

SESSION 1: THE TALENT MYTH

Part 1: Writing Lesson:

BUSTING THE TALENT MYTH

“Everything improves with practice and creativity is no different.”

– Carolyn Enting, Unleash Your Inner Artist

People often walk into the first session of a writing course with a certain belief at the back of their minds, and it’s there as a ready justification for not succeeding as a writer. If they don’t achieve their writing goals, they can say, “Well, I guess I just wasn’t talented enough”, and retire with dignity.

After all, we are entranced by people on television or YouTube singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, performing gymnastics, succeeding at sports; we know people who can fix anything or have a magic touch or seem able to encourage or inspire others when no-one else can, and we often conclude that these people are just naturally good at whatever it is that they are doing. They were born that way. They’re ‘talented’.

TALENT IS NOT A ‘THING’

What I find interesting is the way we use the word ‘talent’. We tend to think of talent as something that we *have*. Language implies that it's a ‘thing’, like a pair of red socks or a bag of apples, and either you have it or you don't. But this is

misleading because the word 'talent' is a *nominalisation*. 'Nominal' means 'existing in name only'; a nominalisation is actually a disguised verb. Other examples are words like 'relationship' and 'problem'. We don't 'have' a relationship like we 'have' a car; we don't 'have' a problem like we 'have' a pair of red socks. We *DO* them rather than *having* them; we *relate* and we '*problematise*'. (Responding thoughtfully to something rather than reacting might result in us finding ourselves viewing the issue as an acceptable part of life, or even as an opportunity).



Likewise with talent. People don't 'have' talent – it's NOT a mysterious gift of the gods; people *DO* talent.

Since it's not a question of being lucky enough to *have* talent, but of *doing* talent, the important question, therefore, is:

What do 'talented' people do?

And of particular interest to us: *What are 'talented' WRITERS doing?*

Because if it's just a question of doing something differently, anyone can 'have' talent. You just do what the so-called 'talented' people are doing. So... what are they doing?

Every 'talent' breaks down to a set of critical actions and attitudes. You've probably noticed that certain groups of people have particular beliefs, attitudes and behaviours in common. For example, top-performing athletes work with a coach, put

many hours into training (they are often getting out of bed while we are rolling over for another snooze), are careful with their diet, deliberately choose their attitude, and use strategies such as visualisation (they play the ‘mental game’ as well as the physical game). Most successful businesspeople have mentors or coaches, are goal-setters, follow their hunches, work long hours, and are very committed – even driven. Those who have mastered a troublesome habit, or even an addiction, have usually experienced a shift in values that gives their intention extra purpose, like a pregnancy precipitating the decision to quit smoking...

Today’s research into human performance has revealed that by modelling on success, we can replicate others’ results in our own lives. NLP, or Neuro-Linguistic Programming, is one of the fields of study that has blasted a trail in this area, and one of the presuppositions of NLP is, *“If it’s possible in the world, it’s possible for me; it’s only a question of HOW... and ‘hows’ can be learned.”*

So... every ‘talent’ breaks down to a set of critical actions and attitudes, and if you adopt these behaviours you, too, can produce ‘talent’ in that area.

Outrageous statements? You’ve probably heard this expression:

1% inspiration

99% perspiration

Let me call on some writing colleagues to back up what I’ve been saying:

American writer, seller of magazine articles and writing tutor, **Duane Newcombe**, says: “To sell your writing today you need 90% desire and 10% talent.”

Dan Millman, Olympic gymnast and author of *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*, says, “Training in gymnastics had taught me that elbow grease mattered far more than genetic gifts; that talent was made, not just born.”

Best-selling Australian author, **Bryce Courtenay**, says, “It has been my observation that success is not about being the most brilliant, educated or talented, it is about being the most determined, about hanging on the longest and never giving up.”

Gustave Flaubert, the classic French writer, said: “Talent is long patience.”

Marilyn Ferguson observes in her book, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, that inspiration, once thought to be the province of only a chosen few, is available to all of us if only we learn to develop our innate capacities.

