

Tip 1. Read a lot. Read some more. And then read some more again.

I can't imagine anyone wanting to become a writer who didn't read a lot, or love books. When I was a child I used to spend most of my allowance on books, and generally bought one paperback a week. I was also a member of the local public library and would regularly borrow books to read. And I read anything. Everything from Doctor Seuss to Doctor No.

I also collected books, the way some kids collect stamps, and even organised them alphabetically on a shelf. Still do. I always had a book on the go, and wherever I went, I always took a book with me. Still do. The fact is you can read anywhere and almost at any time. And should do.

Was I a nerd? No. I played rugby for my school. And was a good sprinter. I had lots of friends. I had fights at school. But I was fairly popular. **Reading a lot doesn't make you a geek.** What it does do is make you more interesting to other people. Any fool can talk about what was on TV last night. But not everyone can discuss a book.

Teachers are fond of telling you that reading will help you to pass exams, but I think there's a more important reason why it's good to become a reader. It's this: **reading will make you more attractive.** Really. This is especially true for you boys. There's nothing smart about not reading. Let's face it, the way things are right now, there are more girls reading than there are boys reading. But think about it, guys. If a lot of boys don't read at all, and believe that books are for nerds, then becoming a reader can only be to your advantage. It will mean you will have something to talk about with a girl you like. It's no accident that some of the most successful writers – Shakespeare and Byron, for example – were very successful with girls. They'd read a lot. This meant they had a lot to talk about.

Reading changed my life. It meant I could do things inside my head. It meant that more intelligent people could show me the inside of their minds. It meant that I found I had more to say. But most importantly of all, it was only through becoming a keen reader that I realised I wanted to become a writer. For me this happened very early on in my life. I think I was about nine or ten when this happened. **Most writers will tell you the same thing. That they got the reading bug before they got the writing bug.**

Okay, so you read a lot already, I hear you say. All right then, let's take this a stage further. Decide who you're favourite authors are and why. Maybe you can even use a highlighter pen and highlight the bits in the book you look best. Is it just the story, or is there something else as well? The descriptions, perhaps. What I'm suggesting is that you become a critic and that you **pay attention to how a novel is structured.** (A novel is what we call a book in which characters are introduced to whom things then happen. All sorts of famous people have written books about 'the novel'.)

There are lots of different kinds of writers. There are playwrights, and screenwriters, poets and short-story writers, diarists and biographers; but when I was a young boy the

kind of writer I wanted to be was a novelist. I think it was probably the idea of creating a whole self-contained world of place and characters that appealed to me.

Many of the novelists I read when I was a boy are now very out of fashion. And sometimes hard to find in print. I read a lot of Kipling, John Buchan, G.A.Henty, Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Ransome, Richmal Crompton, and Captain W.E.Johns. See what I mean? Equally there are lots of books my friends had read that I didn't. Tolkien, for example; and C.S.Lewis. I have never read either of them. This prompts me to say that **there is no one book you should ever feel bad for not having read**. Someone who laughs at you for not having read one particular book will very likely prove never to have read another book. **And don't ever feel bad because you don't like a book just because lots of other people do**. It could be that they're all wrong. And it's also a matter of taste.

Tip 2: Write by hand.

First of all you ought to start working on your **handwriting**. I'm amazed that more time isn't spent on this in schools. That so much emphasis is placed on computers, instead of improving pupils' handwriting skills. Computers are important. But not as important as handwriting. I still write all my novels by hand. I use a mechanical or propelling pencil, and a ruled A4 notebook. This is the way I started writing 40 years ago, when I was a boy. **There is no more portable word-processing than a pencil and a notebook**. You won't need to buy a laptop. Or a desktop PC. As cheap hobbies go, writing is one of the cheapest. It's also one of the easiest to pursue. With a notebook and a pencil you can write anywhere and at any time. You don't need electricity. You don't even need a desk. You just need a quiet place and enough sunlight to see the page.

