

the **Writer**

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STEP BY STEP

10

INGREDIENTS
OF A GRIPPING
THRILLER p. 24

Advice and inspiration for today's writer

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GET Connected GET Published

SPECIAL SECTION

Reach out and sharpen your writing with expert advice in these key areas p. 27

- Writing organizations
- Conferences
- Workshops
- Online courses
- Low-res MFAs
- Freelance editors
- Multimedia resources



5 PROVEN WAYS to break writer's block p. 22

FREELANCING

Smart tips to manage your time and boost your income p. 44

INTERVIEW

Award-winning novelist Lee Smith on blending craft and storytelling p. 18



MEENA ALEXANDER

Gut instinct

"Follow your gut. Don't be afraid to push a thought or a feeling as far as it needs to go. At the same time, be in awe at the power of words, give them their due." p. 66

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Vol. 122 • Issue 4

How to CHOOSE an online writing course

It's a flexible stay-at-home option for writers who wish to build knowledge, get inspired, or simply explore new paths

By Karen M. Lynch

I'M AN ONLINE-writing-class junkie. In the last three years, I've taken six such classes, amounting to 57 cumulative weeks of learning. I can't get enough of the written lectures, the creative assignments, and the critique from professional instructors. It's just a matter of time before I sign up for my next fix.

You can increase your writing abilities in any writing class, acquiring business acumen, networking with like-minded professionals, and, one hopes, achieving some financial gain as a result. Yet *online* writing classes offer an added benefit you can't get with "brick and mortar" classes: convenience.

Students taking online classes can live anywhere and aren't required to meet weekly at a set time. Each individual works at his or her own pace, focusing on the lessons and completing the assignments any hour of the day, any day of the week.

Julia Novak, a full-time mother and part-time work-at-home consultant, has taken two online classes and benefited from the flexibility they offered. "I worked [on the course] most often when my kids were in school or on weekends," Novak says.

Whether you're a freelancer working from home, a staff writer hoping to further your career, or a nonprofessional writer who puts pen to paper during off hours, an online writing class could be

the kick in the pants you need to keep moving your writing forward.

"I wanted to revisit writing as a paying career," Novak says. "I was looking for someone to hold me accountable for writing on a regular basis."

Joelle Klein, a writer from Denver, has also taken two online writing classes. "I love writing but can become overwhelmed or lazy and not get around to finishing things or acting on my ideas," she says. "Taking a class for six weeks, and knowing that I was going to have a professional review my work, was great motivation for me."

There are online course offerings for both beginning freelancers and seasoned journalists. But how do you confidently select the one that's best for you? Here's what you need to do:

Assess your writing ability

If you lack a degree in writing or journalism, have never written professionally, or are not sure you have what it

takes to get paid for your work, revisiting the basics of grammar, punctuation and composition is best.

"If someone already possesses writing talent, targeted classes—such as those on subjects such as magazine and newspaper writing, writing the query letter, and essay writing—are all good," explains Kerri Fivecoat-Campbell, an award-winning author who teaches classes for writers online and at the college level. Otherwise, it's best to brush up on the basics of the written word.

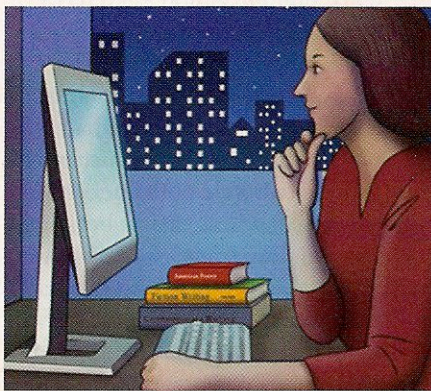
Fortunately, online classes offer anonymity; you and your teacher are the only ones who need to know you're focusing on rudimentary skills. So you have nothing to lose by being honest with yourself and doing what you need to do in order to write well.

Consider a broad focus

When I began writing professionally in 2006, I took a class that explored both fiction and nonfiction. For 28 weeks I experimented with genre, rehearsed some writing fundamentals, discovered my strengths, and looked for my voice. I stretched and pushed and stretched some more and realized, after months of hard work, that I truly wanted to dive into nonfiction magazine writing.

Creative writing and exploratory courses offer you the ability to examine the multitude of paths you can venture down as a writer.

If you can't settle on one class as you peruse course offerings, find one that



Amrane Kanelo

encompasses all of your interests. Or, make a list of the ones that resonate with you the most. Does one seem like a prerequisite for the others? That's the logical starting point for you.

