

1

The Key to Writing Success

Once upon
a time . . .
/ traditional
fairy tale

If you're reading this book, chances are you're a writer. You might be new to writing, but most likely you've been writing for a long time. You might even have a book you've been working on, a collection of poetry, say, or a novel. Perhaps you have a dynamite idea for a screenplay. It would sell for millions, you're sure, if only you could get it down on paper. The problem is you can't find the time. Life keeps getting in the way. When you find five minutes to settle down to write, the phone rings or someone knocks at your door. You're overwhelmed with obligations at work and constantly interrupted at home, and you keep putting your writing on the back burner. Your brilliant idea has been languishing for months, maybe even years.

The thought haunts you: *Will I ever get to the end of my book?*

From time to time you look for help.

O Muses, O
lofty genius,
aid me now!
/ Dante

You've read a handbook or two on writing, and you might even have signed up for a class. The class was particularly helpful. During the weeks it met you felt inspired and the words flowed. You got more writing done in those few weeks than you did in the entire previous year. But once the class ended you lost your momentum and the words slipped away. *Maybe I just don't have what it takes, you think. I'm probably not talented enough. I*

certainly don't seem to have the discipline. After all, other people are successful at writing, aren't they? They figure out how to get their ideas into words.

Meanwhile you feel confused—and frankly a bit alarmed—by the rapid changes going on in the publishing world. Your favorite independent bookstore where you used to love to browse for books just went out of business. You've tried shopping at the big box store at the mall, but it isn't the same. The sheer number of books stacked on tables and shelves is daunting. Plus they all seem depressingly the same, dull, of poor quality, focused on a dwindling handful of topics like vampires and finding Mr. Right while wearing designer shoes. Looking for a book there feels like trying to get a good meal at a restaurant that serves only pre-packaged junk food. *Where have all the good books gone?* you ask yourself. *Is anybody still reading?* Even thinking about publishing is overwhelming. Every day you hear about a new development from ebooks to blogs to websites. It used to be so simple. Now you wonder if we've reached the end of an era. Is it worth trying to write at all?

**"Fool," said my
Muse to me;
"look in thy heart
and write."
/ Sir Philip Sidney**

These were the questions that faced us in the summer of 2004 when we met at a writing workshop at the University of Iowa. We were a diverse group of five writers who hailed from various parts of the country, from the South to the Midwest. We'd been writing on our own for years, but none of us had succeeded at publishing a book. Some of us hadn't published *anything*, not even a short story, poem, or essay. For a few of us this workshop represented a last chance. If we couldn't get the help we needed to get our writing careers on track, we were going to give it up and chuck it all in.

It turned out that the workshop wasn't particularly helpful. The teacher was so-so and the class work mediocre. As a result we stopped looking to the teacher for inspiration and began looking to each other. During the course of that week in Iowa City, we spent time taking walks together, gathering for meals, talking over ice cream cones purchased at Whitey's. We discussed our writing frustrations, our dreams, and our goals. As we talked we found in each other a kinship, a group of writers similarly dedicated to their craft. By the time the workshop ended we weren't ready to let go. We promised to stay in touch.

The following year we did just that. We returned home where, re-energized, we went back to work. We used email to exchange manuscripts, ideas, advice, and critical feedback. It was the most productive year any of us had ever experienced. Somehow all of our problems with writer's block, concentration, and discipline disappeared. Our writing lives began to grow and evolve in ways we'd only dreamed of, and by the next summer we were clamoring to meet again.

We wrote to the University of Iowa asking for what we now knew we needed most: a workshop for committed writers, designed to encourage collaboration between writers instead of the traditional teacher/student format. The University of Iowa turned us down. At first we were crestfallen, but then one of us said, "*Screw Iowa!* We'll do it ourselves." That summer the first *Screw Iowa!* workshop was born. We met in North Carolina at a member's home and for an entire week lived the writing life together, creating, brainstorming, and inspiring one another. We feared not having a teacher would be a disadvantage; instead it proved to be our group's greatest asset. Free from institutional restraints, we exploded the traditional workshop model and developed a new one entirely our own. It was by far the most productive, useful, and exciting

workshop any of us had ever attended, and when it was over we knew we had discovered something uniquely valuable not only to us but to writers everywhere.

Since that summer in 2004, the members of the *Screw Iowa!* writers group have continued to work together. During the year we write at home, exchanging emails and occasional phone calls to offer each other support, encouragement, and critical advice. In the summer, we meet for a week to give each other intensive feedback on the work we've produced. This method has enabled us to realize our writing dreams. Since coming together, members of our group have published poetry collections and novels. We've placed our work in print and online markets, and even started a press. As writers we've become in demand, speaking at conferences and teaching writing workshops. We still face the same daily problems at work and at home that require our attention and take time from our writing. We're certainly no more talented or committed than we were before we met. The difference is that when we sit down to write, we don't do so alone. We work in the context of a group, and that, we have discovered, is the key to our success.

