

Tip #16. Sweat Equity

AB De Villiers is arguably the best batsman in the world at present. How does he do it? Does he simply play as many cricket matches as possible, to maximise his 'real' time at the crease? No, is the simple answer. While plenty of match-time is crucial to his success, so is plenty of practice. Few will get to see him perfecting his stroke play in training; no one will cheer when he plays a magnificent cover drive, or an outrageous sweep shot from the nets. But he does it anyway. Why? To improve his 'muscle memory': to hone his instincts and sharpen his reflexes.

Now ask yourself why writing should be any different? What makes writers so special that they can become literary athletes without exercise? The answer is nothing. Yet few writers, even seasoned ones, are prepared to exercise their literary muscles. Many are content to simply learn craft techniques so that they can try them out come competition time, or give them a whirl in their new novel. After all, why waste time writing words that will never get read, never get judged, never get praised. Surely one's writing time can be more productively spent engaged in 'actual' writing!

To be fair, there's no substitute for 'actual' writing for an 'actual' audience, but that's no reason to dismiss all thoughts of training. Training 'done right' can be extremely beneficial. The key, in my humble opinion, is to keep your writing training short and focussed. If you're new to the idea, try this. Set aside 15 minutes a day (be strict; time yourself, not a second more!) and tackle one of the following:

1. Keep a box of magazine or newspaper clippings (pictures/paragraphs/headlines etc). Grab one at random and go! You've got fifteen minutes to write a story about it.
2. Write a quick scene. Now re-write it from another perspective (another character, a passing dog or maybe the leaf on a tree). Compare them. Decide which one is better.
3. Eavesdrop on a conversation, perhaps nothing more than a single spoken sentence. Write a story culminating in that sentence.
4. Write a 3-way, conflict-laden dialogue, without using speech identifiers (i.e. 'he said, she said, Bob said). You're trying to develop a unique 'voice' for each character, such that a reader can follow the conversation easily.
5. Select a random one page article or a page from a novel and edit it to make it stronger. At the end of 15 minutes, decide whether or not you succeeded. Investigate why/ why not.
6. Take a poem or an excerpt from Shakespeare and condense it into a couple of lines.

This last one was a challenge I was set as part of a job application for an ad agency. We had to distil the following excerpt from Macbeth into its 'purest' message as we saw it.

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

My attempt looked something like this. (I didn't land the job! But I was pretty happy with it nonetheless):

"On the universal stage our life's spark is not essential,
in a word, inconsequential."

There are umpteen writing exercises out there. Why not try a few, or make up your own. It can't hurt...or, not that much!