

AN IVE FOCUS TEXT
INSTRUCTIONAL BLUE BOOK

“... but I can’t write.”

Hey, you forgot to say “yet!”

Welcome to the beginning of a 14-part series
that ~~can~~ *will* change your mind about your ability to write
... whatever it is you want to write.

By Donald E. Werve, Jr., M.Ed.

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You forgot to say “yet!”

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PART ONE: A brief introduction.



Whenever people discover that the elderly, slightly rotund, generally cheerful and gregarious guy they are talking to is a “writer,” the conversation usually moves in an entirely different direction. Most of the time, the movement begins with the statement: “I have a story (or an opinion, or a poem,) I would like to tell people (or I think people would really enjoy) **but I can’t write.**”

I am here to tell you that almost every individual with reasonable intelligence and a reasonable basic education has the ability to write! Their first efforts at writing may not look or sound like Hemmingway, Shakespeare, King, Bradbury, Jenkins, Cussler, Christy, or Patterson—but, then, neither did theirs; and neither does mine! This ability, by the way, does NOT require specific competence in English. Whatever is your language of comfort, **that** is the language you should use to begin your writing adventure.

I am a career-level writer of poetry, commentary, non-fiction, fiction, and technical documentation; an editor of books, articles, and news features; and a publisher. Making this open confession even worse is that I have taught writing on every level from second grade to mid-adult.

But on average I throw away over half of my literary starts. Those which do “make the cut,” will likely be written, edited, and re-written at least four or five times. So just because you aren’t Robert Frost every time you pass by a stand of trees, don’t think it can’t happen (read *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, *New Hampshire* (Robert Frost; 1923).

Age is not a barrier (well, most two-year-olds *are* a little iffy) but I have seen some fairly good material come out of sixth-grade classes. I wrote my first original poem when I was in fourth grade (it was awful) and was writing science fiction in the seventh and eighth grade (which was only a little better).

All of which is not to tell you how really great I am (when you **are** great it’s hard to be humble). Rather to prove the point I made in the last paragraph, I believe I have average intelligence, and **I absolutely love to read** (a characteristic most writers have in common).

Very little of which has anything to do with the reason you bought this book.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL WRITERS

Writers, as individuals within a group, share only two characteristics. They [usually] read and they write. Of these two, the latter is absolutely critical. **You cannot be a writer if you don't write!**

Which brings me to my first milestone on a 14-point journey to not only prove to you that you can write, but to help you create the best writing you are capable of creating.

In a few minutes, we are going to get to a short exercise for you to flex your literary muscles on. But first, let me in on a couple of (what I call) quickie speed secrets (QSS). These are a couple things your writing (English classes, usually) teachers never told you. Remember when you were told, "write about anything?" Remember wracking your scared-to-death mind looking for something to write about? Well, here is the quickest tip I can give you.

QSS 1: Think, "What If ... ?"

What if you weren't in this dumb class? What if you were the teacher? What if the prince who got turned into a frog ... ?

~~There was once a knight~~ ... Ho-hum! Does this seem dull to you; no feeling? Try this next introduction

Many years ago, in a British shire known as South Umberland, which is directly and due south of North Umberland—there being no Umberland proper ... or improper for that matter, there lived a handsome young knight known as Sir Percival Ribbitt.

There, now we've set the scene, introduced our main character (Sir Percival), and have given the reader an idea that this story might be a bit tongue-in-cheek. A little later on, if you'd like, I'll tell you the whole story. But that's where an idea can spring from.

Want a couple others?

Tell me the story of how Ogg discovered the wheel back about 6,500 years ago? **What if** he hadn't been run over by that log from which he was trying to escape ?

What do you think might have happen **if** you hadn't been hit by a Kryptonite rock when you were young?

What if you discovered that you *really* are an E.T. and the sole survivor of a crash in Roswell, New Mexico?

How about just starting with a title: **Company for Dinner!** **What if** you were about to have a quiet dinner at home, just you and (?), when your old best friend from high school "dropped in" with her (his) spouse and their four kids.

Paul and Elizabeth never were the kind of people who paid much attention to rules of conventional behavior.

You take it from there. You don't have to write it; tell somebody about it!

