

**Advice for aspiring writers by Jesse Kellerman**

People ask me all the time for advice on how to get published. There isn't one good answer to that question. Writing professionally requires a combination of skill, luck, and diligence, and every writer has his own system.

That said, I have learned one or two things over the years.

**1. Be organized.**

I am a big proponent of outlines, having learned the hard way that failure to use them results in a meandering, spineless book. The middle of the story is what suffers most. This is because I often have a great premise and a great ending but no clear way to connect them. As excited as I am to jump straight in and write that opening scene, I've found that doing more work in advance saves me a lot of trouble down the line.

My outlines are therefore very detailed, usually running 60-90 pages. Sometimes I'll even include bits of dialogue or phrases that feel important. It's basically a proto-book, and it gives me something to refer to when I feel like I'm out of gas or can't remember what's supposed to come next. Having that there to rely on is a great comfort.

Of course, it's important to be flexible in execution. There's no guarantee that the 4-6 weeks I spend outlining are the most creative and precise weeks of the year. I frequently restructure the entire book about midway through in order to incorporate new ideas or to accommodate characters who have grown in unanticipated ways.

**2. Rewrite.**

For me, at least, the majority of the work is not done on the first draft but on the second through thirtieth. I begin each day by rewriting the previous day's material, which gives me an extra rewrite in addition to getting me in the groove to continue. In days of yore, agents and editors would work with authors to refine manuscripts they felt had promise. Not so anymore. These days they want a completely finished, highly polished product—something they can sell quickly. What I usually tell people is to rewrite until you think that the book absolutely cannot be improved any further. That's the time to send it in, and not before.

**3. When in doubt, cut.**

Writers by nature love the sound of their own words, and the hardest part of becoming a professional is learning to accept that what you find incredibly droll is oftentimes uninteresting to others. It's a bitter pill to swallow but a necessary one. Most of what we write is going to be bad. (Hemingway said that he wrote one page of masterpiece to ninety-one pieces of shit. The trick was to put the shit in the wastebasket.) The key here is learning to evaluate your own work with the same critical eye you bring to a stranger's work. You need to love to analyze text, need to love picking it apart to see how it works and doesn't work. In college I used to edit my friends' papers because I felt that it worked as a "reset" on my brain, enabling me to come to my text with a greater sense of objectivity. Do whatever it takes to give yourself distance from the work. Set it aside for a month. Give it to someone you love and trust and ask them to be brutally honest (and be prepared to bite your tongue). Read other books. Read old work of yours and note what mistakes you made. Think about how you would fix them now. Then look at the current manuscript and ask yourself if those same problems are still plaguing your writing.

#### **4. Trust yourself.**

You have to learn when to ignore people.

***One particular point here:*** I would advise against deliberately setting out to make a book "more commercial." In my opinion, that's a losing game. The reading market is highly unpredictable, and it's extremely tough to anticipate what will sell. You could try to match the structure and tone of a successful book (say, *The DaVinci Code*) but odds are you won't be able to do it. Only Dan Brown can write *The DaVinci Code*, and attempting to mold one's writing to an abstraction such as "commercial appeal" often results in a lifeless text. You should write about what you know and love. This is not just a matter of principle but solid writing advice. Editors and readers have good BS detectors. I can tell when a writer isn't working from the gut, and I will usually put the book down. You have a story to tell that cannot be told by anyone else, in any other way, and if you're talented and lucky and work hard, you will find the right way to tell it. In other words, to thine own self be true. This is not to say that you can't make things up, but rather that your voice, your true voice, is what will draw people in.

***And, along those lines...***

#### **5. Never give up.**

This sounds elementary, but a lot of times it's easy to forget just how many agents there are out there. It's quite possible that one will reject your book for a number of reasons while another

loves it for those very same reasons. The trick is to find somebody whose interests align with yours. To that end, I would begin by making a list of writers you admire and/or whose style is comparable to yours. Find out who their agents are (Google can usually help you there, or else write to the publishing house), and start by querying them. It's by no means a surefire way to make a match, but at least you won't be firing completely into the ether.

## **6 [although really it should be 1-A, because this is a different type of advice])**

Recently a young woman e-mailed me to ask how I knew I had “the stuff” to write. Since the previous five points have dwelt primarily upon questions of craft, I thought I would reprint part of my reply to her, as it addresses more nebulous questions of motivation, inspiration, and confidence. It's long but these q's are biggies. Here goes:

I never decided to become a writer, in that there was no single moment of realization. I've written habitually from a very young age—two or three, when I would dictate stories to my father. I can't say where the compulsion comes from, only that it's there, and that I'm happiest when obeying it. Which is to say: it's the act of writing itself that fulfills me, not the state of being a writer.

That's a crucial distinction, because there is no standard for what makes someone a writer other than the act of writing. There's no licensing exam; no certificate of merit. To be sure, there are academic programs—more on that in a moment—but in my opinion they're basically worthless. Even publication isn't a good standard to measure by, because plenty of magnificent writers never publish, and plenty of terrible hacks rule the bestseller lists. So the real question to ask yourself is: do I enjoy doing this? Does it fill a void that would otherwise be unfillable? If you love to write and you are willing to write and you actually write, then you're a writer. End of story.

Getting paid for writing is a separate issue. I wrote for about twenty years without earning any money, but I don't consider myself any more or less of a writer because I do now. Getting paid is wonderful but it doesn't make you a writer. Writing does.

To that end, worrying about whether you have “it” or “the stuff” won't get you very far. What is talent, anyway? I'm not sure there is any one such quality, and even if it exists, you can't control how much you were born with. My philosophy—and this applies to all areas of my life, not just

writing—is to worry only about those things I can control. Talent is not one of them, so I try not to dwell on it.

Now, you can and should practice your craft. That’s something you can control. You have to write a lot, read a lot, and be extremely self-critical. Even really “talented” writers spend years figuring out how to harness their energies. Story structure, for example, can be learned: you study how great books are put together. You take those lessons and try to apply them to your own work. You practice. You fail. You self-scrutinize. You try again. You may be good; you may be terrible. Who knows? But that question cannot and should not prevent you from trying.

We all have fears that hold us back from writing. Fear of failure, of embarrassing ourselves or looking stupid. That’s okay. It’s reasonable to feel afraid of exposing your heart to strangers. But if you love to write, if it makes you happy, if you have something inside you fighting to get out, then you won’t let that fear stand in your way. You’ll kick it to the curb and put some words on the page. Go for it. Just go for it.

I realize that pushing fear aside is easier said than done, and that it might sound as though I never suffer doubts. So let me cop to being plagued by doubt. I spend a lot of my time in a state of high anxiety. I worry about my work and obsess over it. I guess what I try to do is take that nervous energy and use it as motivation to work harder. Because the other option would be to quit. There are times—many, many times—when I want to quit. Thankfully, my wife is around to calm me down, reassure me that I’ve gone through this before and that I’ll get through it again. Without her I’d probably be working in a cubicle right now. Writing is so difficult, so frustrating, so inherently overwhelming, that it helps to surround yourself with people who love you and believe in you. (Again, easier said than done.)

And that same advice goes for yourself, as well: strive to be kind to yourself. If you’re like most writers, you’re a perfectionist. Often I have to remind myself that novels don’t get written in a day, and that it’s okay to stop work before every sentence is 100% pristine. You don’t have to sit down every day confident that you’re going to spin gold. In fact, if you believe that, you’re probably not being self-critical enough. You can’t be afraid to write, but you also can’t be afraid to criticize yourself, and it’s keeping these two ideas in balance that makes the business of writing so emotionally taxing.