

## WHAT'S A WRITER?

A writer is simply someone who writes, isn't it?

Technically, yes, but isn't that also like saying anyone who plays a musical instrument is a musician, or anyone who sings is a singer, or anyone who takes pictures is a photographer, or anyone who paints is a painter, and so forth? While each of these areas of artistic expression is open and available to all who wish to participate, each one also represents a vast spectrum of application from the hobbyist to the professional to the master of the art.

For example, when it comes to painting, there is a vast difference between someone painting portraits with oils on a canvass and someone who paints houses with latex. Both painters may be professionals, but here we have two distinctly different applications of paint and brush. Singing in the church choir is a far cry from receiving a recording contract with a major record label. Taking a digital camera or camera-phone along on vacation has little to do with professional photojournalism. And so, too, writing takes on many, many forms and applications, and the successful execution of the craft and/or the art is directly proportional to both inherent talent, developed skills, interests, ambitions, and many possible practical applications.

Think about just a few of the various applications of writing for a moment: Novelist, Playwright, Screenwriter, Television Script Writer, Short-Story Writer, Journalist, Poet, Political Pundit, Philosopher, Theologian, Teacher, Copy Writer (Magazine pieces, Advertisements, etc.), Historian, Documentarian, Researcher, Scientific Writer, Technical Writer, Marketing Communications Writer, Business Planner, Lawyer, Contract Administrator, Legislator, Critic, Analysts, Commentator, Public Relations Agent, Secretary, and many, many more.

Therefore, this article isn't about the proper execution of the craft or the inner workings of the writing and publishing business; rather, our discussion herein is designed to encourage those who enjoy writing and who would like to be professionally published in some way to do some exploration into all the various professional writing alternatives available, and more importantly, to give some serious thought to figuring out "where they fit best" in the universe of professional writing applications.

## FUNDAMENTALS

With every discipline in life there are basics, rudiments, fundamentals. Writing is no different. From our earliest years, we learn our language from our parents and those around us. Our first experience with communication is oral and visual. We learn very early how messages can have vastly different meanings predicated upon who is speaking—and sometimes by the tone they use and the expressions on their faces when they do it.

As children, we are taught basic symbols, i.e. our "ABCs," and then how those symbols correspond to phonetic sounds. Armed with phonics, we learn how these different symbol combinations can be

grouped to produce the words we know, and thus we are enabled to construct messages we want to communicate and understand those messages written by others. From there we add more words and phrases to our vocabulary as we increase our knowledge of not only the words themselves, but of what they mean and the impact they make when used. We learn idioms and colloquial expressions indigenous to the locales where we grow up. And ultimately, we are taught in school more and more about the intricacies of the language itself, how to use it properly, its rules, conventions, and uses. All of this achieves a state known as: Literate.

However, “literate” only means one can “read and write,” with this word used only in its simplest context, i.e. that you can write that which you have the ability to speak, and that you can read the writing of others with an average level of comprehension and understanding. It is upon this foundation of basic literacy that a person potentially comes face-to-face with the decision of whether they would like to take this fundamental skill set and develop it further, applying it to one of the many Disciplines of Writing and thereby move from novice to competent practitioner or even on to genuine mastery in a specific professional area. However, just picking an area of interest to try might turn out to be very disappointing, if not very frustrating, without a few other decision-making elements thrown into the mix.

For example, most people who are physically ambulatory can walk and run and throw things. Walking and running and throwing things are basic voluntary motor skills learned as a child, and most children do quite a lot of walking and running and throwing things with very little instruction. But at some point, in school or in the community, a child may be afforded the opportunity to join a sports team. Most team sports involve lots of basic walking and running and sometimes throwing things, as well as many other physical skills that the child may or may not have learned or have the aptitude to master. A kid may sincerely wish to join his school’s football team, but a coach will usually do an evaluation of the kid’s skills and talents and decide which position on the team the child is best suited to play, or if the kid belongs on the team at all. A wise coach may tell the scrawny kid he didn’t make the football team, and perhaps suggest he try out for the tennis team or golf team or even the band, which might hurt the kid’s feelings, but it also may save the kid from serious injury.

Now when it comes to the art of writing, many of these same principles of aptitude and suitability to the task also apply, and a would-be writer would be very well-served by a thoughtful English or Creative Writing teacher, or other Writing or Publishing professional, to help guide them in a direction that’s best suited to their skills and talents. Yet, oddly enough, this is rarely done these days.

“English,” as a subject in school, especially in the Middle School and High School years, is often regarded as one of those “obligatory basic education requirements,” only to be endured and passed with as little effort expended as possible before moving on to other more interesting subjects. Just at the point that young minds and imaginations are maturing into an adult language level, the thought of voluntarily engaging in *more* reading and *more* writing than what is assigned by the curriculum is considered anathema. And that’s sad, because many adults later in life often discover a love for reading and writing and regret all the time wasted that could have been used to develop those skills long ago.

But the good news is that as long as the mind is sharp, the imagination intact, and the flame of ambition still burns, it’s never too late to go through the process that should have been done long ago. Likewise, parents reading this article are well-advised to seriously consider helping your children decide if the art of writing is something they wish to develop in their lives.

Therefore, the remainder of this article is designed to be both an educational and a diagnostic tool to help those who wish to write professionally figure out where their skills lie and how best to apply them. This approach is best applied to youngsters in Middle School and beyond, and to adults as well. That is, it's important to employ the following diagnostic analysis at a point in life where the basic fundamentals of reading and writing have been mastered, and the notion of how to apply these skills in a professional pursuit is now the focal point.

