

Tip #15. Interrogate yourself

Why are you writing?

It's a simple sentence and yet one that most aspiring writers will actively shy away from. Why? We are wordsmiths are we not? And yet somehow we either cannot, or will not, reduce our writerly instincts to written words.

If this is you, then I would sincerely encourage you to bin your fears, grab a torch, and explore this territory: if you don't know what you're looking for, how will you know when you find it? If you don't know what you're trying to create, how will you know if it measures up? By what standard will you judge it?

As in every other aspect of our lives, self-awareness begins with self-analysis. Find out what it is that turns you on about writing. What do you cherish in other author's works? And why?

Ask yourself as many questions about your writing as you feel you need in order to create a solid foundation from which to work. Don't overthink it. Give yourself a deadline, say one hour, to come up with a basic framework of why you want to write and what you're hoping to achieve – firstly with your writing life in general and then with the particular story you're working on now.

It sounds trite, but "Have a goal; WRITE it down" is possibly the single most helpful thing you'll ever do as a writer.

At risk of belabouring the point, the 'gym bunny' who regularly clocks in and out of their local Virgin Active without a clear understanding of why they're going to gym in the first place is wasting a large chunk of their time, or at the very least being totally inefficient. Are they there to lose weight? Or to build strength? To look good, or reduce their cholesterol levels? Knowing this will dictate training techniques and, in turn, garner better results.

This writing interrogation and outcome will be different for everyone. It will probably be hard. It might even hurt a little but it will pay huge dividends if you do it properly: i.e. honestly.

Before tackling my first book, Zululand Snow, I gritted my teeth and tried to analyse, firstly why I wanted to write? And secondly, what I wanted to achieve with this story. To hone in on the latter I found it especially helpful to list the writing nuts and bolts that matter to me. Not only the things I like, but also the things I don't enjoy in other people's writing. This was a dynamic process and the results were never set in stone. I returned frequently to these guiding principles throughout my many drafts, adding some and removing others, until I had it more or less nailed down.

In no particular order, my list of "Commandments" looked something like this (yours will probably be different):

Things to strive for

- An intriguing opening, forcing the reader to read on
- Excellent characterisation
- The story / action is visible to the reader (i.e. show the story don't tell it)
- Original / fresh turn of phrase / metaphor
- Immediacy
- Rising tension throughout the chapter / scene
- Evoking the reader's emotions
- A silent author
- Oblique dialogue
- Less is more
- Clear Point of View (POV)

Things to avoid at all cost

- Interrupting the readers experience
- Reader's attention flagging
- The Authors voice telling instead of showing the story (i.e offstage action / narration)

- Overused / clichéd phrase
- Convenient coincidence
- Stereotypical characters
- lazy writing
- Flagging tension
- Overuse of adverbs and adjectives
- Saying the same thing twice i.e. $1 + 1 = 1/2$
- Wandering POV

Without a doubt, I didn't hit all these targets. Without question, I should have added a few 'story specific/emotional' targets to aim for as well, but this simple list kept me going when the road got bumpy and my writing wandered. In the final analysis, it helped me get that elusive first book into print.