Calvin Coolidge, the 30th President of the United States, said: “Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.”

And **Anders Ericsson**, a Swedish researcher, found that “deliberate practice is the magic bullet that takes someone into the stratosphere of brilliance. Not innate talent, which he’s not sure even exists, but practice; albeit practice of a particular, concentrated, gruelling kind...”.¹

WHAT MAKES YOU GOOD AT SOMETHING?

Ericsson is now the “world’s leading exponent of ‘deliberate practice’, a term he invented as he researched exactly what it is that makes someone very, very good at what they do... Deliberate practice, whether it’s applied to sport or business or the arts, begins in the brain. This isn’t a child doing an hour of piano scales every day

¹ ‘Success is all in the mind’ by Shelley Gare, published in The Australian on January 24th, 2009.

while imagining the fun they will have afterwards. Instead, what makes someone spectacular in their field – and keeps them there – is training via a kind of focused, repetitive practice in which the subject is always monitoring his or her performance, correcting, experimenting, listening to immediate and constant feedback, and always pushing beyond what has already been achieved.”.

Ericsson conducted a study at the Music Academy of West Berlin, and Malcolm Gladwell wrote about this study in his book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*: “The striking thing is that [Ericsson] and his colleagues couldn’t find any ‘naturals’,



musicians who floated effortlessly to the top while practising a fraction of the time their peers did. Nor could they find any ‘grinds’, people who worked harder than everyone else yet just didn’t have what it takes to break the top ranks.”

Even Mozart, who is considered by many to be a prime example of innate talent, had studied music for 3,500 hours by the age of six, and “Of those concertos that only contain music original to Mozart, the earliest that is now regarded as a masterwork (No 9, K271) was not completed until he was 21. By that time Mozart had already been composing concertos for 10 years.”²

² Ibid.

Gare quotes Ericsson as saying, “With the exception of the influence of height and body size in some sports, no characteristic of the brain or body has yet been shown to constrain an individual from reaching an expert level.”

There are certainly no physical constraints facing writers. (Even the ability to use a pen or a keyboard is not essential – many writers use a Dictaphone, and some disabled people even use alphabet boards to write.) So literally ANYONE can be a successful writer, anyone can demonstrate ‘talent’; the only requirement is that you apply yourself.

I was once watching a National Geographic Channel documentary on the Nature of Genius, and the following comment was made: “We all have flashes of genius; the genius acts on them... Decide you are going to be a genius.”

So... decide you are going to be a brilliant writer.

It’s not about ‘if’ but about ‘**WHEN** – i.e. your commitment, and ‘**HOW** – i.e. adopting the attitudes and practising the actions that facilitate success as a writer. What if the ‘when’ is now? You are, this minute, holding in your hands a book that will give you much of the ‘how’...

You might like to keep this anagram for T.A.L.E.N.T. in mind:

Time

Application

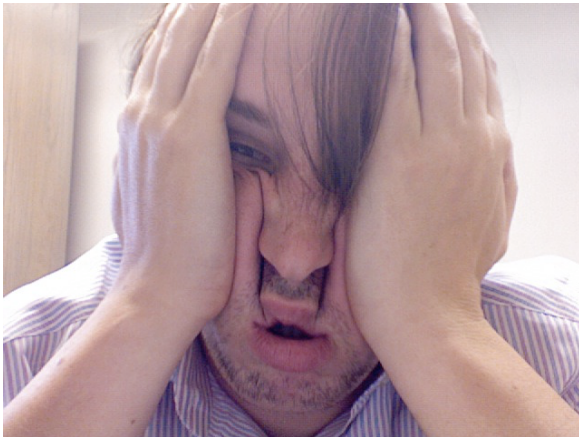
Love –

Energy,

Not

Talent.

THE 'WRITER'S BLOCK' BEASTIE



Have you ever experienced 'writer's block', where you can't seem to get started, or you start but then the stream of inspiration dries up and your writing grinds to a halt? There's a great deal of talk and disagreement in both professional and amateur writing

circles about the business of writer's block: Does it really exist? Is it just an excuse? Is there some deep dark cause?