## UNDERSTANDING THE LANDSCAPE

Before we get into a formal skills analysis and application discussion, it is important to understand, at least at a high level, where various writing skills may be applied, and what the prerequisites are for the different areas of focus. In general, the universe of writing breaks down along these lines:

<b>Area</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Examples (not exhaustive)</b>
<b>Fiction</b>	<b>Poetry</b>	Traditional, Non-Traditional Lyrics (Music collaboration) Commercial (Ads, Jingles)
	<b>Magazine Articles</b>	Topical Prose Comic Books/Graphic
	<b>Children's Books</b>	Early Education Entertainment/Coloring
	<b>Short Stories</b>	Single Title Anthologies, Collections
	<b>Novels, Novellas</b>	Single Title Series, Trilogies, Franchise Graphic
<b>Non-Fiction</b>	<b>Print Media</b>	Magazine Articles Newspaper Journalism Byline/Syndicated Columnist Internet/BLOGs
	<b>Broadcast Media</b>	Television Reporting Radio Reporting
	<b>Business</b>	Theory, Best-Practice Examples, Testimonials How-To
	<b>History</b>	Time/Period/Place/People/Events Biographies Autobiographies, Memoirs Documentaries, Collections

	<b>Reference</b>	Encyclopedias, Dictionaries, Almanacs, Indexes, etc. How-To, Self-Help Cook-Books, Travel Guides, Catalogs Language Study, Foreign Language Technical Manuals, Instructional
	<b>Education</b>	Text Books Workbooks Learning Tools
	<b>Commentary</b>	Political Punditry/Advocacy Issue Advocacy Humorists, Opinion
<b>Performing Arts</b>	<b>Theater</b>	Playwright (Stage Plays)
	<b>Movies and Shorts</b>	Screenwriter
	<b>Television and Videos</b>	Script/Teleplay Writer
	<b>TV Commercials</b>	AV Writer
	<b>Documentaries</b>	Documentarian
<b>Professional Business</b>	<b>Legal</b>	Pleadings, Suits, Contracts, Agreements Legislative, Parliamentary Opinions, Journals, Law Record Business Plans Financial Reporting, Accounting
	<b>Business Writing and Correspondence</b>	Letters, Memos, Email Newsletters, Policy Info, Administrative Reports Presentations
	<b>Trade Periodicals</b>	Commentary, Criticism New Data, Research
	<b>Sales and Marketing</b>	Product/Service Marketing Advertising, Signage Public Relations Proposals, Presentations, Reports
	<b>Reference/Training</b>	Guides, Manuals
<b>Bibles</b>	<b>Versions of Scripture</b>	Translation-based, Reference Editions, Illustrated Editions
	<b>Commentaries</b>	Interpretive, Topical/Issue Driven
	<b>Reference</b>	Concordances, Lexicons Language Study
	<b>Ministerial/Educational</b>	

The first thing you'll notice about the previous chart is that the various forms of professional writing aren't broken down into simply fiction and non-fiction. What is considered "non-fiction" is too broad an area and some areas overlap fiction and non-fiction. Three other areas are:

- The Performing Arts, which can embrace both fictional works and non-fiction works;
- Professional Business Writing, which embraces the precision required of the legal profession as well as contemporary business communications and other commerce related writing disciplines; and lastly,
- In a category all to itself: The Bible. Not many people realize that the number one best-seller perennially is The Bible. It is its own unique market niche with many associated complementary areas. However, since biblical oriented works are the province of theologians, historians, the clergy, lay leaders and authors, translators, and the like, which are highly specialized areas of study and expertise, we'll not spend much time on that area. If you're significantly involved in this area and wish to write about it, you probably already know that.

So to begin the diagnostic process of figuring out where one's writing skills lie in the other non-biblical areas, and then how best to apply them, we must start at a common point of agreement, which is a person who has general conversational competence in writing, i.e. someone with approximately a ninth-grade reading, writing, and comprehension level (which could be anyone from age ten to well into adulthood).

### Question 1: *What Do You Like to Read?*

Reading and writing go hand-in-hand and are inseparable. Reading is breathing in the language; writing is breathing it out. It is only through the regular practice of reading that writers have the opportunity to see the written language in action, to observe technique, style, voicing, pacing, development, and every other aspect of the craft. It is in writing the language that the writer gets to practice what has been observed and polish their craft.

So the first area of examination in a talent and skills analysis of writing potential is whether the would-be writer has a love and appreciation for reading, thinking, and expressing their thoughts. In 21<sup>st</sup> Century techno-speak, that equates to INPUT, PROCESSING, and OUTPUT. Without these three core fundamentals, you'll never have a good writer in any area with any focus in any professional writing application.

I personally consider a lack of regular reading habit to be one of the greatest dangers to young people, who are bypassing the experience of reading and occupying the majority of their leisure time with movies, video games, etc.—i.e. inputting only *visual* medium and never engaging their imaginations. Without an actively engaged imagination, we are incapable of critical thinking, problem solving, and true creativity. That's the real danger of a culture that stops reading.

Nevertheless, assuming the writer *does* read, the question remains: "*What* do they read?" The answer to this question will have a direct bearing on where their core interests may lie and in terms of what they might wish to write. Don't misunderstand. We're not just talking about genre or category fic-

tion here. For someone who voraciously consumes the news every day, either in print, online, on TV, etc., they may have a sharper focus on journalism or issue advocacy or even politics or practicing the law than with writing fiction. Conversely, for the person who takes a milder interest in the news and doesn't spend hours each day soaking up current affairs, but who has a rapidly growing book collection in a particular genre or area, they might be more predisposed to create fiction or be in some other segment of the entertainment industry with their writing.

## Question 2: Do You really *Want* to be a Professional Writer?

You might think this question would come later, after we've figured out whether you really have the chops to be a good writer before you start talking about professional writing careers; but that isn't so. Lots of kids dream of being astronauts or movie stars or doctors or lawyers when they're young. It's only later after they begin to explore their ambitions do they discover whether or not the journey is realistic and if they still have the heart and drive to complete it. So right up front the question needs to be asked and answered, "Do you wish to make your primary living by the fruits of your writing skills; or, do you wish to make your living some other way, using writing as a critical element of getting your job done?" Knowing one's destination makes charting a course so much easier.

