starting writing is often; *write what you know*. This does seem helpful, because it means creating stories from the material at hand. However, it also seems to want to limit people to writing memoirs, autobiography or roman à clef. The advice that would seem preferable is; *use what you know* and from this personal material you can create a wide range of stories once you have developed your jigsawing technique. For instance, Patricia Highsmith, an American author, nearly always wrote crime stories, but she had little or no interest in actual police procedures or legal matters. She used crime as an environment where she could create the characters she was interested in. If she had been advised to write, *what you know*, what might have appeared would have been stories of college life and the literary world. Instead she used *what she knew* to fashion a large number of personal crime novels. Building a fictional world from what you know is certainly a key to success, but it can't simply be a recounting or re-working of autobiographical events.

Another decision that new writers take where they follow others in what they choose to write is by feeling that have to write what is deemed worthy; literature, potentially important works, socially significant writing. It's good to aspire to great work, to hope that what you write will have a social relevance, but to set that up as a choice that limits your options is more likely to make it a barrier than a route to success.

As an indicator of the pressure that people feel to write what is worthy, and what might be respected rather than what they might be good at, a student recently asked me to read a script that they had written. Rather, apologetically, they let me know that it was a *rom-com*, a romantic-comedy, as though this would be a disappointment to me, or make me less willing to read it. The type of story I was being asked to read was not what was disappointing to me, but the student's regret that they had chosen to write in this genre was. After all didn't Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, Sheridan and Molière, all write romantic comedies? Isn't the most popular and still highly esteemed English author, Jane Austen, a writer of romantic comedies, and isn't Britain's most successful screenwriter, Richard Curtis, a writer of romantic comedies? In film aren't the romantic comedies of Lubitsch, Capra, Hawks and Wilder, still regarded after fifty years as some of the best and most enjoyable films to come out of the Hollywood studio system? Avoiding, or being worried about writing a romantic comedy because it seems less serious than other work is likely to be a wrong choice to make if you have a feeling for this kind of story and this idea can be applied generally by adopting the view that if you find you can write one type of story

well and the ideas keep flowing then that's probably the type of story you want to work on.

It would seem wrong to me to feel a pressure not to write in a particular genre if that's where your strengths lie. In the case of Dashiell Hammet, the crime genre was considered a very inferior form before he started writing his P.I. stories, but by the time he finished his career and was joined by writer's such as Raymond Chandler, the detective story was very popular and also respected as good writing. There are poor, clichéd and stereotypical works in every genre, but every genre has the potential for fabulous engrossing stories, so it's not a good idea to believe that one genre is 'better' than any other or there is a 'better' type of story that one should be writing.

Given the range of possibilities for making the wrong decision when choosing what to write, then making the right choice is not at all clear-cut. First, one can avoid the mistakes of writing what others want you to write, or what's popular now, or even what you like and admire. Instead the key may be to write for a while and if you look back at what you've done you can see what worked well and where your strengths were over a variety of projects and this very specific study of your own creative output will help you decide what kind of writing you might concentrate on.

As an interesting case of trying things out; the writer Paul Auster had no luck with his first written works and so decided on trying his hand at the more marketable genre of crime fiction. He wrote a novel that was successfully published, but the real significance of this experiment was that it led to Auster writing his *New York Trilogy*. The detective novel that Paul Auster penned was much like many others, but the *New York Trilogy* was received as a significant literary work. Trying things out can lead to unexpected outcomes and a writer doesn't always know where their talents are best used at the very beginning of their career.

When writers are successful in a particular field they are often said to have their own *voice*; they excel in what they do and their work is particularly distinctive. This might be what you're looking for when you start writing, but you're not going to find it by relying on what's popular or what people say is good writing, or even what you like to read or watch yourself. Your *voice* will emerge when you can focus on what works in your own stories, because they from your own specific personality and tastes. Your writing skills plus your individual perspective will make your work original and you will discover your voice by writing without fixing yourself as a writer to one particular type of story.

### **A problem created by others: the talent challenge**

Some of the books on writing and sometimes industry professionals identify talent as the one thing that you can't learn and either you have talent or not. This creates a paradoxical problem for new writers; it's arrogant to say you have talent without proof of success and if you don't feel like boasting to everyone that you have talent then perhaps you don't really have the talent that you think you might have.

The view to take due to this dilemma is to ignore it, because testing yourself for talent is an unnecessary trial to put yourself under, and instead its best to focus on developing the skills needed to create stories and learning how to write. If you want to ask yourself if you have talent then wait a few years before you start worrying about this question and in fact another tip for writers gives us the answer in terms of creative work: *it's ten percent inspiration and ninety percent perspiration.*

### **Getting a second opinion**

Your friends and family may well want to support you in your writing, but they are not the people who can give you a second opinion on a piece of your work if they have no writing skills on which they can base their advice. Scripts or manuscripts submitted to agents, or producers, or production companies are judged on whether or not the individual or company is interested in buying, making or publishing your work. The correct way to seek advice is have your work read by someone who is knowledgeable about the field that you're writing in, is sympathetic to your aims and is able to suggest what might be done to improve the work you've produced.