My research has revealed that while professional writers themselves may not understand the process, most successful writers intuitively know what to do, and their writing flows easily.

Studies into human performance indicate that all behaviour is the expression of unconscious strategies. We have strategies that govern our buying habits, the way we communicate, how we manage our tasks - and our approach to writing. Successful writers use strategies (often unconsciously) to produce great results too. By observing how successful writers overcome writer's block – in other words, *by discovering their strategies for writing easily* – you, too, can get into the flow of easy writing.

Your first official writing lesson in this program is going to be in Part Two of this book, where you'll learn how to overcome Writer's Block, but for now, either grab your notebook or sit at your computer for some preliminary writing.

Having busted the Talent Myth – I trust! – I invite my students to do three short pieces of writing as a kind of marker of where they are 'now' with writing

before I share with them some of the attitudes and actions of successful writers.

Take a few minutes now to write your responses to the following topics so that you also have a marker of where you're 'at' before we tackle the business of Writer's Block. I usually give my students about seven minutes per topic, but feel free to write for as long as you like. Also, don't concern yourself too much with the quality of your writing. (More on that later.)

WRITING EXERCISES:

TOPIC #1: Me. Right now. Why I'm doing this. (What else could I be doing?) My plans, hopes, dreams, fears, possibilities...

This is essentially a piece of journal writing. Set this book aside now and take five or ten minutes to put your thoughts and feelings into writing...

TOPIC #2: Character Notes

Whenever we find ourselves in a new situation – at a party, in a café, at any kind of gathering – there's always someone who catches our eye. We find ourselves wondering about that person. What do they do? Are they in a relationship? What is their 'backstory'?

I tell my students that they have the delicious opportunity now to look around at their classmates, notice who has drawn their attention, and write about that person, describing the life they think that person leads. Are they married or single? What's their occupation? Where do they live? What is their name? Lifestyle?

If you're alone, you might need to postpone this exercise for now, but as soon as you can, sit amongst a group of strangers and write about the one that has

grabbed your attention. Or cast your mind back to the last time someone stood out for you. Maybe it was at the supermarket or in a doctor's waiting room or at a social event. Describe them and invent their story. Who do *you* think they are?

And finally, I present a standard 'creative writing' exercise:

TOPIC #3: Midnight. The telephone rings...

What happens? Write the rest of the story.

I suggest you create a special folder, whether in hard copy or on your computer, for these writings. (Your phone probably won't cut it.) Date them and hang onto them because we'll refer back to some of your early writings as we go on and they'll provide a gauge for you of your growth in confidence, power and fluency.

Perhaps your preferred writing style will change also, indicating other inner changes. For now, notice which genre felt most comfortable for you: journal style about yourself or more imaginative writing? Also, did you notice how your ideas came to you? Were you 'taking dictation', 'watching a movie', responding to feelings – or a combination of those, or something else altogether? Australian author, Toni Jordan, hears her characters voices and learns about them from how they speak. Other writers are recording visual scenes that come to them. I find that I use a bit of each modality: words present themselves, images appear at times, and feelings direct me to the essence of the moment I am describing. So, without putting yourself in a 'Writing Style Box', notice what seems to be your predominant way of receiving your material. Just out of curiosity.



SESSION 1: THE TALENT MYTH

Part 2: Life Story Work:

'AM I EVER GOING TO BE GOOD ENOUGH?'

"It is easier in our society to be naked physically than to be naked psychologically or spiritually – easier to share our body than to share our fantasies, hopes, fears and aspirations, which are felt to be more personal and the sharing of which is experienced as making us more vulnerable."

– Rollo May

MY STORY

I came close to giving up on myself as a writer. I had been teaching that 'it's not about talent' for some years but when, in my late thirties, I had not yet had anything significant published, I began to conclude that perhaps I just wasn't a good enough writer. Perhaps it was time to Grow Up, Get Serious, Be Responsible, and Put Writing Aside. It could always remain a hobby, of course, but I should stop expecting it to deliver my dreams.