If the answer to that question is, "Yes," you wish to write either books, stories, magazine articles, poems, plays, screenplays, television shows, news stories, or even become a lawyer (non-litigator, *per se*), then you've said, "Yes, I want to be some kind of a professional writer as my primary vocation." If you don't want to be any of those things as your primary vocation, then you still may apply many elements of the writing craft to numerous other professional pursuits, or you may actually *be* or become a professional writer and not realize it.

Think about it, a Technical Writer at a software company who gathers information from programmers and develops the Installation Guide or Help Manual for use of the software *is a professional writer*. The "creative staff" at an Advertising agency who come up with the copy for a press release or magazine advertisement or the script for a TV commercial, are all professional writers. The people who come up with the inscriptions on greeting cards are professional writers—some of them professional poets! A professional writer wrote the labels on every soup can in your cupboard. You know, there aren't too many jobs where writing of some sort *isn't* required to do the job successfully.

All right, let's now focus our attention on those areas of writing where writing itself is the primary vocation. To address the next step in the analysis we move on to the next question.

## Question #3: Are You a Good Storyteller?

This is the most important question of them all.

Good storytelling is a must in prose fiction, but it's also pretty important for a salesman writing a million dollar business proposal, or for a lawyer filing life or death motions before a court. The talent of "storytelling" is bigger than mere mastery of spelling and grammar. Storytelling is the ability to take an audience of one or more on a journey—a journey with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is the ability to engage the attention and imagination of the audience and cause them to see what you want them to see, feel what you want them to feel, and to believe what you want them to believe.



For the fiction writer, mastering storytelling *is* the job. For a nonfiction writer, business professional, someone in the legal profession, et al, it is the heart of being able to *persuade*. It advocates and argues a position and/or recommended action without necessarily having to be confrontational or adversarial—unless you choose to be. It is a higher order of magnitude than merely the impartation of information. It understands that the *presentation* of the story/case/argument/proposal is as important, if not more so, than the substance. There’s an old joke that goes:

“I’d been away from home for several months, so when I called my brother the other day, I asked him, ‘So how’s our cat?’ He said, ‘It’s dead.’ So I told him, ‘You can’t just tell me bad news like that! I loved that cat. You’ve got to use some tact. Break it to me easy. You should say it was up on the roof and couldn’t get down, and the fire department came and tried to get it down, but unfortunately it fell...or something like that. Not just, it’s dead!’ My brother apologized. So then I asked him how Mom was doing, and he replied, ‘Well, she was up on the roof...’”

*How* you impart information really does matter. And a true storyteller will use their power of critical thinking and creativity to come up with the approach they believe will achieve the desired effect with the target audience. The best comedians are true storytellers. Humor is predicated on a proper set up, delivery, and execution, with or without a punchline. In the Sales and Marketing world, the “story” is often many times more important than the product or service itself. This is where we get the concept of “hype.” A Marketing 101 axiom is: “He who has the best toys to sell doesn’t always win.” This of course explains why so many inferior products dominate different markets.

So how do you know if you, or your child, is a good storyteller? Short answer: it will show. When you ask your kid how school was today, if the answer isn’t just, “OK” or “Fine,” rather, it’s more along the lines of, “Oh, let me tell you! First...” and then they proceed to tell you a story, one that you actually find interesting to listen to—their talent might be showing. This same test works with spouses in terms of, “So how was your day?”

Being a good storyteller has often been characterized as someone, “having a way with words.” Indeed, there are just some people who are very pleasant (and not boring) to hear speak and regale you with their experiences and thoughts. Chances are, their writing is along a similar vein because it’s the same brain generating both forms of expression. Most of us have an elder relative who is the official “clan storyteller,” who recounts all the humorous tales and family lore every holiday when everyone is together, with everyone sitting around enthralled and laughing at the same stories you’ve heard again and again for years—but you still like hearing them, told well by someone who knows how to do it.

Another way to tell if the gift of storytelling is there, even though I hesitate to highlight this, is: “Are you a good liar?” Not that I in any way wish to condone or promote lying in the real-world sense, but the truth of the matter is, some people are just plain good at it and others aren’t. Lying requires the liar to embrace their own sense of what is known as “suspension of disbelief” and tell the lie as though it were true, convincingly, plausibly, believably. What do you think fiction is? So while I wouldn’t recommend a practice of lying to improve one’s fiction writing skills, if you know someone who possesses this skill—be it yourself, a loved one, or child—it might be an indication of a talent that would best be channeled in more positive application, like writing!

The acid test of discerning storytelling talent is this: “Can you still pretend?” Pretending requires imagination—the key to all creative writing—imagination to see what isn’t there as though it were;

to imagine and then behave as another personality, believably, even with conjured up passions, emotions and idiosyncrasies; to act out that “little movie playing in your head.” This is the gift of the storyteller. For the actor on the stage or in front of the camera, his body and voice becomes the medium of telling the story; for the writer it is his ability to faithfully use his words and style of language to tell the tale—all stemming forth from their internal font of imagination.

For children, pretending comes quite natural. It’s such a shame its light dims as we age. For older teens or adults, a simple exercise can quickly show who still has the ability to pretend and conjure up the magic of their imaginations: Play a game like Charades or Pictionary. Side Note: harboring any fear or exhibiting a reluctance to play a game like Charades or Pictionary among friends and family is very, very telling. It says that you either feel insecure and/or apprehensive about actively using your imagination, using your ability to think quickly on your feet, or being the center of attention in front of an audience—all of these are really bad signs for a would-be professional writer.

OK, so what if you’re just not sure if you’re a good storyteller, or if your child or loved one has this gift? Test them. How? Ask them to tell you a story or to write one for you. Most likely it will be a fictional tale, so when you hear or read the story, judge it by three simple criteria:

- 1) Did it have interesting characters?
- 2) Did it have an interesting plot/storyline that held your interest to the end?
- 3) Was it told well?

