

I SHOULD BE WRITING

A free series by Mur Lafferty



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Introduction

My name is Mur. To date I have one novel, one non-fiction book, many role-playing games, countless magazine articles and columns, and several short stories published. I have been writing seriously since 2001, wanted to be a writer since, oh, 1985 or so.

When I was in high school, I discovered the love of writing and wanted to be A Writer when I grew up. When I got to college, I pursued journalism unsuccessfully and went into English, taking as many creative writing classes as I could. It was in these classes that I discovered something horrifying.

Other people were better than me.

Some personalities could have taken that as a challenge. But I was a shy kid with little to now self confidence, and therefore figured why bother? If they were better than me, they always would be.

I graduated. I got a job in web design. I thought about writing. I got laid off, got hired as a webmaster for a computer game company. I thought about writing and game design. Failed to break into the game design department (they didn't want anyone from marketing there). I got laid off again.

I thought about writing this whole time. Short stories, books, other awesomeness. I waited for something indefinable, something blessing from above that said, yes, you are allowed to write. Start now and make brilliance. It never happened.

Now we're in 2001. Two members of my family had died within months of each other. The economy was in a slow downturn, about to dip much deeper in September. I had a friend, Richard Dansky, introduce me to White Wolf games who were looking for writers. I got my first job. Suddenly I was writing for money for the first time. I wasn't bad, but I certainly had room for improvement. I realized I had to work for it.

And it suddenly struck me- I had waited for something to happen in my life to change. As I slid into adulthood, and I had a job, then a house, then a husband, then another job, books to read, TV to watch, beer to drink, somewhere I had decided I wasn't good enough. And I didn't have the time to get good enough. If I couldn't write a story in an afternoon and have a sale the next day, what was the point? But with the help of Richard, I realized that the only thing that would get me better is putting my butt in the chair and writing. And that thought was wonderful and freeing. Because as I've felt most of my life, I should be writing.



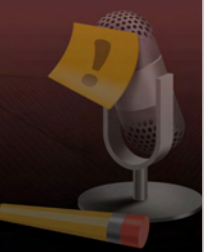
So I started this little podcast. (If you're having the PDF passed to you by someone who clearly loves you very much, you can get the podcast for free at www.ishouldbewriting.com.) I started talking about the things I was coming against and the things I was learning. And at some point, I decided to write down everything I was learning.

And that's this document.

Mur Lafferty

July 13, 2009

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Chapter 1: It's OK to suck

Really.

I think what gets beginning writers down so often is the fact that they have dreamed of being a writer for so long and they think the worlds in their heads will be grand and glorious. The reality usually is they sit down to write such glorious worlds and, well, they suck.

But honestly. Think about it. If you wanted to run a marathon, would you leave your front door and run 26 miles? If you did that? What would happen? You'd injure yourself. You'd vomit. You might die (didn't the first runner who inspired the marathon actually do just that?). I can promise you that you wouldn't achieve any sense of competitive time. You would fail.

No, to run a marathon you have to leave your house and get in shape, running a little each day¹. You get your body used to running every day (with some rest days in there) and you get stronger and better and faster. Then you can try out a 5K race, and a 10K, and a half marathon, working your way up to the big race.

People think writing is easy. Of course they do- it's just words, strung together, right? And we all use words, every day, usually speaking, but some of us write emails, or reports, or letters. Storytelling has to be easy, right? We relate our days to our spouses, we encapsulate last night's TV to our coworkers. Language is a core facet of being human.

But writing is a skill. The ability to use the right words to properly indicate what's in your head is something you have to practice. So just as you know that right now you're not an Olympic marathoner (unless you're actually a marathoner, and then insert sport-you-don't-play here), right now you're likely not a novelist.

It's OK. Really. You will be.

Most writers say that rule 1 of writing has to be "write" or "butt in chair." I disagree. Before you can put your butt in that chair and start writing, you have to let go of the illusion of perfection. What you are writing might suck. The closer you are to your first day writing, the more likely you are to suck. BUT you can look at it the other way: the farther you move from square one, the less likely you are to suck. But it's not time that takes you from square one; it's writing those words.

When I watch kids' TV with my daughter, I find it amusing and sad that so many of those shows tried to teach us lessons that didn't sink in. One of these lessons is that you're not going to be perfect the minute you try something. You have to practice. I have to remind my daughter time and time again that she's not going to

¹ I am not a doctor nor a personal trainer- take my running metaphor for what it is, and talk to a professional if you want to start running for real.

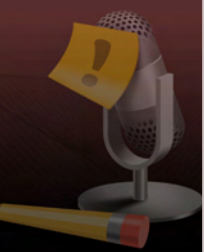


be perfect when she tries something the first time. And then I have to remind myself that when I start something new, and I have to tell my listeners that when they tell me they're discouraged.