Only after I have finished writing a whole book in longhand do I transfer it to the computer. This is a useful discipline because it means I have to re-write what I have written at least once. When I am writing the first draft of a new book I usually expect to write about 5 pages a day in longhand, which is about 1500 words.

I still can't type very well. I tend to use only 2 or 3 fingers. No one ever taught me to type. I taught myself. You do it often enough you remember where all the keys are. **Typing well is not important but good handwriting is important**.

The great thing about using a pencil is that you can rub it out, or write something on top in ink. And **here's a useful tip. When you open your notebook, only write on the right hand page. Leave the left page blank for notes, and editing, and new ideas**.

I have found that writing by hand has some other advantages, too. It feels more like a craft, like an art. This kind of writing has a greater fluency. In other words, I have found that words flow easier from a pencil than on a computer. Also, I don't care to see the cursor on a computer screen blinking urgently at me.

All of this reflects the kind of writer I am. Because temperamentally, I think there are two kinds of writer. There are inspirationals – writers who are inspired to write by having a

good idea; rarer beasts altogether, I think. And there are also compulsives – writers who write because they feel compelled to do it. I am the second kind. I feel driven to do it.

I was about ten when I finished my first short story. But I was aged 33 by the time I got my first book published. **It took me 23 years to get published!** During that time I wrote not for money, but for the sheer pleasure of it. And because I felt compelled to do so. Which kind of writer are you? An Inspirational or a Compulsive? Do you feel driven to do by something you can't explain? Are you writing something already, something secret, because you feel you have to? Very likely you are also a Compulsive.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.....

Tip 3: What Shall I write?

Lots of people write to me saying they've started a novel and I often wonder how many will ever finish them. **Anyone can start to write a novel, it's not everyone who can finish writing a novel.** From the age of 10-18 I mostly wrote short stories and poetry. It may be that you're the next Leo Tolstoy and don't mind that finishing a novel takes a long time. Sometimes, years.

Most novels average about 100,000 words, which is about 300 pages. Let's work it out. If you wrote three good pages a day you'd have a first draft in three months. A first draft is what we call the first version of a story because inevitably you will have to re-write it, often several times. And having written it several times, you will have to edit it, too. Editing means printing out your book and reading it again and again, critically. In other words reading it and looking for mistakes, and generally ways of improving what you have already written. I can't imagine a novel taking less than six to nine months. Most people take at least a year.

So, I recommend that you **don't tackle a novel until you've written a few short stories.** This will help to teach you the craft of writing. What do I mean by that? Well, just this: you don't expect to make a chair on your first day of woodwork, do you? You don't expect to get to the final of a tennis championship without putting in a lot of practice. It's the same with writing: practice makes perfect. Which is why I am recommending that you start writing short stories; so that you can learn from your mistakes without feeling that you have invested too much time in a novel to put it aside.

The chances are you won't actually have read a lot of short stories. And depending on how old you are, I can make some recommendations here. Ghost stories are perhaps some of the best examples of the short story you can read. The stories of Edgar Allan Poe, and M.R.James are well worth a look. As is *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling – my own favourite is *Riki Tiki Tavi*. The Just So stories by Kipling are also excellent. But you can probably find short stories that suit you just as well.

Tip 4: Keep a journal.

The great American novelist **John Steinbeck used to write a journal before he started work on his novel every morning.** It was a kind of warm up exercise, if nothing else. Like

an athlete stretching muscles before a race. I recommend that you do the same. But don't fill it full of stuff like what was on TV last night, and what you had for dinner. Try and use it to describe things. People you've met, places you've been, feelings you've had. In time you may be able to borrow bits out of this for whatever you're writing. And if nothing else you can have a good chuckle about what you wrote in it when you get older.

Tip 5: Plan what you're going to write.

Another word for this kind of plan is a synopsis. It's a way of working out your plot, assuming you have one, so that you check if it's all water tight before you start writing. **Think of it like a road map that you consult before setting out on a journey.** Something very handy to have. You find you want to take a couple of detours along the way; in fact it's more interesting if you do. But you can always get back onto your prepared route should you need to.