Now here’s where we get into a gray area. Candidly, the true gift of storytelling is something that you either have or you don’t, and if you do, it is by degree on a broad continuum, broken down into the following major groups:

- Those who **don’t have the gift** are like the four-foot tall athlete who wants to play basketball for the NBA. These people typically use writing only in brief communication or administrative functions in their professional lives, where form and convention are their only real concerns for their writing.
- Those who have **a little of it** are those who probably will use their writing skills on a more non-fiction oriented area, where information organization, processing and distribution is the primary goal and creativity isn’t.
- Those in the **middle of the bell-curve** may be journalists or lawyers or sales professionals, who need a measure of creative storytelling, but deal primarily with facts and figures.
- Those who have **the gift of storytelling by the truckload** are those who will do better in terms of the heavily creative side of writing, from writing all forms of fiction, to working for Advertising and PR Agencies, to writing for the performing arts.

This four-tiered distinction is an important one. I personally feel it is the height of cruelty for anyone, well-meaning or not, to tell a person they have the talent and ability to do something that they just don’t. As a Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of a publishing house, I see submissions every day from wannabe writers, who desperately want to be the next bestselling novelist, but who simply can’t write. It isn’t that they don’t know how to construct a sentence, or have bad grammar, or can’t spell. No, the problem is that they can’t tell a story. Their writing simply sucks, and to tell them to just



“keep at it and you’ll get better,” may soothe a bruised ego in the short run, but it’s actually a cruel lie setting them up for even greater frustration and disappointment in the future. That’s just mean. Ironically, they may feel you are being mean to them by telling them the truth, and possibly dashing an unrealistic dream, but sometimes it’s something that needs to be done.

Oddly, in other forms of the arts, people tend to consider the experience of rejection more the norm than in writing. If you’ve ever watched the TV program *American Idol*, you’ve seen countless wannabes, desperate to win their fame and fortune via singing contract, but quite evidently have no singing talent. They may get their feelings hurt when told so, but no one with a pair of ears (other than perhaps their mother) has any doubts about their lack of suitability as a professional. Likewise, many musicians, dancers, actors, and the like who regularly audition for jobs are routinely told, “Sorry, not you.” It seems only in the area of writing do people believe that if they love to read, they must also be talented writers. There is no correlation between being a fervent member of the audience and having the talents and skills to be on the stage.

On the other hand, I’ve seen many submissions that were sloppy, had structural issues, plot problems, unnecessary characters and a host of other ills—but, boy, could they write!—engaging, compelling, poetic, inspiring, whatever. When the talent shows, the raw “gem” can be cut and polished into something magnificent—that’s what editors are for. When it’s not there...well, as they say, “You can put lipstick on a pig, but it’s still a pig.”

So the first major fork in the road in exploring a potential writing career centers on your “Storyteller” quotient: A Lot, Some, A Little, or None. Let’s look at each of these in more detail.

## THE FICTION WRITER – A LOT OF STORYTELLING TALENT

OK, let’s say you have boatloads of storytelling talent and you’re ready to create some wonderful new fiction. As you can see from the previous chart, fiction comes in many, many forms. You may notice that one of the differentiating characteristics of the various areas of fiction literally has to do with “size”—from Poetry, which is typically short (but can be long), to Short Stories, to Novellas, to full-length Novels.

What is important to note about each of these different forms of fiction in that they are distinct disciplines. I’ve heard some folks giving BAD advice to writers by saying, “Start by writing some short stories and use that to work up to writing novels.” This is as ignorant a statement as telling a musician, “Learn to play the flute first, then you can work up to playing the trumpet, and later the piano.” They’re all different instruments. Some musicians play multiple instruments, but they had to learn to play each one individually, each with its own fundamentals and unique attributes.

Some writers may be great at writing short stories and terrible at novels, or vice versa. Some writers have learned to master both. Why is this? Honestly, it has to do with how your brain works, and most importantly, the depth of “vision” of your imagination. Some short story writers end up with a Novella and can’t figure out how to cut it down to meet a word limitation of a contest or writing assignment. Some novelists end up with a novella having run out of story before they get to at least 50,000 – 70,000 words or more. Both of these writers have a problem. What they are failing to do is to embrace the “distance” parameters, or boundaries, of the discipline for which they are attempting to write. It’s like a marathon runner competing in a sprint or vice versa—they’ll both lose.

This issue is worse in writing for the performing arts. A stage play may have more flexibility in terms of running time, but a movie doesn't. Most producers/directors in Hollywood want screenplays with 90 - 120 pages, knowing that a page of screenplay (in the proper format) equates to approximately one minute of running time, which has a bearing on how many times the film can be shown per day in theaters. They want to make an hour and a half to two hour movies—period (epics notwithstanding). In television, the time frames are very strict: 21 minutes of air time for every half hour slot. The teleplay or AV Script has to hit that number *exactly*! Many forms of poetry have strict form, format, and length conventions: sonnets, haiku, limericks, etc. Side Note: *You* don't get to change commonly accepted and expected conventions of the industry just because you are either ignorant of them or incapable of abiding by them. So learn what's proper and get with the program.

The point here is that within each fiction type there is an ideal "size," or better yet, "scope," for the work, from its beginning, through its development in the middle, to the ending. Over time, if not inherently, a good writer develops a familiar *sense* of this properly-sized "field of play" and fashions his stories to fit comfortably within it without having to do either serious surgery or padding later.

For many writers, these "boundaries" are a function of a mental "comfort zone," being unaware of the fact that this is really a manifestation of the depth of storyline that their imagination has the capacity to envision as a whole and subsequently bring to life. I recommend that whatever your comfort zone is, figure it out, and don't try and put that square peg into a round hole. If novel-length fiction is what comes out when you write, then write novels. If short stories come out, write short stories. If a novella pops out, and you didn't intend one to do so, then you need to resize your comfort zone. And that point leads us to our next diagnostic question.