QSS 2a: Say It Like You See It! (*Boy do English teachers hate this one.*)

QSS 2b: Then Write It Like You Say It! (*But they hate **this** one even more.*)

Now I am going to tell you that you don't have to **write** your first story, or your paper, or your essay, in perfect English (or any other language for that matter) the first time out of the box. Start by telling it to a tape recorder, or something that won't try to correct your grammar; your dog or cat will do nicely. (Dogs are the best listeners, by the way—cats usually get bored and either fall asleep or walk out in the middle of the story.)

Actually, trying to make it "right" will take you three or four times as long as it should. Find your "What if ...? Think about it for a couple of minutes (but no more). Then just pick up your pencil (or go to your keyboard) and perform what I refer to as "a brain dump."

I love computers! When I first started writing, at least somewhat seriously, we didn't have computers. We had manual typewriters, or more often, just good ol' Number 2 pencils. I preferred the pencils, not because they were better or faster, but because they had erasers—and I used the living daylights out of those. My first drafts had more smudges and crossed out words than they did productive stuff. And more often than not, they finished their useful lives in the trash can with the longish stumps of pencils. I say "longish" because, like almost everybody else I knew, I threw them out when the eraser was gone; usually when the bright yellow wooden stick was only about half used up.

QSS 3. Don't tell any-body, yet, you are writing ... anything.

Finish off something, anything, first. Then share it with somebody (*ignore what they say, even if it's very positive*) and go back to work.

Why ignore the positives? When I was about twenty-two, I went to work for the Great Books Division of Encyclopedia Britannica. In my first night out (working with a crew of salesmen) I wrote three orders. This was a record for the entire company, I found out. And I went on to write nine orders in my first month (tied another record). I made \$810.00 in my first four weeks. (An average engineer, in those days, was doing well if he (or she) was making \$400.00 a month.)

And it was so easy!

It was so easy that I stopped working the plan. I started streamlining the presentation. And when I left the company seven months later, my average income for eight months was a whopping \$46.00 a week. I was good, people told me I was good, and I figured that it was so easy I could go to work and make a lot of money any time I wanted.

Writing, unfortunately, can be the same way.

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I've been told I'm a natural writer. Well, the first thing *this* "natural writer" had to do was realize that I might be a good writer **if I worked at it!** Don't ever think that "being a writer" is all sparkles. It's a great job. Right now, I can do it whenever I want to do it the brain is flowing and the words are fairly dripping off my fingertips onto my keyboard. But "now" is 11:47 in the evening, my wife and son (and the family cat) are asleep. I have no distractions. Things are quiet and I am relaxed.

But this is the exception rather than the rule.

Which sort of brings us full circle from where we started.

You can write. You **can** write. You can **write!**

Anyone with reasonable intelligence and a reasonable education can write. If you can read, you can write (and the more you read, the better writer you will become). They can become writers; they can become good writers; they can become **great** writers. All it takes is the desire to write. I meet very few people who don't have a story to tell. They just need to believe **they** can tell it better than anyone else (which is usually true) and that they **can** tell it.

NOW LET'S GET TO THAT EXERCISE I PROMISED YOU.

Let's start with your pretending you are a teen-age girl and I am a teen-age boy. We have been dating for a while—three to six months—but you are becoming less and less enamored with me (for whatever reason). NOW, and I mean **right now**, (taking no more than 10 minutes to think about and answer this question; "what would I do if this was real and I had to do something like this?"), I would like you to write a "Dear Don" letter.

Tell me our relationship is over! (NOTE: "Get lost, you creep, and don't ever talk to me again," is NOT an acceptable response to this assignment.) Being a nice person, you don't want to destroy my fragile male ego; nor do you want to lie and tell me it's because your dad has threatened to ship you off to a convent. You just want the relationship to end—now!

OH, BY THE WAY, I FORGOT TO TELL YOU SOMETHING ABOUT THIS COURSE.

The exercises are all pass/fail, and it is up to you to grade them (at least at first).

If you give it a reasonable effort you will become a more confident (and therefore a better) writer. And as a bonus, you can also pass an advanced writing class.

