

Las Vegas Quill Keepers Lesson 20: I'm Writing... for whom?

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Hands down the most asked question at any conference is "Will you read my work?" I've said it. Some of you have said it. Some of you have been sitting in front of your printer, as you watch it pouring word after word out. You are hoping that each syllable ends up on some Library shelf, or even better, in the hands of your favorite author, as she says silently to herself, "Gosh, I wish I wrote this." But, what do you really want to do with the ramblings or research? You can write a novel, or a script, or even a book relaying the history of a hula-hoop. But there are other ways to make a living by writing. Let's look at some ideas.

Basic Letter Writing

The days of letter writing, of words crafted out in long hand, on paper permanently stained with cat paw prints or instant coffee, intimating deep secrets and ponderings of family gossip, sadly seems to have disappeared. This technological requirement of life instead grants us the ability to share emails. There is no rule book that demands email be kept to short grunts, or glimmers of goofiness in forwarded chain letters. Instead, we are now allowed to converse with those from many cultures, from different lifestyles, and from all age groups not only in private missives, but also in the use of Blogs.*

*(See lesson 17 on <http://www.vegasquills.com/articles.html>)

Those who watch the program Antiques Road Show are aware that packages of letters are worth far more today. While the opportunity of snail mail exists we should not take it for granted. There's something very powerful in letter writing. I'm not speaking of an annual newsletter sent during holidays blaring events and triumphs. Each letter written by

hand seems to hold its own personality; its own quiet strength. There's something in receiving a hand written note that makes us feel more alive, important, and even more human somehow. Letters are also a cathartic release of life. Psychologists suggest we write letters to those with whom we've felt betrayed, or loved, or angered by, and burn them as a way to forgive our own thoughts and others actions.

Quickies Aren't Easy, But They Sure Are Fun!

Some of us are quick witted, and have an uncanny ability to master a single ten page thought in the fewest of words. There is a large market for those who are able to powerfully say things smartly or in a poignant way. It's in greeting cards. Each year, Writer's Market puts out dozens of listings of greeting card companies seeking new, fresh voices. As large as the market may be, it's probably one of the most difficult to break into.

I've met young writers, (young meaning new, not twelve), who have crafted three limericks and a punch line, who assume their work is going to be swooped down upon by card companies. Hallmark, which has at least seven divisions in the United States, and dozens worldwide, pays only 200 or so regular writers, and hundreds of freelancers. The money is good for those who are able to consistently pass in work. Most of these people are full time employees, and also provide other services, such as graphic design or layout. But the reality is, not many people make more than \$25 a card, and of those who do, it's rare to get hired on a regular basis. A recent Writer's Digest story quoted numbers that were quite discouraging, reminding their readers that of the tens of thousands of submissions greeting card companies get per year, a scant percentage spark anyone's interest.

The one way to break into the market is by approaching small stationery companies, or upstarts searching for talent. Ground floor entry gives an author an edge over those who attempt to break into established markets.

Particles and Articles

If you are one of those women who can see the big picture, or who is meticulous in research, you have the right credentials to work as a stringer. A stringer is a writer who is uncredited for a story in either a newspaper or magazine. There is a lot of work available for those who want to keep their stories down to about 250 words or so. The pay is usually by word, and is often around the \$50 range.

You have read my work as a stringer for Associated Press. I've had articles in more periodicals than I had as a bylined writer for regional newspapers. In fact, there are six articles in today's local paper, that I have written over the last three months. Stringer articles, as a rule are not time dependent, so they can be used to fill empty space. For this reason, the stringer articles are often called "fillers".

Fillers and Stringers can lead to regular assigned work. I was hired as a regular columnist for a regional paper in New Mexico after submitting several filler articles on the shops and events in Santa Fe. Editors use these articles to test your work out on their readers. They also use these articles to supplement stories which appear in their magazines. For example, I had a story about a wheelchair user who preferred a helper pony instead of a helper dog. This was a 200 word piece that appeared in a women's fitness magazine next to the box previewing the next month's issue -- holding a story of a woman who taught disabled people how to ride horses.

Sell? Well? Sell Well!

Some women are really great at persuasive linguistics. They take a dull subject and punch it up so well that even if the work is just a few paragraphs long, it's hard to put down. You can make quite a bit of cash in the field of marketing for this very reason. In fact, a majority of those authors I speak with on any given day either started out as, or at least worked as, a writer for marketing materials.