#### Question #4: *How Much Do You Write?*

The old axiom is true: Writers write. If the "creativity gene" is there, it demands to express itself. Unfortunately, the "vanity gene" looks a lot like the Creativity Gene, and the two are often confused. As is true in business, "Activity doesn't equal productivity—though it often masquerades as such." Many wannabe writers have no problem churning out reams and reams of words. The question is: Are these words any good? Only critique and evaluation will answer that question, which we'll discuss more in-depth later.

Granted, many people write for their own entertainment and amusement. There's nothing wrong with that, in the same way many people play musical instruments, sing, cook, paint, garden, whatever, for their own pleasure, with no professional aspirations whatsoever. This isn't what we're talking about here. In the context of personal entertainment, a person is free to write whatever they want, when they want, for as long as they want. No, our discussion here is specifically about professional writing that is meant to be read by others, and hopefully with the writer paid for doing so.

For parents reading this, the key point is: Does your child like to spend time writing? If so, that's a good sign they have some creative element within them that seeks expression. Nurturing this can be one of the greatest gifts you can ever give your child. If your child doesn't write very often, or ever, try challenging them to write a story for you. If they do it, help them type it up and print it, then take it to Kinko's and get it bound for them. Sometimes a simple request can open a very big and wonderful door.

From adults, I often hear, “I’m working on my novel, but I just haven’t finished it yet.” I often ask them how long they’ve been working on it. The answer usually comes measured in terms of years. If it’s not a gigantic tome (which may be tough to get published for production cost reasons, especially for a previously unpublished author), or a work that requires some extensive lifelong research, the truth is that they probably can’t finish it, and moreover, novels really aren’t their thing. Some people like to say that they are working on a novel simply to sound like they fit in with the rest of the writers group, when in reality they do very little actual writing.

As was noted: Writers write. If you’re not writing, you need to figure out why not. I’m not one to advocate a hard-and-fast quota for how many words you need to write per day, or per week, etc., for that’s a personal choice. The important point is to have a meaningful goal that involves regular writing participation and consistency, and then to develop the self-discipline to adhere to whatever schedule is needed to meet your goal.

### Question #5: *What Do You Write Best?*

This is probably the second most important question of them all, and the one that most writers honestly don’t know how to answer. Note, the question wasn’t: “What do you *enjoy* writing the most,” but rather, “What *type* of your writing produces the best results?” This is where it gets fun. Because the only way to honestly answer this question is for two things to happen:

- 1) The writer must attempt to write in many different contexts aimed at specific writing goals, even those that they’ve never attempted before, and
- 2) Someone other than the writer must judge the results.

You’d be amazed at how infrequently this actually happens, but should.

The diagnostic exercise used to help determine which area of fiction someone is most suited to write is really pretty simple. I highly recommend that writing teachers and leaders of writing groups challenge your charges to give this exercise a try over a couple of months. The way it works is that each writer, youngster or adult, must submit to writing a series of writing challenges, to see if they can achieve the stated Success Criteria or goal. Please note that simply completing the assignment *isn’t* the goal, but rather achieving the *impact* of the assignment’s Success Criteria in the mind of an objective reader or readers. If you’ve never done this before, challenge yourself to do it.

Here’s how the test goes:

1. **SCOPE (Learning to Abide by Conventions):** In each of seven distinct writing challenges, the writer must write a single scene of at least 5 pages and a maximum of 10 pages, (double spaced, 250 – 300 words per page, with 1 inch margins all around).
2. **DEADLINE (Learning to Work Within Artificial Timeframes):** The writer has one week to complete each challenge before moving on to the next one. There is no minimum time to complete the challenge, and the writer may move on to the next challenge if finished within a week. If the challenge is not completed in one week, that challenge is considered failed.

3. **CHALLENGE TOPICS** (Learning to Write by External Assignment): The following are each of the Challenge Topics, one topic per challenge, per week, over a seven week period.
  - a. **Suspense.** Write a scene containing one person in jeopardy and another person attempting to rescue them from that jeopardy. Success Criteria: Attempt to make the reader's pulse quicken and breathing accelerate.
  - b. **Humor.** Write a scene containing someone's "Most embarrassing moment," how they get into the situation, and what they do attempting to extricate themselves from it. Success Criteria: Attempt to make the reader laugh out loud.
  - c. **Romance.** Write a scene of a protagonist proposing to their beloved. Reveal some element of their lives that has kept them apart and is keeping them apart, and the protagonist's suggestion for a solution, along with handling at least three objections his love has to saying yes. Success Criteria: Attempt to make the reader cry—either with joy or despair, or both.
  - d. **Horror.** Write a scene designed to scare someone to death. That is also the Success Criteria: Not to literally kill them, but to genuinely frighten the reader.
  - e. **Science-Fiction/Fantasy.** Write a scene that takes place in a different world. Set a quest before two travelers to this unfamiliar world, and detail the primary obstacle they will face in achieving it. Success Criteria: Attempt to achieve complete "suspension of disbelief" in the reader, feeling like this other world is real and believable.
  - f. **Historical.** Based upon your actual research, write a scene depicting two explorers who are witness to a major historical event, at least 200 years ago or more. Success Criteria: Attempt to make the reader feel like they were an eye-witness to this event, and burn the images you depict into their memory forever.
  - g. **Contemporary/Mainstream:** Write a scene where an employee at a major corporation gets fired and has to explain to their spouse what happened, why it happened, and what lies before them. Success Criteria: To develop the main character in such a three-dimensional way that the reader completely empathizes with them and feels the emotional weight of their plight.
4. **Judging.** Each Challenge should be read by at least two objective readers or more, who, ideally, should not be told what the Success Criteria is until after they have read the scene. The readers should render their opinion as to whether or not the challenge was successfully achieved based upon their reaction to what was read.

The purpose of this seven week exercise should be clear. The writer will have varying degrees of success in each area. Some of the challenges will be easy, others a nightmare. What the challenges will reveal is what the writer is really adept at depicting, as well as what they enjoy writing. It's not unusual for a writer to discover that one or more of the areas that they've never attempted before is something they find pleasurable and where they receive excellent feedback. And this, in turn, may be very instructive about what areas of fiction writing they are best suited to tackle. But isn't that a lot like real life—you never know if you're going to like something or be good at it until you try it?