You will never be perfect. Never. You will eventually finish stories and novels and achieve a sense of accomplishment, of satisfaction, even. You'll start to get confident in your work. But the story will never appear on the page the same way it did in your head. And that's OK.

It happens to all of us. Your job is to tell the story in the best way you can. When you're done, put it down and write something else. You can edit later. Right now you're just worrying about letting go of your perfect shining image of the story in your head, sitting down, and writing it. And if it sucks, so what? Your next story will be better.

I have faith in you. The day you accept that your writing is allowed to suck is your first day of being a writer- the day you set yourself free.



Interlude: Excuses 1

I got up too late.

I am blocked.

I have a baby.

I have a kid.

I have lots of kids.

I have a spouse.

My mom/dad/pastor/sister/brother/kid/spouse doesn't think I could/should do this.

I have a stressful job.

My commute is too long.

That show I like is on tonight.

I have errands to run.

I just want to take it easy tonight.

I just want to sleep in.

I'm hungry.

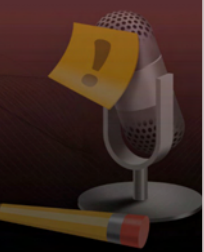
It's too noisy.

It's too quiet.

My desk is messy.

It's too dark.

The cat/dog/hamster won't leave me alone.



Chapter 2: Butt in Chair

Beginning writers feel that there's got to be a secret. Some secret, some magic bullet, some blessing from an ancient shaman. They believe that successful writers must have been hit with a meteor or had a near-death experience. There's something that has to be hidden from them when it comes to success in writing.

This is one of the biggest reasons we stop writing. We get frustrated and feel like we're on the outside looking in. We clump writers into two worlds: We and They. We are the wanna-bes and They are the published. We want to know the secret, They already do.

AND THEY ARE KEEPING IT FROM US.

And when We hear the secret, it's so simple We call shenanigans. We are completely convinced that it's not true. It can't be that easy. But it is.

Crane your head around. Look down. See your butt? It may be bigger than you like, or bony, or not quite there, but it's a good butt, as it's served you well throughout the years. The butt has supported you in your sitting efforts, silently, steadfastly. It has supported you in your TV watching, your movie watching, your reading, your work, your break time, while sitting on the floor to play with your kids or pets, while nursing your baby, that time you had to wait outside the principal's office, and countless other times.

The butt is your unsung hero. And it is half of the equation of the magic bullet to writing.

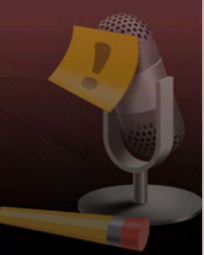
Now look at your desk. Or your couch. Or your kitchen table. Somewhere there is a place for you to put that butt. Make it a comfortable place. Some place where your butt's best friend, your back, will also be supported. Put your butt down in said comfy place.

Is it there? Good. Now. You're ready.

Write.

I'll give you a moment to recover. I know it's a lightning bolt of information. You might deny it, like the moon landing. Somewhere NASA has a secret room where they filmed the whole hoax. In the same building is the drug that they give really good writers, not to mention the books that they get all their best ideas from. (We'll talk about ideas in a later chapter.)

What people don't want to hear- and I will fully admit I don't want to hear it either- is that books are written a little bit at a time. You don't sit down for a crazy weekend and pound out The Great [insert your country here] Novel. It's a long haul.



It requires not only butt in chair, but daily butt in chair.

Ideally you want to write a certain amount of time or a certain number of pages or words a day. But if that daunts you, just try to write every day. Sit down and write, 100 words, 250 words (that's one page to Standard Manuscript Format, also something we'll cover later), 1000 words. Whatever. Keep momentum going, keep your body and mind remembering that writing is something we do every day.

The biggest excuse that people don't write is lack of time. That is a lie. If you have time to watch TV, or to go out with friends, or have a beer after work, or read the newspaper, then you have time to write. If you blog, you have time to write. No, the real reason you don't write is that you haven't made it habit. How many things in your life are habits? Do you ever say, "I don't have enough time to brush my teeth?" How about, "I don't have enough time to make coffee/tea in the morning?" And yes, some smart alecks among you will be saying, "I say that all the time if I'm running late/too busy," but honestly, it's a habit, you do it without thinking about it, and if you made writing a habit, then you'd do that too.

And some of you are now complaining that sure, brushing your teeth takes five minutes (you do floss, right?) and coffee takes two minutes, while writing takes much more. And to that I say you're taking me too literally and you need to hush. The point is not the time involved. You also have habits of television watching, lunch breaks, exercise, chores, lots of things you do regularly that take time and you rarely consider NOT doing them.

Because they need to get done. They should get done. (You know where I'm going with this, right?) You should be writing.

