

# How to Write What You Want & Sell What You Write

## Introduction

Maybe you've heard that you can't teach anyone to write. That writers are born, not paid. Too many writers are born, matter of fact. Or, should we say, imbeciles who want to be writers. Well, those sarcastic complaints are a bunch of hoey. If you don't know what I mean by that phrase, look up the word "hoey" which to me is a synonym for many so-called experts.

Forget every assumption or generality about writing you've ever heard or read. You *can* teach someone to write. You can learn to write. In fact, you can keep getting better at writing for as long as you're able to think and act rationally and coherently. You can't teach *talent*, but you can teach *craft*, and *craft nurtures talent*.

I've taught craft for over a quarter of a century.

Remember this – *learn your craft*. Keep improving it, and you'll prosper. I've had students tell me that I was a breath of fresh air, that I saved their writing lives, that they couldn't understand why all their other writing teachers had made it all seem so complex.

I understand why those other teachers stumbled, and so should you. Too often, instructors are more interested in process than in communication. Good writing is simple in concept, though it can be elaborate in execution. What are you doing when you are writing? You're communicating. You learned to talk, didn't you? I trust you learned your ABCs. How about grammar? Did you learn it well? If you didn't, you may need to brush up. Get a copy of [\*The Elements of Grammar\*](#) by Margaret Shertzer. Study that book and [\*The Elements of Style\*](#) by William Strunk Jr., and E.B. White. I also recommend [\*Eats, Shoots & Leaves: Why, Commas Really Do Make a Difference!\*](#) by Lynne Truss.

I cannot fix the work you missed in English class, but if you have your basics in order, I'll take you the rest of the way. At the very least, I'll point you in the right direction with a road map to where you want to go. I did that with an English class at the [\*Academy of Art University\*](#) in San Francisco. One of my students went on to win the first Sundance Film Festival online contest for an animated short film, and then he started the first animation company in Israel. I taught him how to keep his eyes on his goal.

I have a workmanlike view of the world of writing. No matter how successful I become, I will maintain that basic point of view. What do I mean by workmanlike? When I was just starting out as a professional writer—a career I dreamed of, even counted on, from a very young age—I wasn't picky about what I was paid to write. That's why I put my name to articles about air conditioners, quickest taxi arrivals, and the best pizza in Los Angeles (I chose Numero Uno because I liked their sweet dough). I loved the perquisites that went along with writing those articles, and I learned about the drawbacks. (Sick as a dog on the eighth day of eating nothing but pizza, I didn't go near another pizza parlor for six months.)

No one taught me how to write articles; they simply told me how long they wanted them, and I winged it. I learned each new form of writing "flying by the seat of my pants." I've been holding that basic flight pattern for decades. If you do some research, you'll discover that the majority of highly successful writers have, like me, a workmanlike view of writing. They have simply written whatever it took, perfecting their craft as they went along. Often that's because it can be hard to make a living at writing, something I've also done for decades.

So, learn the lay of the land. One of the best things I discovered early on was this: No matter how good your writing, if it isn't presented in the proper length, format, and "look" you can be immediately branded an amateur.

When I began writing screenplays, there was only one book available in Hollywood that explained the proper format. Oh my, how times have changed. The correct format for an audiovisual script was explained to me verbally. The best length for various kinds of short stories—the length acceptable to editors—was explained on a postcard from my agent.

When I needed to know about stage play formats, the way speeches should look on a page, or tricks about article writing, I gleaned inside tips from experts. In Los Angeles, where I've lived since the mid 1970s, there are plenty of successful writers to consult. I've found that many successful writers naturally seek out experts, while other hopeful writers do not, even when they live in major metropolitan centers. I found out an

Oscar-winning screenwriter had a secret writing buddy since high school. After that, it never bothered me to ask anyone for tips. Will you let fear prevent you from making it as a writer, or will you ask someone who knows?

Since I often secured writing jobs in areas of writing I knew nothing about, if I wanted to keep the job, I had to display total professionalism. To do that, I learned to (1) get it right the first time, and (2) ask a pro if I didn't know. Don't know any pros? Well, you do now. Reading my writing, in essence you know me. You can send me an email, and I'll answer it.

I'll also tell you where to find other experts. So, pat yourself on the back. You just moved ahead in the game. In teaching writing over the years, both formally and informally, I discovered that, although most of my students had a very strong urge to get published and/or sold, or even become professional writers, they didn't know how to sort out their own desires, capabilities, and strengths. They rarely knew proper formats or thought to find out about them. I determined that, by explaining in brief detail different writing markets, then providing the proper format for each, I give my students an advantage. They can then do a minimum of two things: (1) hone in on the form of writing offering them the best immediate personal chance of success; and (2) give their work a professional "look" right from the start.

Beyond that, I told them, one becomes a better writer by: (a) writing, (b) writing, and (c) more writing. (Thank you for that advice, Mark Twain.)

I realized I had a pretty good system when I got the Instructor Evaluation Forms back from the first class I taught at [UCLA Extension Writers Program](#). Most of my students rated me a "9," the highest possible rating. A couple of troublemakers gave me a "7" and a "6." One of my best students thanked me profusely for not presenting another "touchy-feely, thank-you-for-sharing" type of class. She was extremely grateful for my honest, practical, useful advice. Like twenty-five percent of my students from that first class, she got published within a year of taking my course. Twenty percent of the students became full-time writers in a year. I've maintained a very high success rate with every

course I've given. A student of an online class I taught for [WritersWrite.com](http://WritersWrite.com) ended up with a three-novel deal; she had never sold one previously.

I will tell you what sort of submission is expected for a newspaper "op ed" [opinion editorial] piece, an audio-visual script, a year-end report, a screenplay, a nonfiction book proposal, a stage play, a novel, blogs, and e-books and the distributors of those books. There are other places to get this information, of course. You could buy the entire Writer's Digest catalog, including an entire book about nothing but writing query letters. In contrast, my book is one-stop shopping. In [\*How to Write What You Want & Sell What You Write\*](#), I've attempted to cover virtually the entire field of lucrative writing in practical, workable, proven terms.

I created and sold so many books of useful information, more than one publisher asked me to write a book for their company, on a subject of my choosing. That's how I came up with a book about video games. I hadn't written a game, but I knew two of the top writers in Hollywood. By now, they've created 80 video games and been instrumental in some of the top games on the planet, like Pokemon Go. [\*The Ultimate Guide to Video Game Writing and Design\*](#) by Flint Dille and John Zuur Platten (edited by me) has become the "bible" of that industry and is used to teach writers in schools and at video game companies.

Although I've sold darn near every type of writing that exists, my own advice is mixed with that of established professionals in specialized topics. I try to cover all the bases. Over the years, I learned to write economically. Quick and clean writing is particularly important in writing screenplays. For almost a decade, I taught an online course that was available at one time in 1500 schools. The course was based on my book, the [\*Complete Idiot's Guide to Screenwriting\*](#), which was also published in Russia and has been selling there for 20 years.

People buy "everything you need to know" books about medicines, cars, gardening, home electronic repair, and taking care of babies. I should know – I've written four *Complete Idiot's Guide* books and I ghost-wrote a quarter of another. Why not a comprehensive one about breaking into all types of profitable writing?

I hope that reading this book flies by like a good movie. I don't spend too much time on any one subject, but I do give you the basics. After reading and applying the principles and formats given here, every single want-to-be writer out there (and those interested in switching fields of writing) should know what basic first steps to take. You'll discover exactly how to get started and rapidly achieve quick, no-nonsense results. Turn the page, and let your adventures begin!