And I did put my writing aside. I chose another vehicle to deliver my dreams: I decided to distribute health products because health is one of my top values. This seemed like a reasonable choice – and I could always write the odd story here and there for my own satisfaction. But I should face the facts: the world did not seem to want what I was writing. I didn't have what it took to succeed as a writer.

I very nearly believed this. I very nearly gave up on myself as a writer, but my love of writing was always there at my elbow; a small voice was continually whispering in my ear ‘But you want to write... when are you going to start writing again?’ and I finally came to trust that urge. When I did, everything changed for me.



The first step, however, is to truly understand that it’s not about ‘talent’; it’s about love and application over time. If you have the desire to write, if you love to lose yourself in your imagined worlds, then talent is completely irrelevant. Follow your heart and apply yourself to this thing you love doing, and skill will follow.

YOUR STORY

During one of my writing courses a long discussion was triggered off by someone's embarrassed statement that, "I'm not a writer". (This person was attending the course mainly to keep company with her husband and daughter, and hadn't really seen it as being quite her thing.)

I asked everyone, "Well, what *IS* a writer? Is it only someone who writes daily and is *technically* a writer, or is it someone who has the eye and perceptiveness to create and recreate situations and to comment on them in ways that stimulate thought and insight and feelings?"

There are many people who are not technically 'mothers', yet are very 'mothering'. Likewise, even if you are not a regular writer and don't (yet) have many skills or badges (published writing), if you are drawn to it, if you love writing – even if at the moment it's only emails to friends – then you have the heart and soul of a writer, and that's the important part.

By the end of the session, that participant declared that she was a writer after all, and the following month produced such a fresh and entertaining piece of writing that I challenged her to send it out to a magazine.

Another woman, Belinda, attended one of my Writing Mastery weekend programs and quite soon into the first session declared that maybe what she would discover during the program was that she just 'wasn't good enough' and should perhaps give up on this writing thing. She repeatedly spoke in terms of 'shoulds' and repeatedly asked if she was 'doing it right?' I suggested that she write her limiting thoughts on a separate page every time a doubt in her ability arose in her mind. These thoughts and her feelings of lack of self-worth were an unconscious habit that

would continue to weigh her down and hold her back unless she became aware of them and deliberately chose to think different thoughts. The first step toward change/transformation is becoming conscious.

Later that day, when her confidence was increasing, Belinda revealed that she had a folder full of poems and prose, and she asked me to read and comment on them. They turned out to be a collection of delightful, insightful poems and very moving personal pieces. I told her that she most certainly was a writer. It would have been quite sad if she had concluded prematurely that she ‘wasn’t a writer’ and then stowed this vital part of herself away.

“I didn’t think I was coming to a self-development class,” Belinda said at the end of the course. And that’s the premise of this whole book: if we want to be powerful writers, we must be prepared to face ourselves and grow.

So... are you thinking it’s presumptuous to consider yourself a writer?

If so – think again!

“People often ask, ‘Am I really a writer?’ Yes. The answer is always yes.

Writing transforms people. As they write, it transforms them little by little, and they are transformed on a larger scale when they finish a big project.”

– from Use Your Words by Catherine Deveny

Catherine Deveny also says writers are writers not because they’ve written a book or a play but because writing nourishes them; she adds: “Creativity is a vending machine... Your job is to keep feeding the vending machine – with hours of your time. It’s about quantity, not quality. The rewards are not always commensurate to

the amount of time and energy you put in. But if you persist – if you keep going back for the satisfaction of effort, not the reward of achievement or excellence – you will get everything.”

WRITING EXERCISES:

- 1. Flush out some of your unconscious beliefs by finishing the sentence ‘A writer is...’ and find out what YOU think.**
- 2. Write your thoughts and feelings about *why* you want to write.**
- 3. Write a list of some of the projects you would love to write.**
- 4. Write down some of the other experiences and achievements you would love to have in your life (or do or be), and notice how worthy of them you feel. Do you feel you deserve to have those things or those experiences? For now, just notice...**

