



WRITER PEP TALK

Pathways to Writing by Joyce Sidman

There are so many different ways of becoming a writer (and I'm not an expert, either, so take all this with a grain of salt). Some people start when they're very young; some come to it late in life. Some do it full time; some do it when their homework is done, or while the baby is napping, or on a day off from work. Which leads me up to my first pronouncement:

1. You can be a writer at any time, any age, any stage in your life.

It requires time and energy, though. To be a writer, you have to say to yourself: I AM A WRITER! And then make space in your life for writing. How to do this?

2. Gather ideas

Pretend you are a movie camera, a tape recorder, a sponge. Watch, listen, feel. How is one thing like another? What are the connections? What are the stories behind what is happening? Listen to the words in your head, and WRITE THEM DOWN! Be Harriet the Spy; keep a notebook. Even if you think an idea might not lead anywhere, write it down anyway. Save it for later--you never know which ideas might sprout into stories or poems.

3. Make time for your writing

Try to pick a time of day when you usually have a few free minutes, or an hour, or a couple hours. During this time, sit down and write--every day, if you can. Work on a story, article, screenplay, poem. Write in your journal. Write a letter. Good writing takes practice, and if you don't do it often enough, you get rusty. Do you need to be progressing on the Great American Novel every day? No. But you need to be writing. This is now your job.

4. Put it away for a while

OK, so you've written something. It's the best ever! It's stupendous!!! Then, when you read it an hour later, it is no longer stupendous. It is awful, horrible, *burnable*. Don't burn it--put it away. Overnight, for a week, for a month. When you come back to it, you will see more clearly which parts are truly fabulous, and which parts need work. Which brings us to:

5. Revise, revise, revise! (and read, too)

Revision can be hard, very hard. It also requires practice. I was terrible at revising at first, because I saw my written words only through the lens of my own heart. I *dreamed* them; I *felt* them: how could I change them? I had to learn to see through the Reader's eyes (that mythical Reader who's waiting for something good to read, but who needs to be convinced). How do we learn to see through a Reader's eyes? First, read lots of other good books. Look at what other authors are doing well and try to learn from them. Second, get help--individual help.

6. Read your writing out loud to someone you trust

Two important points here. One, read your work *out loud*. Then you can hear the rhythm of your own words, the impact each word makes. You will hear where things start bogging down (and could be changed or cut) and where things seem electric (don't change a word). Two, read your work to *someone else*. Not just anyone--someone who will be kind to your fledgling writing, but who also knows & loves writing enough to help make yours better. THEN (this is the hard part), you have to *listen to what they say*. Carefully. You might not take all of their advice, but some of it will be right on the mark. As you get better, you will begin to do more revising on your own, before reading aloud to others. Your writing will be more polished. Finally:

7. Believe in yourself, in your vision

You see, hear, think, and feel things that no one else does. Try to keep this in mind as you make your way down the Writing Road. You may face rejection or disbelief. However, the longer you write, the more you will enjoy writing for its own sake: the excitement of making connections, of capturing a thought, of playing with words. You will begin to enjoy seeing, and writing about, your experience as *only you can*--nobody else. It is wonderful to have others recognize your creation. But what will keep you going is the work itself: the wonderful, magical work of writing.