Tip 6: Do some Research.

In other words try to **find out something more about the place or subject you're going to write about so that at least you'll sound like you know what you're talking about.** You can get a lot of this out of books, although it's even better if you've experienced what you're writing about. Better but not necessary. When I was a kid people used to say to me write about what you know. It was a way they had of trying to put me off writing. But I used to think to myself, that can't be true. Shakespeare never really wrote about what he knew. He never went to Denmark before he wrote about Hamlet; and he never went to Scotland before he wrote Macbeth; and he certainly never went to Ancient Rome to write Julius Caesar. Mostly, he read other people's books. But it was still research.

Some authors do mountains of research. They keep lots of tidy notes in alphabetical filing boxes, so that they can look something up very quickly. And in this way they can kick-start their writing.

Things are easier today of course thanks to the Internet. It's amazing how much you can find on a subject by doing a **Google search.** And even the rarest books can often be found by looking for a title on Amazon.com.

Invest in a good dictionary. And something called a Thesaurus. This is not a rare species of dinosaur, but an invaluable book - possibly the most important book you will ever own as a writer - that is a store of words arranged according to ideas and meaning. For example, you want to use a word that means 'distance'. But you don't want to use the word 'distance' - perhaps you used it in the previous sentence. Looking up your Thesaurus will help you to find lots of different words that mean 'distance', such as mileage, footage, length, stride, etc. You get the idea.

Tip 7: Keep a Commonplace Book.

This comes out of Tip 6, really. This should be a book full of notable passages from other people's work that you find inspiring. In other words, this is the most basic kind of research; these passages should help to remind you of why you wanted to be a writer in the first place, and there's no more useful research than that.

One thing you should pay attention to is how other authors start books. It's what I call the Stephen Spielberg principle of beginning a novel. A great first sentence is like an exciting first scene in a movie. It should hook the reader in, not put him off from reading the rest of the rest of the book.

Tip 8: Rewrite, revise, re-read and rework.

Once you've written something, get used to rewriting it. **The chances are your work will require substantial revision.** Check for spelling mistakes, bad grammar, and repetition. If you've written your story in longhand first, then read through what you've written and mark the manuscript with a red pen. When this is done, transferring your work onto a computer will help you to identify where any more mistakes are to be found. You can use the Spell check and the Grammar check if you have Word for Windows – although the Grammar check leaves a lot to be desired.

Read what's on the screen and look for mistakes. Then print out your story and read it one more time, always checking for mistakes and marking the paper with a red pen. Correct the mistakes on the computer, then print out a second time. You'll be surprised just how many mistakes will slip through all of these readings. I recommend that now you put away what you've written and leave it for at least a month. Coming back to it, fresh, and reading it again, will help you see mistakes you didn't see before.

Should you decide that you would like to show what you've written to anyone else, make sure that it doesn't have any mistakes – especially if you're hoping to get what you've written published. Nobody wants to publish anyone who can't spell, and who doesn't understand the basic principles of grammar.

Number your pages; this will help you to edit what you write.

And above all learn to take criticism without getting upset, or stamping on your handkerchief. Once you've asked someone to read your story and asked their opinion you have to listen to what they have to say. If they don't like what you've written, ask them to explain why. Learn from your critics. But don't be discouraged. And don't let people put you off. If you have finished a novel, it might just be that the person telling you that your book was no good is jealous that you did it and they didn't.

Tip 9: Try to be Original.

Imitate, don't steal. It's fine to imitate the writers you admire. At least for a while. But don't copy them. And don't just use the same story and the same characters. And don't just reproduce what you've seen in a movie. Try to be original. **Use your imagination.**

That's what it's for. There's nothing imaginative about stealing someone else's ideas. Thinking is essential here. Don't write the first thing that comes into your head. Think about it. Roll it around your mind like a boiled sweet.

Tip 10. There's no such thing as Writer's Block.