Now, another possible outcome of these challenges is that the writer will have trouble with ALL of them, and be judged harshly in each and every one of them. This is a good indication that, while a measure of storytelling ability and creativity may be within them, the world of fiction may not be

their cup of tea. That's when a new set of challenges should be laid before them. But before we leave the Area of Fiction, I do have a few additional remarks to share relative to writing Poetry and Short Stories.

Regardless of how much a person may personally enjoy writing poetry, from a "career counseling" standpoint, young or old writers should be well-informed about the professional potential for aspiring to be a professional poet. The truth of the matter is, poetry is one of the smallest market segments in the publishing industry—meaning that there aren't very many professional opportunities for poets.

That's not meant to be a discouragement from writing poetry, for it is literally the lyrical expression of our language, but one must be honest and realistic about whether or not you can feed yourself or a family solely from writing poetry. The odds are heavily against it. Said bluntly, most poets either have a day job, are supported by someone else, are independently wealthy—or still live with their parents.

What's worse is that there are many "scams" in the marketplace today where aspiring poets are invited to submit poems for consideration in a "collection" of poems soon to be published, unbeknownst to them that just about everyone who submits a poem gets it accepted, along with the opportunity to buy the finished book with their poem in it for an exorbitant price. At the end of the day the only people who have a copy of the "collection" are the poets within it. So beware.

Some good news for poets is that writing and publishing one or more of your poems isn't the only professional application of a poet's talents. I mentioned greeting cards! Another very common one, which can be quite lucrative, is to collaborate with a songwriter, turning your poems into song lyrics. A fellow by the name of Bernie Taupin did that with a musician by the name of Elton John and made out quite well. Another more businesslike application is a creative position within an Advertising Agency that develops slogans, tag lines, and even jingles for their clients' products and services. Many of these everyday business needs require a creative poetic flair to be successful.

Of course, the most egregious professional use of poetry is that form of the entertainment industry that masquerades as music, which I commonly refer to as "Bad Poetry Set to a Drum Machine," or in the vernacular, "Rap." In this venue, even appalling poets with no musical abilities whatsoever have become millionaires. Enough said on that.

Short Stories are a different matter.

There are many readers who dearly enjoy short stories and will gladly buy collections of them. Alfred Hitchcock released a series of mystery and horror short story collections a generation or so ago that were wildly successful. Most short stories these days are found in magazines or online in e-zines, which provide an entertainment component to the magazine or website (which the publishers can then sell advertising space around). Other venues for short stories are the single volume collections or anthologies brought together around a topic or theme. Short stories are also a good mechanism to obtain some legitimate writing credits and get your name circulated in the marketplace. Many well-known authors like Stephen King and others had a story published in a major national publication as a means of breaking into the market.

Lastly, a word about Novellas. Not to disparage them in any way, but the problem with Novellas is that by themselves they tend to be too small to publish as stand-alone books and are often too big to include in magazines. Where they do often find a good home is when two or three of them are grouped into a single volume book, the size and price of a normal full-length novel. You'll find pitching two or three of them together with a common hook may interest publishers more than one all by itself.

The nicest thing of all about novellas is that they translate the easiest to movies. Full-length novels typically have to be severely abridged for a theatrical version of the story, whereas novellas tend to fill a two hour slot quite nicely. So if your professional writing goal is ultimately to write for Hollywood, and you've recognized that it's harder to get a screenplay optioned than a story in print published, the novella strategy is one to consider.

#### Question #6: Who is Your Audience?

A professional writer doesn't merely write for themselves, but for some specific audience. That audience might be an audience of one, as in a formal letter or email, or it could be meant for a vast group as with the readership of a magazine or a nationally distributed book.

The best professional writers in any area are the ones who possess the best and clearest understanding of the needs and expectations of the people they are writing to inform or entertain. What's clear is that no writer writes for "everyone." There is no single form of writing that is consumed by everyone. Therefore, all writing has an ideal target audience. It may be the fans of a particular genre, or adherents to a particular movement or cause, or viewers of a particular television network or radio program. You always hear about "audience demographics," i.e. the 18-34 year olds, or Seniors, or the X-Generation, or Soccer-Moms. For a professional writer, this applies to you, too. Who are you writing for? You need to know! To help you figure out the answer to this all-important question, if you don't already know the answer, you will need to avail yourself to one of the best tools a new writer can have: **a critique group.**

All new writers should join a local writers group (and all accomplished writers should join one to help out the new writers!), if for no other reason than to have a disinterested group of souls read your work and provide you with some honest feedback. For a young, school-age writer this might be parents or some other relative at home, or a teacher or schoolmates at school, or even a small writing group put together at school as an extra-curricular activity (Teachers' and Educator's Note: That's a hint to go look into making happen!). For adults, there are many community and online writing groups readily available to join. They aren't hard to find. Go to your favorite search engine and type in: Writers Groups; or ask you local librarian or bookstore owner.

Please realize that a critique group is your chance to "test market" your writing before ever trying to shop it to editors and publishers only to have it shot down for elements or flaws that could have been fixed if they had been brought to your attention beforehand. Your critique group also might be able to help you better understand the type of reader who would best enjoy your work, as well as which ones would hate it. This is invaluable information when it comes to trying to sell your work. Furthermore, critique groups can be an invaluable aid for troubleshooting a problematic work, helping unblock your writer's block if you suffer from it, and a source of great new ideas and inspiration. Sometimes just being around other prolific writers helps get your creative juices flowing.



