

Taking Your Writing to the Next Level

Make Time To Do Some Reading

Read Wide. Read novels, short stories, flash fiction, poetry, experimental pieces, genre fiction, stories with convoluted plots, stories with no plot, writing that is style over substance. Read old writing, new writing, futuristic writing. Read writers from different countries, socio-economic profiles, racial groupings or stages in their life.

Read Deep. Read things over multiple times. Consider what makes them good, bad, ugly or indifferent. If reading short fiction, what feedback might you give the writer to help them improve their work? If reading a novel, write a review considering everything from entertainment value to structure and use of imagery. Make a list of sentences that you would have been proud to write and keep them for inspiration.

Find Better Subject Material

Getting Inspiration. Watch the news, trawl clips on YouTube, go for a walk, listen to music, allow yourself to daydream, take a trip to a museum, make a collection of interesting photographs. There might be a background character in a film or TV show that could inspire a great story. There might be a lyric in a piece of music that triggers an idea.

Observe the World Around You. Sit in a café and people watch – what are the back stories of the other customers? What are they feeling and why? What is the thread of their conversations? On your way home from work, try to find three new details that you've never noticed before – look for the small things like the broken tree branches or the back street graffiti. What are the stories behind these things?

Know What You Write. Don't be straight-jacketed by the expression 'write what you know.' Use as much of your personal experience in your writing as possible but anything else that interests you can be learnt about through a bit of research. Consider the minutiae as well as the broader brush stroke details. For example, if you want to write a story set in Victorian England, think about what language people would have used, what they would have worn, the social structure etc. as well as looking into the historical, political and geographical context. Leave no stone unturned, as it were.

Write What You Love. It's important to feel passionate about your writing. This passion will shine through for your readers. You shouldn't discard a whole genre or set of circumstances that you initially find uninteresting, though. Challenge yourself to find a novel twist on a tired trope. Challenge yourself to see the unpromising subject material in a way that it becomes enchanting or mysterious.

Improve Your Style

Try New Things. You can learn a lot by experimenting with new techniques. Try writing from a new perspective (1st person, 3rd person omniscient, past tense, future perfect continuous etc.). Try structuring a story as a shopping list or diary entry or a letter to a dead person. Try writing in the voice of a contemporary teenager or a Regency period dowager. Even if your approach doesn't work or reach the standard of your normal writing, there will always be something that you can take away from the experience.

Focus on Your Weaknesses. Try writing a story where you pinpoint that one area without worrying about anything else. Look back at a previous story and set yourself a target of making ten improvements to your area of focus. Find examples of other peoples' writing which are particularly strong in your area of weakness and ask yourself how they have achieved it.

Get Feedback and Set Challenges

Feedback. Whilst it's always nice to hear that your writing is brilliant, you want to get feedback that will challenge you to improve. Get your CPs to point out the bad and the ugly as well as the gems. Once you have their feedback, think about different ways that you can improve the piece of writing and also whether you can learn anything from the feedback that applies to your writing in a more general sense.

Set Challenges. A small amount of pressure can be a good thing in bringing the best out of you. Choose contests you would like to enter. Aim to get something published in a 'higher tier' literary journal. Challenge yourself to make one submission per month/week. Task yourself to write something every single day.