Writer's Block. I get asked this all the time. Do I ever suffer from this? It sounds like a medical condition, such as Athlete's Foot. W.B. afflicts a lot of older people who probably have a lot of other more important problems than not being able to think of anything to write. **It's just a fancy word for a story that's going nowhere.** It certainly shouldn't affect a young writer. You should be driven by enthusiasm for writing with no regard for what your peers are going to say. If you've got writer's block when you're still a kid, you're kidding yourself. A better explanation might be that you need to write something else.

If you can't think what to write next, put your story aside. Pick up your journal. Start writing in there. Then return to your story. You'll be amazed at how helpful keeping a journal will be in this respect. It will kick-start you into your story.

Tip 11. Don't Throw Anything Away.

If you start a story and stop writing it for whatever reason, keep it. Don't throw it away. **Never throw any writing away.** Six months from now you may figure out what was wrong with it, or what should happen next. The human mind is unpredictable. Ideas come out of the blue. Think about keeping a notebook and pen beside your bed. I have dreamed things that ended up becoming short stories, or episodes in books.

Tip 12: Publication is no Guarantee of Quality.

Finishing a novel counts as an achievement. But if your book doesn't get published this doesn't mean it's no good. Plenty of great writers never get published, but this doesn't mean they're not great writers. Franz Kafka didn't publish while he was alive. But he is a great writer. Equally there is a lot of garbage that does get published. Books by celebrities, for example, that have really been written by someone else – someone we call a ghost writer, i.e. a writer we can't see. Most of the books written by celebrities are garbage. A book is just another way of making money for these people. Never read anything written by someone who only did it for the money.

Tip 13: Get used to your own Company.

Writing is never lonely. But it is always solitary. You can't write if lots of people are around. You have to be on your own to do it. **If you don't mind being on your own, you have a writer's temperament.** If you can't bear to be alone, then think of something else to do. Writing is about going into a room by yourself for several hours and staying there

without playing games on the computer, sending emails, and speaking to friends on the telephone. It's about hanging out with the characters inside your head.

Tip 14: Educate Yourself.

I hesitate to include this here. But it is important. And here's why. There's an old saying about computers that goes something like 'rubbish in, rubbish out'. It's the same with your brain. You will need to fill it full of interesting stuff and not all of it can come from books. Schoolwork becomes more important if you are aiming to go to college or university. Most writers probably do go to university. But you should also start thinking about going to art galleries to see exhibitions. You should try to go to the theater once in a while. You should see some classic movies. You should read a newspaper. In other words you should start to have a cultural life.

You're at a lousy school? Too bad. That's no excuse. Don't expect people to do this for you. A lot of great authors gave themselves an education. In fact the best education is always the one you give yourself.

All of this will affect your writing. It will inform it. It will make you more authoritative in what you write. Having an opinion about something is what writing is all about. But you need to form an opinion. And you need to base your opinion on the available information.

Tip 15: Treasure your Failures.

Sometimes writing feels like a vocation – something we have been called upon to do. The vocation tests us to see if we have got what it takes. The vocation throws failure at us to see if we can stick it out and stick with it. Pity the person who publishes the first novel they ever write. They will never know if they can cope with failure. **Coping with failure and rejection is what writing is all about.** That is what is called character.

Tip 16: Keep your Writing to Yourself.

I often hear lots of people talking about the book they're planning to write. But the odd thing is that **the more you talk about writing, the more you tell people about your story, the less inclined you feel actually to put it down on paper.** Books will come out of a person one way or the other, just make sure it's in print, rather than a lot of hot air. So here's another tip, make time to write, but keep it a secret; and don't tell anyone until you've finished. Don't show people work in progress unless you really think you can get something out of it.

Tip 17: Laying out a Manuscript.