There are script editors, book editors, sub-editors, and agents who can read a work and consider it in relation to what it offers without needing to put forward their own version of the story that's being told. They can look at the details; structure, storytelling, and expression and competently feedback on how the story comes across. This is the relationship a writer needs to test and assess their work. For many writers such a relationship is important even essential, because they need a second opinion to be able to look at their work from an outside perspective. Finding the person who can give a reliable and supportive second opinion can be difficult, but a writer will know they have found them when this person asks the questions and makes the comments about the work that the writer themselves is thinking. The writer and the knowledgeable reader both recognize what is good, what is weak, what is clear, what is unclear.

When the first draft is done a writer can benefit from support, because the re-writing process can either improve or damage a work, so that good support and advice is a welcome chance to share worries, discuss ideas and decide what to do next.

### **Script vs. prose**

As films are so popular the first choice for a writer is often the screenplay. The view taken in these notes is that a person who wants to write should identify themselves as a writer, not as specifically a screenwriter, or a novelist. Going a step further than this I would suggest that learning to write prose fiction is not to be avoided in preference to scriptwriting. A script to be successful has to tell its story well, has to be commercial, has to appeal to a particular person or company at a particular time. A screenplay has to meet very narrow and uncertain criteria to be judged a success. A good script can be rejected endlessly simply because of bad luck not bad writing. This turn of events can be very dispiriting for a writer. The novelist and screenwriter William Goldman states that it would be madness to try to be a writer who is only a writer, because the screenwriting business is so fickle and very often unsatisfying

Writing prose often produces a piece of work that at a later date can be adapted into a screenplay, but as the final word of the book is finished the book is finished. Even if it's never published a work in prose is complete and the writer can move on to other stories with a feeling that they've done a job well and that the task is complete. If a novelist gets their later novels published and has some success then their early work and their first short stories may well be published. A piece of prose has its own integrity and that can offer a writer a lot of satisfaction in itself.

Even if a writer wants to be a screenwriter above all else it is still advisable to also write prose and plays, because novelists and playwrights are given more respect and deference than those who base their career solely on screenwriting. Also, writer's want to see their work and stories preserved; a screenplay that's unmade has little or no status, it's hard to get a single person to read it, and a film that's made from a screenplay fails for any number of reasons then this destroys the original intention and promise of the script.

There are other reasons for writing novels if you are in fact more interested in film. The majority of films are adaptations from other sources, so that a story that starts as a novel has a better chance of landing up in production than an original screenplay. This is because an original script has not been proved and it therefore needs greater confidence to support it being turned into a film over a

popular book that has already been tested and proved successful with the public. Additionally, if the writer wants to protect their own story a film adaptation from a novel is more likely to follow the original book while with a film from an original screenplay it will more often than not be significantly changed during production. A screenwriter is a secondary or even minor person in the filmmaking process while a novelist is the primary creative force who guides and controls the work. And finally, a writer who wants to be a writer-director will have to serve an apprenticeship producing work for others and this leaves someone who is only a screenwriter prey to all the problems of bad films from good scripts and unmade scripts that can make a writing career feel very trammled and unproductive even though the work is good.

**In summary: in order to become a writer try the following:**

- Learn how to jigsaw; start with stories based on fact, then take on more individual projects.
- Learn how to recognize material; get into the habit of storing events, people, places, things you have read, and things you have seen so that you have the material in head to jigsaw and create stories.
- Decide to become a writer and commit yourself to the time needed to achieve this.
- Make regular, hopefully a daily time in your life in which to write. Stick to this time and protect your writing hours.
- Recognize what good writing is and make that your aim to achieve.
- Read your own work and the work of others aloud so you can hear it from an outsider's perspective.
- Transcribe the work of others to understand how other authors write
- Start writing non-fiction: journalism, reviews, journals, business or academic writing.
- Research for material when helpful and necessary

- Write short pieces at the start of your writing career and avoid taking on large works that are more likely to fail.
- Be a writer; write prose, write plays, write screenplays, write fiction, write non-fiction
- Don't start on a long work until you have the experience and are able to plan out the story of a long book or feature-length screenplay in detail.
- Produce a scene-by-scene, or chapter-by-chapter breakdown before writing the first full page of any story.
- Find an informed experience person to give you feedback and support for your revising and re-writing.
- Don't fix your mind upon being one particular type of writer until you have several years experience.