

Las Vegas Quill Keepers Lesson 16: Writing Tools

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Have you written a letter to Santa yet? Did you go through every book list, news insert, and review to find a perfect gift for an author? What tools, other than a word processor, helps a writer the most?

I started this article by looking through my office at the items which get the most use. After that, my computer is my hunting ground. Finally, I going back in time, I searched the articles written for the last three years, and discovered there were specific items used over and over again.

The Dictionaries

I recommend dictionaries in three formats. The online dictionary services are updated often, and some are specific to certain forms of language. Medical Dictionaries work well for writers specializing in murder mysteries, for example. For an author working on novels about teens on computers, I recommend the Netspeak dictionaries. Netspeak is the language developed over the last ten years that allows simple characters, or combinations of letters, to mean phrases or ideas. (For example, SSDD, is same stuff different day, and ROFLMAO is Rolling on the Floor Laughing My Arse Off.) For any colloquialisms, a dictionary exists.

My hard drive is home to four dictionaries. The first is Webster's New World. This program offers synonyms, antonyms, alternate spellings, and pronunciations. Accent Software sells this at a very reasonable \$10. A free dictionary, obtainable from PricelessWareHome.org, is Word Web. Not only does this serve as a basic wordbook, but it also allows spell checks for word processing documents and email programs. The software package that is found in any office supply store for under \$8 is Random

House Dictionary and Thesaurus. Newer versions of the software exist, at a much higher price. By buying an older version, you get a better price, and you can update the software online.

The fourth dictionary I have is specific to the type of writing I do. Available for free, again at PricelessWareHome.org, the Medical Terminology Dictionary allows me to correctly phrase techniques and procedures I talk about in my veterinary articles. For consumer pet magazines, I can dummy down the language, and alternatively, for the trade periodicals, I can use informed scientific terms. I recommend finding a genre assistant. A glossary or dictionary of language of a specific country, dialect, terminology, and even slang, gives more credibility to the words spoken by characters in fiction, and helps the journalist better develop questions for interview subjects.

Literature

I'm not going to tell you to read. I'm not going to tell you WHAT to read. I'm only suggesting an author can improve her skills and style if she is well-versed in the styles of others. Libraries are an underused treasure. The best escape from the world lies in books. It may be years since you've last read books deemed classics, but the least expensive vacation lies between the covers of books. Viewing these from a writer's eye gives an insight you might not have had back in your high school days. Read not only the words, but the cadence. See if you are able to imagine all of what is described. Watch your reactions to events, or twists. As an exercise, write in a way you think the author of your selection would.

Word Processors and Other Software

Each month, in *The Writer*, and *Writer's Digest*, advertisers lure authors to the newest and best gimmick software package. Some of these are plot directives, others are structural, while even more are designed to improve readability. The ultimate software designed to augment your skills is the simple word processor.

OpenOffice.org offers a combination of word processor, spread sheet, presentation, and graphics package. Compatible with both Microsoft Word, and Corel WordPerfect, the Open Office suite is a free solution, saving hundreds of dollars. Programs such as StoryWriter claim to restructure work, but ultimately relies on the word processing software of your choice. Unless you are unfamiliar with basic grammar, or just don't understand story structure, (character, plot, conflict, resolutions), these programs just become costly additions to those you already have.

Free alternatives to story development software packages exist. If you aren't sure how to develop ideas, the try Write This, or The Literary Machine. Both generate ideas from keywords the writer types. There isn't much of a learning curve, as both are simple to use. If you are faced with writer's block these serve as great means for inspiration.

I do recommend those designed to keep notes, or databases. Again, free programs exist. Note packages offer the writer an ability to design plot twists, develop timelines, keep track of character relationships, and even serve as reminders when you come up with any ideas, but just cannot use them at the moment. Tree Pad Lite, Golden Section Notes, Avignon Concepts, and Sticky Notes are small programs you can even keep on a Flash Drive. With low memory requirements, these programs can prove invaluable as well as portable.