Forget the excuses. Carve out 15-30 minutes a day. Get up earlier. Stay up later. Eat lunch faster. Skip one of your evening habits and use that time to write instead (the VCR and the DVR are great inventions for writers. You no longer can use the excuse, "I can't write, The Office is on.")

Put your butt in the chair.



Interlude: Excuses 2

THE ULTIMATE WRITING EXCUSE AND ITS TRANSLATIONS

I don't have time.

Translation: media 1

I would rather watch television.

Translation: media 2

I would rather play video games.

Translation: social

I would rather go out with my friends.

Translation: cat lady

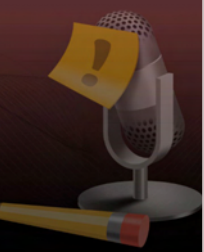
I would rather play with my cats.

Translation: neat freak

I would rather clean my house.

Ultimate translation:

There is something in my life more important than writing.



Chapter 3: Ideas are EASY. Work is HARD

Ask any pro writer and she'll tell you about someone who's approached her saying that he has the best idea ever, that it's unlike any book out there, that he thinks it will revolutionize fiction, and all he needs is a pro writer to help him. So if he gives her his idea, she can write it and they can split the profits.

If you ask any aspiring writer why they don't join a writer's group or a workshop, and inevitably one of them will say he is afraid to do so because he's worried someone will steal his ideas. There are people who even get to the point of having fiction good enough to submit, but they won't because they're convinced the agents and editors will steal their ideas, give the idea to one of their authors, and have them rewrite it.

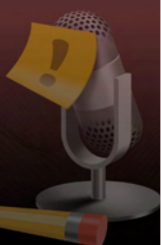
These writers see the world through different goggles than the rest of us. Every idea they have is a gold nugget dug from underneath a pile of rubble, and every other writer is a trench coated malevolent figure hiding in the alley, ready to pull out a shotgun to steal their idea and use it as their own. The ideas are such precious gems they don't want to ever share it with anyone else. Ever. If they can't leap from unknown, unsubmitted author to J.K. Rowling status, then no one deserves to see their brilliance. The last thing I'll say about these people is that they also seem to hold one idea close. If they can't turn their one idea into a bestselling book or award winning story, then they might as well give up as a writer because they'll never get another one as good.

And I am here to tell you that all of the above is frightened blathering based on fear, lack of information, and lack of self-confidence. I can't deal with two of those- they're yours to deal with. I hope that I can help, but I can't fix them. That's you.

But the whole lack of information thing. Yeah. I got your back there. Read on.

Always remember that ideas are easy. Implementation is hard. The brain works a bit like a muscle; you can't literally work it out, but you the more you implement ideas, the more ideas you'll get. It's not like a bucket that once you empty it's empty forever. Think if your brain like a plant; it flowers, and then you trim off the flower to encourage more blooms.

After I finish a project, my conscious mind thinks, "Well! I'm glad that's over! Boy, a break sure would be nice right now." And at the same time, my subconscious mind is saying, "HAH, aren't you an idiot. Now that you got that idea out of my way, here comes three more I've been working on when you haven't been paying attention."



On a legal level (please note IANAL - I Am Not A Lawyer - applies to all legal advice in this document) you have not a leg to stand on in court if someone “steals” your idea. While text is copyrightable, and plagiarism is against the law, you can’t put a copyright on an idea. Here’s the tough love: **your ideas are not pretty unique snowflakes**. Others have had them. Others will have them. Still others are having them *right now*, and they are writing them while you fret, delay, and do everything but write.

Now for the non-tough love: your ideas aren’t snowflakes, but the way you write them will be. Every idea has root in something else. How many vampire romances are published? How many craggy old officer dragged back into work because of one more mission? If you give a basic plotline to a group of 70 people and tell them to write it, you will come up with 70 different stories.

Writing is hard. Sitting down and figuring out where to start, what POV to use, whether to do a short story, novella, novel, or epic trilogy, all are harder than forming an idea. And then sitting down to write a page, five pages, 1000 words, or more, a day, every day till it’s done, then editing, then handing it to a first reader, then editing again, then submitting... it’s all more work than, “Wouldn’t it be cool if...”

When you get an idea, do something about it. It will either work, or it won’t. But doing something gives you experience, it gives you more than you had before. And if it sucks, then you can always go back when you have more experience and edit it. But don’t be afraid someone else will steal it. Don’t be afraid that it won’t be perfect (here’s a hint- it won’t. It never is. It’s a reality of the creative life. We accept it and do write the thing anyway.) And don’t be afraid of failing. Because if you fail, not much bad happens. We’ll talk about that more later.

Stop holding onto your ideas. Think of them like seeds. Seeds do nothing in their packets- you gotta plant them.