Explore niches or genres

If you've been writing for a while, or are blessed with a sense of what you want to write, you'll find targeted courses appropriate. There are genre-specific courses that will help you focus and commit to one type of writing or explore a niche you're drawn to.

Caren Chesler, of Ocean Grove, N.J., has been a journalist for 20 years, having spent half her career as a general news reporter and half as a business reporter. "Selling more creative writing is something that interests me," Chesler says. So she took a Mediabistro.com course, "Personal Essay Writing," with the hope of writing some salable essays. "In the class, I improved the essays I had and was able to write more essays, which I enjoy doing, immensely, whether I sell them or not."

Maybe you've always wanted to become a screenwriter, write a romance novel or children's book, or become a travel writer. Maybe you've considered food writing, book reviewing or blogging. Genre-specific classes allow you to delve into a particular field—possibly the field of your dreams—before quitting your day job.

Make a business decision

If you're a freelancer trying to get published, a novelist trying to sell a manuscript, or a nonfiction writer trying to develop a platform, you know firsthand that it takes more than creative talent to be successful. Online classes are available to help you develop good story ideas, write pitches or book proposals that appeal to publishers and editors, or learn how to promote yourself as a freelancer. You can't beat the writing-related business acumen you acquire in classes like these.

When I began writing articles, I had a foggy idea of how to sell my work, but I wanted clarity. I took the "Crafting the Query" class with Diane Benson Harrington, through FreelanceSuccess.com. With few national clips, however, it was

tough breaking into features and department pieces. I took Christina Katz's course "Writing and Publishing the Short Stuff," which focused on selling fillers and front-of-the-book pieces. As I started to make sales, I signed up for Harrington's "Kick Butt Query" class, again through FreelanceSuccess.com, and began landing feature assignments.

Susan Johnston, from Cambridge, Mass., freelanced part time for years before going full time last year. Shortly thereafter, she took The Renegade Writer's class with Gwen Moran called "Build the Freelance Writing Business You Want." "I knew there was more I could do to boost my income and become more efficient," Johnston says. "This class gave me the confidence to replace a client that I knew wasn't right for me. It got me thinking about how I present myself as a writer. It gave me strategies for finding publications and clients to pitch."

Weigh the time commitment

Online writing classes run anywhere from four to 28 weeks; most have weekly lessons and assignments. Your responsibilities, preferred pace and current workload should dictate how much time you can dedicate to a class. Consider the fact that the more you put into an online writing class, the more you'll get out of it.

You might need to work daily for a four-week course to maximize your learning. Shorter classes are great for someone with plenty of time on their hands and a desire to speed up their learning. A 12-week class offers more flexibility, perfect for those with other time commitments and restraints. A longer class spreads the learning out over time and allows for the busiest writer to complete the assignments.

Analyze the cost benefit

Fees for online classes run from \$99 to \$610; longer classes typically cost more. (I'm not including those offered at colleges and universities in the latter figure. Many institutions of higher learning offer credit and noncredit online writing courses as well; you'll pay more for them, but if an advanced degree or certificate is one of your goals,

RESOURCES

THERE ARE a number of credible Web sites specifically for writers that offer an array of online classes. To give you more of a taste of what's available, consider the following, and check the Web sites for more details:

- "Get Published in Magazines," with Linda Formichelli of The Renegade Writer (www.therenegadewriter.com)
- "Grammar, Punctuation and Meaning," at Mediabistro (www.mediabistro.com)
- "Level 1 Fiction Writing class," at Gotham Writers' Workshop (www.writingclasses.com)
- "Platform 101: Discover Your Writing Specialty," at Christina Katz, The Writer Mama (www.christinakatz.com)

they might be worth exploring.)

Some programs have an additional fee for e-mail support or coaching. Some writers consider this unnecessary, while others love to have their instructors easily accessible and able to give them more one-on-one attention.

You'll spend little else on an online class. Most writers are already equipped with a computer with Internet access and a printer. Some classes may require the purchase of an additional book. (Remember, these are tax-deductible business expenses for those in the business of writing.) But you'll have no transportation worries, and you'll sure save money on gas.

Still wondering if it is worth the money? Consider this: To date, I've spent \$1,144 on online writing classes. I've more than doubled my investment in wages earned for pieces I crafted in those classes. Technically, everything I've sold since my first class should factor into that return, because nothing I've learned has gone to waste.

Karen M. Lynch

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