My Database is probably the one program I use as often as my word processor. For less than \$20, you can put together a submission database, a library catalog, or even a character family tree. This program allows you to import contacts from Outlook or any other email software. Within minutes, you have professional looking databases. If you choose to export into any other program a simple command will do so.

Books For Writers

Our current lending library consists of fifty books on writing skills, grammar, methodology, and inspirational stories. There are three books which I would be lost without. The Chicago Manual of Style, the guide for writing used by many major publishing houses, and periodicals, exist both in print and in software format. You can download the student version for free at <http://ww.docstyles.com>. Associate Press Stylebook is used often when I submit to trade publications. Used copies exist online, or in bookstores.

For less than \$20, it's certainly invaluable as a resource. The third book any writer should own is Strunk and White's Element of Style. Not long ago, an illustrated version of Strunk and White launched a renewed interest in this often required reading. The illustrated version has a dark red hard cover, giving the appearance of a grade school lexicon. For the first time, sentence structure accompanies visual elements, in real-life grammatical examples.

***Tip:** To save hundreds of dollars on books, I recommend visiting book club sites. The Writer's Digest offers a large selection of advice, manuals, and technical offerings to aide a writer in her quest to perfect her skills. Also, most book stores have clearance shelves containing dozens of books designed to aid an author.*

Gizmos and Gadgets

It's not enough to understand language or its use anymore. An author has to be her own marketing agent, desktop publisher, and often, graphic designer. If the people in your life are looking for gifts that would help you out in your career, nudge them towards office supply stores or discount shops. There are low cost printers available that allow you to print as if you were at a professional copy center. Monitors are compact now, and the prices are dropping quickly on those flat screens. Backing up data is easy if you have a flash drive, an external hard drive, or a disk writer. My USB key drive is the home of most of my back-ups for the books I'm writing, and it cost less than \$50 for a full gigabyte of space.

For any author sending out manuscripts, add priority mail stamps to the list of "love-to-haves." Each year, I beg Santa to bring me manila envelopes, and small office supplies such as paperclips, (NEVER STAPLE A MANUSCRIPT), printer inks, and note pads. Printer Inks now cost nearly as much as a new printer. One of the nicest gifts I had last year was a gift certificate to an ink refilling station. I just bring in my cartridges, and within minutes, and at nearly half the cost, I have a full supply again.

Do you have a fax machine? Although most computers allow you to fax as easily as you can print, it is wise to have a standard fax machine when you are working with contracts, or an agent who isn't very excited about email. You can find these for under \$50. Again, cartridges for fax machines cost almost as much as the machines themselves, so it doesn't hurt to ask for refills.

If you already have CD burners, and printers, then ask for the media needed. Blank CD-RW's can be used over and over to back up your work.

Manuscripts require nice, strongly bonded paper. There are discount office supply stores that sell these by the box. Do you print labels for return addresses, or your own checks? Suggest these supplies as gift options. Why not ask for blank labels for the CD's used for keeping track of contents of your back-up disks?

Subscriptions

Tools that renew my skills are my subscription to writing related journals. Three of these have led to assignments, and offer insights for any writer, published or not. Writer's Digest, (<http://www.writersdigest.com>), stands out for consistent advice. The Writer, (<http://www.writermag.com>), isn't far behind. The third, however, offers one thing that the other two do not: conference, submission, and contest opportunities in every issue. Poets and Writer's magazine, (<http://www.pw.org>), is a little pricier than the other two, for good reason. Their staff updates listings each issue. Out of the three options, this is geared for professional writers, without being condescending to those with few credits. Both The Writer and Writer's Digest dummy down the language in some articles.

Now that you have some ideas, go send that list to Santa! (Or whomever!)

Free Byte Software

<http://www.freebyte.com/>

Writer's Digest Book Club

<http://www.writersdigestbookclub.com>

Viking Office Supply

<http://www.viking.com>