### Question #7: Am I Better at Writing for the Performing Arts?

Logically, you might be thinking, “Well, if I can’t write a short story, novella, or novel, then how could I be any good at writing a play, a movie script, or a teleplay? The answer is that you just might be better at writing for the performing arts than printed prose. The reason this is possible is two-fold:

- 1) Because the performing arts are an audio-visual medium
- 2) They are collaborative art forms as opposed to an individual performance

That means that what the audience sees and hears in the performing arts is the culmination of the actors’ performances, the scene designers, the costume people, the musicians, the sound effects people, special effects technicians, etc. The writer doesn’t have to write out all the descriptions and narrative to get the reader to “see and hear” what’s going on in the story. In the performing arts all of that is “shown” to the audience by others. The writer is the one who either initially conceives of the story and/or is hired to write a script from someone else’s idea—whereupon their main role is to create the action and dialogue “map” for the director to follow in creating the complete production.

In fiction writing (e.g. in novels), the author is the “auteur” whose artistic vision comprises the vast majority of the finished work, his editors’ contributions notwithstanding. On the stage, as well as on the big screen and small screen, the auteur is the director. So perhaps you have a very vivid imagination for a story, but lack the words or skills to describe everything as a novelist would—but you can nail the fundamental storyline, amazing characters, and great dialogue. You can “see” the storyboard in your head, and envision the story unfolding scene by scene. This might be an instance where someone could produce great screenplays but poor novels.

For a screenwriter, all he has to do to set a scene is write:

EXT\*. BUSY NEW YORK CITY STREET – DAY

A novelist might take two or three paragraphs or even several pages to convey to his audience what a movie audience would instantly perceive in viewing a single image. And therein lies the difference between writing for the two mediums. What is undeniable is that you will never know if writing for the performing arts is your forte until you try it.

Please be aware that what scriptwriting doesn’t require in terms of detailed narrative and description it *does* require in terms of very restrictive format and scope. Before you attempt to write a short one act play, a teleplay for a half-hour television program, or even a feature-length screenplay, you need to invest some time in researching the proper script formatting for the correct medium. Teleplay scripts don’t look like feature film screenplays. If you ever get around to trying to sell your work, either through a theatrical agent or entertainment manager, or directly to a production company by yourself, it will be expected to “look” professional. If it doesn’t you might get a rejection for no other reason than its cosmetics, even before anyone has read a single word of it. Granted, it’s even more important to learn about how to pitch a script—log lines, treatments, etc., but that’s an entirely different topic for a different day, and we won’t go into that here.

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\* EXT is shorthand in a screenplay for “Exterior” meaning “outside,” as opposed to INT for “Interior” meaning inside somewhere (not outside).

Another element of writing for the performing arts that you need to be aware of is that it is also true that because the auteur of the finished work is the director, and that the production is a collaborative effort, it is not unusual for the finished work to have little resemblance to what you initially wrote. Some writers take a very professional attitude about that issue and simply cash the checks they are paid and seek out new projects, while others tend to be more *prima donnas* about it and throw a fit when they see their work changed in a thousand different ways. Which of the two attitudes do you think will get you future jobs? But if you're one of those people who can't abide the thought of people rewriting your story, or if the whole performing arts community just isn't your scene, then perhaps this area of writing isn't for you. Perhaps your talents lie in the world of non-fiction writing.

## NON-FICTION – SOME STORYTELLING TALENT

### Question #8: Am I Better at Telling the Truth than I Am Making Things Up?

Writing for the non-fiction world is broken down into three key areas: the Print Media, the Broadcast Media, and the Business World; supplemented by four major market niches: Historians, Reference Works, The Education Industry, and miscellaneous Commentaries.

The Print Media and Broadcast Media are the primary domains of Journalists, researching and digging up the facts of the day and reporting that information to their audiences. Regardless of what medium a journalist works in, journalism is a well-defined vocation, best taught by many degree granting secondary educational institutions of higher learning (i.e. college). However, the best time to “try journalism” before committing to the time and expense of a four-year degree program is probably in High School, volunteering to work for the school paper and trying your hand at writing articles for it. I won't spend too much time here going into all the facets of journalistic writing because there's simply too much information available on the topic to be found elsewhere.

As an adult, past your High School years and ineligible to work on a High School paper, if journalism is a potential interest for you, try writing some “byline” columns for one of your local newspapers and submitting them to the various department editors. If you can find a topic of interest and write a good column, it's possible to for it to be picked up and printed, and perhaps even get paid! The more columns you're able to get published as a “freelance writer,” and the more credits you amass, the easier it will become to convince other editors that you produce quality work. But like several other areas we've touched on in this article, you'll never know if you have a talent for this area of professional writing unless you find a way to give it a try.

When it comes to most of the other areas of non-fiction: Business books, Historical books, Reference Works, Textbooks, and the like—they all share one very important common element: you have to be an expert about what you're writing about, with the more credits, degrees, accolades, and awards the better. So where journalism requires specific training, formal or OJT, before anyone will hire you, these other areas require you to have spent a substantive amount of time working and/or researching in the area you wish to write about to establish your credentials in order to be able to speak with authority on your topic. So if you lack such experience, short of becoming a self-proclaimed expert and starting your own cult, you may find this to be a show-stopper in this area.

With some types of reference books such as cook books or a travel guides, the expertise prerequisite is a much more reasonable hurdle, where you only need to know what you're talking about, not neces-

sarily that you graduated from a culinary school, or are a native of some far away place. On the other hand, even without specific degrees or awards, if you set your mind to writing business articles or business books, you'd better have some noteworthy business credentials in terms of personal success stories and accomplishments to back up the advice or instructions you're giving.

Where many writers have found a productive professional niche for themselves in writing non-fiction is submitting topical articles to magazines. This can simply be a product of your own research and/or experience that is appropriate to the readership of the magazines to whom you wish to submit. Of all the non-fiction avenues, this one is probably the most open to new writers, assuming you write a decent article that an editor likes and wants their readers to read.