**It takes a thousand
voices to tell a
single story.
/ Native American
Proverb**

But isn't solitude necessary for writing? you ask. Isn't that the only way I can cultivate my imagination and develop original ideas?

Sure, spending time alone, putting pencil to paper or fingers to keyboard, is an essential part of the creative process. We all need time to daydream and reflect, thinking about language, imagining characters, snippets of dialogue, or scenes. The problem comes when writers become locked in their solitude—when they don't know how to connect.

Too often writers make the mistake of thinking they have to go it alone. It's easy to buy in to the myth of the solitary writer, that poor, gaunt figure toiling away in an attic garret. When we suffer from loneliness and isolation, we tell ourselves to buck up: pain is a necessary part of writing. Meanwhile other kinds of artists understand instinctively the energizing and sustaining power of group work. Musicians come together to jam, painters work in schools, and dancers train in studios. But too many writers continue to believe that the only way to work is in solitude. Some are even afraid to connect, fearing their ideas will be stolen, they will lose their inspiration, or they will somehow compromise their originality.

**Imagine our tribe
around a fire on a
dark night and ask
yourself: do stories
matter?
/ David Guterson**

The reality, however, is that writing has always been a communal act. Think of groups like the Algonquin Circle, European literary salons, or collaborations between writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Read the acknowledgments page of a debut novel. You'd be amazed at the number of names listed there, from people who helped the writer with research, who proofread and edited drafts, provided financial support during the years of work, and offered invaluable advice about publishing the book and reaching an audience. Successful writers succeed in large part because they learn how to assemble the people who will support their endeavors. The very roots of storytelling lie in a community of people, drawn to a campfire to exchange tales.

That community is the secret to writing success. The reason most writers fail is not because of a lack of talent or even a lack of discipline. It's because of the lack of a reader.

The quickest way to kill inspiration is to sit down in front of a blank page wondering, *Will anybody ever read this? Do my words and my efforts matter? Does anybody even care?* Certainly publication is the ultimate form of reaching an audience. But there's a long road between conceiving the initial idea for a piece and bringing it to completion. This is where the writing group comes in. Together you sustain each other until the work is done—until you reach the end of your book.

Working in a group is necessary for another reason. In today's competitive and complex world the secret to succeeding in writing is the same as it is in most other fields:

**For we are the stars. For we sing.
For we sign with our light.
For we are birds made of fire.
/ Passamaquoddy Indian**

networking. In our group, we call it the “Power of Five.” Nina is our marketing expert *par excellence*. She's constantly on the lookout for new places to submit our work and informs us when a promising venue appears. Lauren keeps us up to date on changes in the publishing world, from ebooks to legal issues. Melissa has deciphered the world of websites and learned how to create a thriving blog. Marni has started community programs where writers come together to read from their work, and Mariana, our craft guru, has mastered the art of teaching writing. All of this is far more than any one of us could accomplish on our own. But together we form a nexus of writing professionals, enabling us effectively to complete, place, and market our work. Think of a set of stars with beams of light radiating in all directions. One star by itself gets lost in the darkness, but together you light up the sky.

Yes, the world is changing. It's complex and challenging.

It's also rich and exhilarating. With each new problem comes a host of new solutions. The routes to publication are varied, unpredictable, and often surprising. But they all start the same way: by connecting with a group of similarly committed writers dedicated to each other's success. Sound farfetched? We thought so—until we found each other. Now we've taken our knowledge and experience and put it together in this handbook, to enable you to duplicate our method. In this book you will learn how to:

- create a writing group to sustain your writing life
- use your group to improve your craft
- organize your own writing workshop
- edit your own work—and that of your fellow writers
- take advantage of websites and blogs
- publish your work in print and online journals
- find an agent and evaluate publishers
- decide if self-publishing is right for you, or even start your own press

We provide you with profiles, questionnaires, checklists, and assessments to help you determine your skills and needs. Guidelines for giving—and receiving—useful feedback on your work. Advice on how to run a writing group and how to troubleshoot problems if they arise. Information on how to find the best writers to work with—the ones who will form the core of your network.

But we offer more than that. This book, combined with our website, www.screwiowa.com, offers a complete writing program. You can always find bits of information on the Internet here or there about blogging or self-publishing. Some websites even invite you to post pieces of your work online for critique. But no one puts it all together in one place the way we do. Our book is a valuable tool, explaining in great detail how to start your new writing method, while our

website remains fluid and dynamic, providing you with the updated information you need to be on top of latest changes in the writing world.

Most importantly we offer ourselves. Other online books and websites are administered anonymously by remote, faceless people. Someone from our group

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me
as good belongs to you.
/ Walt Whitman

is on our site every day. You can even see our latest pictures! We give you our email addresses and invite you to contact us with your questions and concerns. We are committed to helping you personally. When you submit a piece of writing to our site for critique, you are sure to hear back from one of us—most likely from all five.

We invite you to keep reading *The End of the Book: Writing in a Changing World*, and to start writing the *Screw Iowa!* way. Together we will make your writing dreams a reality. Put aside your isolation and begin connecting now.