There are always companies looking for those who can sell not only their products, but services, advertisements and even give their personnel manuals a boost. Although many of these jobs are full time, freelancers can rake in a pretty good living by designing and writing professional promotional materials. This isn't just the idea that you can write a brochure. You can produce text for websites, sales presentations, and even business plans.

She's a Brain-iac!

I've done some writing creating a corporate online education system. Not only was I reworking some drab materials into readable, fun, and exciting topics, but I had the freedom to change and update my work daily, as I taught in a live classroom. This gave me insight into self editing. I had day to day feedback teaching me how to write so my readers would comprehend no matter what their reading levels were.

Education companies love great writers. If you have a sense of humor, are able to easily state something without sounding like a cobweb covered professor, and can convey difficult subjects so that "dummies" can understand them, you can make a great living doing educational

writing. O'Reilly Associates developed dozens of books for computer users. The Dummies series invites writers to submit sample chapters for any subject not covered by their current catalog. You know that manual that came with your computer? A team of writers, graphic designers, and layout artists all had something to do with bringing it to you. And, if you check your own computer, chances are the manual exists in PDF form there not only in English, but in several other languages.

Translate This!

Every visitor's and conventions bureau of nearly every major city across the United States offers materials in English, Spanish, Japanese, and now in several Chinese dialects. In New Bedford, Massachusetts, Portuguese materials are found because of the high immigration numbers of people from Portugal. Cuban Spanish is different from Mexican Spanish, which is much different from Puerto Rican. In Florida, materials exist for Cubans, Mexicans, and Islanders. Quebec and New Orleans require French translations. Here in Las Vegas, the materials offered to hotels include not only those listed above, but even Pacific Island languages, Middle Eastern, and Braille. If you have skills in languages, you have a guaranteed job writing for someone.

For many, translating tourist materials leads to jobs writing in multi-linguistic periodicals. Just peering out at the news stand at Barnes and Noble nearby, I found magazines in seven languages. A strong writer's portfolio of clean, solid translations partnered with strong expressive tales in print, can lead to a regular writing assignment. English isn't the mandated language for authors in the United States.

It' s Just a Box!

Take a look at every single thing on your desk. It all has the input of a writer. From the text on a box of paperclips, to the user's manual of your computer, this is all writer supplied. The label on my over-the-counter medication tells not only the story of what is in the bottle, but sells the product. After all, most of us *do* judge things by their labels, covers, and packaging. It's never JUST a box.

For those of you with children, I'm sure you're used to seeing product writing. The back of each box of cereal is designed to keep the sugar coated goodies on the table longer. This is done to insure that kids will use the product up faster, and also ensure you will buy more sooner. Every kid's meal at a fast-food restaurant comes with constantly changing material. From billboards to toilet paper, words exist, meaning writers are needed.

Copy Centers. Copy Centers.

If you are still unsure where to write, consider working in a copy center. By printing the work of others, you allow yourself to find opportunities. A friend worked at a national printing chain. She told me she had a never ending assignment of printing college theses. As she ran these, she read through some of them, and found many mistakes. Often times, she'd leave a business card in the envelope along with the copies. Her card read, "If You Need Me, Just Call Me—Rewards Through Rewords." Within weeks, she had enough clients, from the local university who asked her to help copy edit, that she started her own business. Within two years, she was able to hire six other writers. It's been eleven years, and her business in Cambridge, Massachusetts is still booming.

Copy centers often have computer services. The clerks sit with clients and rewrite or reworks layouts. We've all read brochures that simply

never got to the point, or worse, missed key elements, such as contact information. By assisting the copy center's clients in creating efficient materials, you increase your own abilities to produce similar materials. You add to your editing toolbox. My step-mother started her business by typing letters for people afraid of computers. She now runs an Office Center that does full secretarial services for business people visiting my home town on Cape Cod.

I hope some of these non-traditional writing ideas appeal to some of you.
Next week: What Happens to My Query?

Here are places to find Markets for your writing:

Writers Market: A subscription based online database run by Writer's Digest

<http://www.writersmarket.com>

The Writer: This magazine also runs a market database, available to all current subscribers.

<http://www.writermag.com>

Bella Online: Free Source

<http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art1489.asp>