There is one other factor that can be more valuable in terms of getting professionally published in either fiction or non-fiction than either having vast subject matter credibility or years of experience: a famous name. If you happen to be a famous politician, comedian, criminal, movie star, supermodel, a royal, a sports star, a nationally syndicated TV talking head, etc. you can pretty much put your name on anything and there are people out there, presumably your fans, who will buy it. How else can you explain why Paris Hilton and Monica Lewinsky both have bestsellers to their credit?

The "name" factor is also predominantly the case with bestselling Commentaries you see all the time by Political Pundits, Talking Heads from the News Networks, Stand-Up Comics, and the like. They can put together a 200 page book of their rants, opinions, musings, life experiences, or general observations, and it will sell—to their preexisting audience of fans, that is.

So in the vast spectrum of non-fiction writing, most of the career choices really boil down to some simple decision logic:

- Am I a trained journalist (or am I willing to study to be one)?
- Am I an expert in some field or discipline such that I can write about it in a way that others will want to learn from my expertise and research?
- Am I already famous?

If you can answer Yes to any of these questions, then writing non-fiction works may be where you need to be. If the answer is No to all of these questions, and they were also No in all of the questions in the fiction areas, then you still have the area of Professional Business Writing to explore.

## PROFESSIONAL BUSINESS WRITING – A LITTLE STORYTELLING TALENT

By definition, I call Professional Business Writing those forms of writing that aren't aimed at producing books, stories, or articles, apart from specific company or industry-related publications.

The centerpiece of this area is the entire legal profession, and all of those professional fields whose job it is to write contracts, agreements, laws, orders, policies, directives, regulations, announcements, notices, guidelines, instructions, etc. This area of writing can range from the very precise application of legal language, where every word has nuance and is subject to scrutiny and interpretation, to a simple professional business letter aimed at effectively communicating with another professional.

Nowhere is professional business writing used more often and for the greatest commercial gain than in the wonderful world of Sales and Marketing. In our capitalist society, everything is bought and sold. Everything must factor in competition and product/service evolution. The very wheels of business turn on the messaging and communications skills of talented business writers. From brochures and flyers to official reports, proposals and major presentations, there are many examples of where professional business writing is key to success.

In general, Professional Business Writing is aimed at accomplishing one or both of two specific goals: to inform and/or to persuade. With the former the emphasis is on clarity, conciseness, and completeness. With the latter it is on structuring a cogent and persuasive argument. To accomplish either of these goals well, formal training is highly recommended. There are many good books out there available on effective written communications and persuasive argumentation. If your profession requires you to write on a regular basis to accomplish either of these two goals, I highly suggest you learn everything you can on these topics.

### Question #9: Do You Know Where You Fit Now?

The sum of the matter is this:

- If you are an exceptionally gifted storyteller and have the requisite talent and skills to tell stories, short or long, completely, without help from anyone in the performing arts, you should probably concentrate on writing some form of fiction.
- If you are a good storyteller, but lack the talent to tell stories completely and work better in collaboration with members of the performing arts, you should probably concentrate on writing scripts.
- If you are only an average storyteller, but are very good at researching facts, processing information, coming to sound conclusions, and clearly communicating your research and conclusions to others, you should probably look into journalism or other forms of non-fiction writing, predicated on your area of expertise or interests.
- If you're not that good a storyteller, but can write clearly and properly according to the conventions of the language, you probably won't do any of the above, and will instead use your writing skills as a supporting element of a non-writing profession.
- If you have no skill as a storyteller at all, haven't mastered the basic rules and conventions of the written English language, have little imagination, do very little if any critical thinking or problem solving, have a lot of trouble being understood orally and in writing—then at a minimum, professionally or otherwise, writing probably isn't your thing, and you shouldn't frustrate yourself with endless rejection and disappointment by refusing to accept this as a fact.

I expect that most of the people reading this article, young or old, if you are not currently a working writing professional, you would answer the question of “Where do you fit?” with a shrug of the shoulders and a great deal of uncertainty. If so, I hope that what you've gleaned from this article, if

nothing else, is that the only way that burning question is ever going to be properly answered for you is when you take the time to try your hand at all (or at least several) of the various areas available, and then judge the attempt by the results. You may think of this process as “trial and error.” I heartily encourage you to view it instead as a journey of exploration, something potentially very exciting, even if it seems a little bit daunting at the beginning.

If, however, you are one of those souls who fervently believes that you’ve already discovered the area of writing that is destined to be your professional domain, but you’ve received nothing but rejections thus far in all of your professional publication attempts, I would ask you—simply as an experiment—to take a break from your chosen area for a time and try your hand at some of the other areas of writing with an open mind. You might just surprise yourself!

If you are a Middle School or High School English or Creative Writing teacher, and if you haven’t done so already, I would encourage you to supplement your academic curriculum, going beyond the development of the writing craft alone, and spend some significant time educating young people about all the various applications of professional writing that exist, and the various paths necessary to reach them. And at the risk of sounding impertinent, if you yourself don’t know the vast majority of the options available in professional writing, then your education needs a little supplement as well. That same exhortation is extended to parents. If your child shows talent as a writer, don’t just help them get the spelling and grammar right, help them to learn about how these talents and skills can serve them later in life in a variety of professional applications. They might amaze you by what they can do.

If you are a young person still in Middle School or High School, and you’re interested in a possible career as a professional writer, then I challenge you directly to do the exercises listed in this article, look into becoming involved with your school paper, join a local writers group (or start one among your peers if you can’t find one)—and to stop dreading going to English class, and instead see it as valuable preparation for your career as an adult.

Hey, you never know what you’re capable of until you try.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Gelinas is the founder, Publisher and Editor-In-Chief of ArcheBooks Publishing Incorporated, ([www.archebooks.com](http://www.archebooks.com)), as well as the author of many novels. He is a frequent public speaker and teaches and lectures on writing and publishing.

For more articles and by Mr. Gelinas, please visit [www.archebooks.com/AuthCor/AuthCorn.htm](http://www.archebooks.com/AuthCor/AuthCorn.htm) for ArcheBooks’ “Author’s Corner” of writer’s resources.