If you do not take this activity seriously, you will (probably) gain very little out of it. You would (probably) not pass most serious writing classes and could likely go on to spend three or four years in middle school ... or six or eight years in high school ... or several classes getting ready for "higher" education ... until you "get with the program—at which time life could get a lot easier for you and you can get on with your life.

Now! Quite honestly, I didn't get paid to write this book and I really don't care if you become a better writer or not (at least not yet). Regardless of what **you** do, I will still be a professional writer and will continue to do what I enjoy doing for a reasonably-well-paid living.

The sun will still rise and the sun will still set. This is NOT intended to be something you will be forced to do. It is simply an offer to help you learn something that **will** make your life easier and more enjoyable.

If you are brave, and would like to continue with these exercises ([which may include verbal and emotional e-buse] *don't forget what I said about maintaining a sense of humor*), you can e-mail me your first exercise at 3ftpota@surewest.net. This will "enroll" you into the "class" and I'll send you my comments and the URL of the next exercise.

And so you don't think that I am out to bait-and-switch you, only the first four exercises are FREE. After that, they will cost you \$10.00 each (and you will need to be able to pay through PayPal). The first bill (with a PayPal link) will accompany your fourth exercise. If you don't want to go any further, just don't pay the bill. You can quit at any time, or wait a month or two before you pay the bill and get the fifth exercise.

NOW, as I promised earlier, you can go to

<http://www.focustext.com/e-netlibrary/978-0-00B-Unassigned.pdf>

and enjoy ***The Saga of Sir Percival Ribbit***. This, by the way, only took me two hours to create as a first draft, and only eight (or was it nine ... or ten) revisions to get it to the point at which I prepared it for this publication cycle. And after I read it in its present form, I thought it might be interesting to explore the idea of **what** the story might look like **if** it were set in modern days ... perhaps being told as an evidentiary flashback in a civil trial – Ribbit v/ Ribbit – where Lady Ribbit is being sued for divorce on the basis of violation of spousal rights, and cruel and unusual punishment, by an ugly frog.

APPENDIX A:

Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening *By Robert Frost*

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

From: <http://www.ketzle.com/frost/>

APPENDIX B: A SHORT ALPHABETIC LIST OF LITERARY GENRE

This Section is a little formal in contrast to the general tone of the rest of the materials for the class, but I think it is helpful for you to realize that writing is a very broad landscape. Academia would like you to believe that there is only one kind of writing (called “academic writing”—does that surprise you?), but in the real world there are dozens of niches for manipulators of words.

The following list is drawn and edited, in part, on a list available at Wikipedia.com which also provides more in-depth analysis of each genre (category or classification).

Autobiography, Memoir, Spiritual autobiography (This includes diaries and journals)

Biography

Children’s Literature

Comedy

Erotic Literature

Epic (Generally seen as a fiction format, usually in poetic or heroic literature)

Essay (Persuasive, Compare and Contrast, Personal Essay, General). A classification of literary composition usually devoted to the presentation of the writer's own ideas (I say) on a topic and generally addressing a particular aspect of the subject. Often brief in scope, it can be either formal or and informal in style, the essay differs from such formal expository forms as the thesis, dissertation, or treatise.

Fable (Fairy tales)

Fiction (Adventure, Detective, Mystery, Historical, Fantasy, Gothic [which can include most mystery fiction, horror and “lovecraft” literature, and the various classifications of “thrillers”], Science Fiction, and speculative technology).

Genealogical and Family Histories (which includes Oral Narrative and Oral Histories).

Inspiration

Journalism (the newspaper and magazine kind of writing, which breaks down into “hard journalism”, features, and sports plus several other writing specialties).

Literary (analytical) Criticism.

Magic Realism (examples are seen in the trilogy of the rings by J. R. R. Tolkien, and [more recently] the Harry Potter Series by J. K. Rowling).

Medical Novels.

Military

Narrative (Which generally deals with factual events).

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Philosophy.

Poetry

Romance (which is generally seen as uplifting and positive and should not be confused with “gothic romance” which is usually dark in nature).

Saga (which is the prose form of the Epic).

Satire

Technical

Travel

Western (any work centered on the western expansion period [c. 1840-1920] of the United States)