

Why did you enrol?

For writing is indeed a business, like any other. Indeed, most students tell us that they have enrolled for this course because they want to make money. Many believe it is an easy way to make money. It isn't.

Freelance articles and stories in United Kingdom papers and magazines are not well paid. The pay is often no more than it was twenty years ago – inflation or no inflation. So writing is not a get-rich-quick scheme.

Students sometimes tell us that they want “to give up work and live by the pen”. Let us say at once that this is an unlikely prospect. Even to get into print is increasingly difficult these days, with the decline in reading, the closing down of a number of papers and magazines, the rise of TV and videos.

Your chance of success

You may of course prove to be one of the 20% of students who make themselves a corner in writing.

You might even be the Jackie Collins or Wilbur Smith of the 1990's – or strike gold with a Mills and Boon. The only way you can find out whether you have what it takes is to try: to write and write, to work hard, and not to be deterred by rejection slips.

All sorts of people enrol for this course, and their motives are almost as numerous as they are. Some have a 'mission' or a gripe: they want to write in order to put a certain idea over to the world. This type of motivation does not usually make for success. Our tutors find that often the most successful students are women secretaries and teachers, who seem to take well to learning journalistic techniques. The degree of life experience does not seem to be a factor. Highly qualified people with fascinating C.V.'s sometimes do not prove malleable enough to produce what editors want to buy.

All of which means that we cannot predict any student's progress. If we believe that you will not make it, we will try to tell you at the start. But our tutors report that often a student whom they did not initially think promising has succeeded through hard work, by following guidance and perhaps above all, by astute marketing.

Why do students drop out?

It is almost as much a thrill for the tutor as for the student when an article is accepted. Of course, that student may have proved successful anyway – but we like to feel we have had some hand in their success.

Most students start off with high enthusiasm, but you might be surprised to learn the low percentage who actually complete the course.

Why is this?

Occasionally a tutor is driven to write personally to enquire of a good student why he dropped out. The answer is frequently, "I didn't know it was going to be such hard work", "I didn't think I would have to ..." or "I find I just don't have the time".

So be under no illusions, this course is tough and demanding. Even experienced and successful writers can profit from it, the study it entails can only improve anyone's work, but we can only teach you what *not* to do, and stimulate you to *write*. We can give you the tips and techniques that will be short cuts towards success. Your course saves you time by doing some of the background work for you, but make no mistake, 90% of the work must come from YOU, the student.

WHAT THIS COURSE CAN DO FOR YOU, AND WHAT YOU MUST DO FOR YOURSELF

Let us repeat – we cannot teach you how to write if you have no talent for it.

One can only be taught to write as one can be taught to paint, or to play a musical instrument. We can give potential writers the basic techniques. We can suggest, counsel, encourage and discourage. We can tell you what is wrong with your work, and what is right with it. But we cannot WRITE for you.

If you have that “spark”, you may succeed in swimming through the oceans of chance to success. But if there is no “spark”, nothing the tutor can do will light it.

If you feel that you have this “spark” and most probably you do, or you would not have put down good money to enrol in this course, do not confuse it with inspiration. Never sit waiting to be grabbed by some supernatural force. Writing, unfortunately, doesn't happen that way.

The need for self-discipline

"I got carried away – I just had to write it." Yes, this does happen to writers, but even when it does, you still have to struggle with that blank sheet of paper in your typewriter.

You have to think, draft, block out, write, rewrite, and then cut, cut and cut again to edit your work until you almost hate what was originally conceived with such love.

Those who make it to the top in writing are often those who, because they have worked as journalists or advertising copy-writers, have been forced to write every day, whether they felt like it or not, inspiration or no inspiration, rain or shine. Because they earned their daily bread by their pen, they gained a form of discipline without which no writer is likely to succeed. Because their copy had to be ready to meet a deadline, they had to develop habits of working.

For instance, it's a stringent discipline to cut your own work to a certain wordage. For the true writer, it's like cutting out part of one's very heart, but it must be done.

One of our best tutors who was a copywriter for many years says that his best training for writing the truly disciplined article and leaving all self-indulgence aside had to cut a 45-second radio commercial down to 15 seconds timing. "Not a word, not a single syllable must be wasted; yet the pith of the thinking must be kept".

Not 'in the mood'?

Even if you are not in the mood, it helps to sit down and write something, anything, even if you know it is not right. For when you come back to your desk feeling in just the mood to tackle it, you will have something to get your teeth into right away, something to tear apart and re-write.

Get into the habit of writing something every day. Set your own goals, but be realistic. Force yourself to write, a letter to your local paper, a description of some scene, or of your day if you are not feeling particularly creative. You will find that almost everything you write comes as grist to the mill. There will be a use for it, at some time in the future, if only to spark off new ideas.

Getting 'the knack'

Many students believe that once they have got the knack then all they need is a computer (or like Roald Dahl a pad of scribbling paper and felt-covered board!), and away they go. Certainly, first you will need to develop that, knack, but it is only developed by self-discipline, perseverance and hard work. First you need to be able and willing to learn. You need to come to this course with no preconceived ideas, without prejudice as to subject matter and market.

"I will only write for the Readers Digest". We have heard this from more than one student. But the Readers Digest does not take unsolicited contributions. It is a digest of the best journalism from every corner of the world, and its local content is directly commissioned. It would be unrealistic to believe you can break into it by sheer force of your rhetoric. Mind you, it is an excellent and well-paying market for its short 'excerpts'!

Finding your own direction

One thing that our tutors have learnt is that many students are not sure at the start in which direction they wish to move.

Or on the other hand, some may choose the wrong direction; they may believe they want to write romantic fiction, yet it is only by the process of trial and error, and through the guidance of their tutor, that they discover their true metier.

We have in mind one student who wanted to write illustrated reportage features. She produced sound work, but it lacked something, and was neither sensational enough for GQ nor 'feminine' enough for Woman's Weekly. The rejection slips piled up. Then a short story she had produced simply as an 'exercise' proved so delightful that her-tutor suggested she submit it to a certain magazine, and since then she has had easily half-a-dozen stories of her very personal type used by this market.

The lesson? Don't be too sure of your aims. Be willing to change direction.

An easy solution?

A student wrote to us recently, "I have tried for years to get into print, with no success. I know you people will have the easy solution". Unfortunately, we don't, because there is no easy solution.

Writing is darned hard work. It only looks easy from where the reader is sitting.

Writing success takes:

Talent – or at least skill in writing.

Good, sound English – with adequate spelling, grammar, construction.

Knowledge of the 'tricks of the trade' – journalistic techniques and marketing skills.
(This is the area in which the Course particularly helps you)

and above all, something to say.

Your tasks

There is no work in which you are more "the boss" than writing. No-one tells you what to do – though your tutor and those friends who read your work will advise, approve and disapprove – but what you produce in the end is yours and yours alone.

- You do not only have to write.
- You have to re-write and edit. That can prove even more tricky.
- You have to read, learn and inwardly digest. Reading the successful work of others lets you see what makes it successful.
- You have to learn the tricks – from those who have been through the mill themselves, or, of course, from a writing course like this one, which helps you to take short cuts.
- You have to know the local markets.