Most agents and publishers can tell within a couple of pages whether or not something is publishable or not. And only half of that probably relates to the quality of your writing. I've already mentioned spelling and grammar; well, here's another important

consideration. **A manuscript you're planning to show someone in a professional capacity should be laid out the correct way.** This means it must be double-spaced, with a margin of at least an inch and a half on the right hand side. It should be printed/typed on white A4 paper only. You should only choose a plain black typeface, such as Courier or Times New Roman. This means no fancy colours, no fancy typeface, and no fancy paper. Your manuscript should be loose-leafed and not bound with anything other than a few rubber bands. Don't even think of punching holes in it or using a thermal binder. Remember, if someone likes it, they will want to have it photocopied, and they won't want the hassle of having to remove your binding.

Tip 18: Discipline.

A book won't write itself. Writing a story requires that make an investment of your time in your story. **You will have to sacrifice doing something else in order to find time to write.** Sometimes the best way to do this is to force yourself to do it at a certain time of day. When I was working in an advertising agency, I used to get up early in summer, at around 5.30 a.m., so that I might write for two hours before going to work; and in the evening, when I returned home, I would write for another two or three hours. At the weekends I generally gave up half of Saturday and half of Sunday to writing.

Since my office is next door to my house, I find myself sitting down at my desk and scribbling things down at all times of the day and night. Christmas Day 2004, I did maybe half an hour of work among all the other usual Christmas things.

The great American writer, John Updike, once said that authors should live their lives like doctors and dentists, by which he meant that **writers should treat being a writer like a regular job.** There's very little point in sitting around in waiting for inspiration and generally the best thing to do is to set off and look for inspiration with a baseball bat in your hand, club it over the head, and drag it kicking and screaming back to your place of work.

My working day looks like this:

8.30 a.m. I get to my desk, answer e-mails, pay bills.
9.00 a.m. Start to write.
10.45 a.m. Coffee break
11.00 a.m. Write.
12.30 p.m. Lunch.
13.30 p.m. Write
15.15 p.m. Tea Break
15.30 p.m. Write
16.30 p.m. Exercise
17.30 p.m. Office Administration
18.15 p.m. Finish

Most writers look to build some kind of a routine and habit in their writing, so that it becomes a discipline. Eliminating distractions is the next hazard. I avoid loading any computer games on my computer just in case they waste my time. I even erased the simple games that came bundled with the software – games like Solitaire and Backgammon. It's hard enough to sit in a room by yourself all day and produce some work without making it extra difficult for yourself.

Tip 19: Money

The majority of authors do not make a lot of money. There is a small percentage of authors who do make a lot of money, and one particular author – blessed be her name – who makes an enormous amount of money, but the hard fact of the matter is that most authors don't drive around in Rolls Royces and live in the South of France. **If you're in it solely for the money you're going to be disappointed.**

The chances are you will have to do something else to support your writing in the same way that actors become waiters. But the good news is that you don't have to become a waiter. You can have a regular respectable job by day, and at night lead a secret life as a writer. This is the secret meaning of Robert Louis Stevenson's classic story Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde. Throughout my twenties I had lots of jobs. I was a lawyer, an accountant, an advertising executive/copywriter, a television executive, and a journalist. Journalism and Copywriting are the most popular choices for writers; it's the kind of job that uses a few of the same skills you need as an author.

There are two kinds of writing. There is the writing that is story-led, in which story is everything. And there is the kind of writing that is interested in itself, in the writing, in how things are described. Some people can do both. But most people seem to be better at one than the other. Fine writing will win literary prizes; but story looks like a better bet as far as making money is concerned.

Tip 20: Literary Agents.

When a literary agent takes you on as a client he agrees to try to interest publishers in your book; and for this you pay him ten percent of what you make. It's a situation of no win, no fee. Most publishers these days don't have what used to be called 'a slush pile' of manuscripts people have just sent in. And they rely on agents of proven reputation to bring them interesting new books.

Good agents are better than bad agents, but they can't sell what isn't there already.

A list of agents may be obtained from the Writers and Artists' Yearbook, and not from me. My own agents are the oldest literary agency in the world. They are called A.P.Watt, and may be contacted at www.apwatt.co.uk.