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Here's What No One Tells You About Writing For A Living

Published on May 7, 2018



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The [platitudes](#) are everywhere. From the ready-for-a-fridge-magnet Hemingway quote about sitting down at a typewriter and bleeding to experts on LinkedIn talking about "content creators" and "engagement" the way Millennial YouTubers talk about video games and makeup tips, there's no shortage of advice and encouragement for those stupid – or worse, narcissistic – enough to pursue writing as a career. *Make your own hours. See your name in print. Do what you love. Reach an audience of millions.* The promises, both explicit and implied, are as often made by fly-by-nights and start-ups as they are by media behemoths... and as equally disingenuous.

Promises *per se* aren't terribly dangerous or destructive: it's belief in them that leads people astray. Friedrich Nietzsche may not have had writers in mind when he wrote that "faith makes blessed under certain circumstances, that blessedness does not make of a fixed idea a true idea, that faith moves no mountains but puts mountains where there are none: a quick walk through a madhouse enlightens one sufficiently about this," but his aphoristic arrows never fail to strike where they are most needed.

What no one tells you about writing for a living is that there are thousands of hack writers – and hack editors – who have permanently disfigured writing as a career landscape by either working for next to nothing, thus lowering the employer-perceived value of [writing as a profession](#), or by churning out absolute fucking garbage on mutual admiration platforms like Medium, which are less about ability and quality than they are about the democratization of



same: increasing the amount of noise to signal and filling the world with bad writing. What no one tells you is that although good writers are obvious, bad writers are ubiquitous, and contrary to popular belief, most companies recognize that *quantity* has a quality of its own and would rather pay 10 bad writers \$10 each for an article – excuse me, "content" – than pay one good writer \$100 for one. Thousands of would-be writers perpetuate this: they eagerly lap up the attention and the 3-figure paychecks, lowering the bar for everyone. Others are so committed to the idea that writing is like *A Star Is Born* – that their genius has simply to be discovered – that they will work for "exposure" and think themselves all the more authentic for suffering for art. To some degree, identity has always been configured with performance of one kind or another – I will dispense with critical theory for now – but the 21st century has amplified that need for validation, convincing millions of untalented dilettantes not only that the world around them is their audience, but that they have some kind divine calling to perform for that audience: that their opinion and their ability to express it is objectively and inherently *valuable*. Meanwhile, their poorly-executed prose fills the "content" needs of media sites who, beginning to buckle under the weight of having started vanity projects after wasting venture capital on beanbag chairs and pinball machines for their community office space, are reduced to trying to survive with programmatic ads or YouTube income to keep their flickering lights and dreams from going dark as Facebook strangles their reach. What no one will tell you is that writing for money means that you're entering a marketplace filled with low bidders, desperate arts graduates, and companies who would rather pay some "writer" in India or the Philippines who not only won't complain about a \$5.00 a day salary, but will continue to churn out content even when the PayPal payments are delayed for days, weeks, months...forever. That's not hyperbole: I can name a dozen ostensibly American sites off the top of my head who are using that very business model even as I type this.

Someone once wrote, "choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life." That's nonsense. Choose a job you love and eventually you will come to hate some aspect of it. Eventually you'll gain enough experience to realize that there is always tedium, toil, and labor. This is reflected in language itself. The word essay is derived from the French *essayer*, which means "to try," and is related to the word assay, which relates to the testing of materials for purity. Both words come from the Latin *exagium*, which means weighing or weight. What no one tells you about writing for a living is that you will find it trying. You will find it testing. You will find that it has a weight and you will have to figure out if there's anything in it for you. You will find that critics, clients, collaborators, colleagues, and editors all come with their own banal microdramas and trials. On a good day, you'll find specks of gold in the dross. On a bad day, you'll get drunk and ramble on Twitter.

Professionally, I've written everything from pornographic copy (don't ask) to high level "outsourced" academic work to [song lyrics](#) to [articles](#) that helped launch careers and change lives. I've also developed theories that I do not own, made discoveries I cannot claim, and created characters that, by terms of



What nobody tells you about writing for a living is that these losses come with the territory and that, as "just the writer," some paychecks are intended to cover the cost of silence, so you'd better make sure you charge accordingly.

What nobody tells you about writing for a living is that you're a method and means of production. In digital media, you're a "content creator," though some slightly more idealistic editors or CEOs might call you a "storyteller." As such, you're a lot closer to Don Draper than Joseph Campbell. In print, you're still a content creator, but at least you'll have the opportunity to see your work made tangible in the form of books with publisher remainder marks stacked up at whatever brick-and-mortar stores still remain. What nobody tells you about writing for a living is that you'll be expected to write about things you don't believe in, inflate ideas that you know are inherently weak and flawed, and flatter icons and institutions that you find contemptible. If you have trouble embracing hypocrisy as a profession, I advise you to read Balzac's *Père Goriot* and *Lost Illusions*. For a quicker read, Louis Lapham's *Rules of Influence* makes for fine counsel and consolation.

The promise of writing for a living is that, like all things done for a living, it will eventually grind you down in ways you can't fully appreciate until your nose is against the stone. I've had my share of successes, but I can't say I've ever *enjoyed* them. I feel a certain relief when I finish something, whether for myself or a client, but rarely anything more than relief. That may be my temperament, but I suspect that it's more widespread than that.

What nobody tells you amidst the promises and assurances is that writing for a living is often painful, invariably frustrating, and only very rarely rewarding. A more optimistic man might include something here about the hidden rewards of this profession, but I don't want to disappoint you. It's not that sitting down at a computer or typewriter or pile of bar napkins and writing is terribly difficult. It's that doing it in the face of fear, self-doubt, frustration, and financial uncertainty can freeze even the most intrepid of spirits into silence; into blank white pages.

Take those fears and frustrations and write them down. It doesn't get easier, but you will get used to it.



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Eric Zimmerman - MSHRM

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Human Resources Business Partner at Goodwill Industries of South Mississippi

I read the quote in Lee Iaccoca's autobiography. It stayed with me since 2001. I wrote for a couple small local papers for a few years. Mainly sports background on specific popular local semi pro athletes. Most recently, I covered local MMA fights. Pouring 8 hours into interviews and fight coverage of an article...\$15. Sitting at the table ringside with the fight judges...p... See more

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Thank you for the kind words, Eric.

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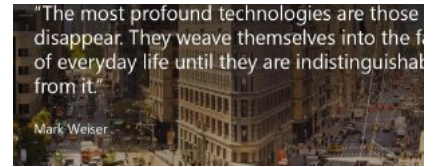
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