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Opening Extract from...

How to Get a Break as a Writer

Written by Neil Nixon

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Introduction

Not Another Book About Writing?

Yes, but for all the right reasons. This book deals with an area of writing for a living that remains virtually untouched by most other titles. This is a book about getting breaks, making your own luck and the kind of ‘ducking and diving’ that gets hopeful writers to the stage of being taken seriously. When other books do cover some of this ground they usually discuss how you’ll sell one book or one script. This book does not assume you want to write that one novel that will change the world. It assumes only the following things:

1. You have ideas, and they come to often enough to suggest you might be happy in a creative career.
2. You have some general notions of how this creative career might work, but you also have a lot of uncertainty about the kind of opportunities that exist in the working world.
3. You are prepared to put in the work to make yourself more successful.
4. This work will involve you producing writing, and trying to sell your ideas.
5. You are prepared to be open-minded and consider a range

of options, including some that don't really appeal too much at first glance.

This is a book that addresses the age-old problem of not being able to get a break without experience and not being able to get experience without getting a break. This is also a book based on solid research and evidence. I started this book ten years after I founded the UK's first full-time university course in Professional Writing.

A lot of what follows are examples of how people with no experience and limited options went on to make things happen and kick-start their writing careers. In some cases I met students who told me they wanted to be writers and during the years we worked together both of us realized that 'writing' in the sense of writing words and trying to sell them, wasn't the right way forward for these people. The solutions we identified often involved creative jobs, including some writing, but also a great deal else; like working in teams, thinking up ideas and working with people.

This book assumes you are like the people I have met over the years. You know you are creative, you have ideas you want to share. You believe these ideas can earn you money and you believe you will be happier and feel more alive if you can find a way of earning good, regular money as a creative person.

What follows has worked for people I have taught, and many of the professionals with whom I work. I can't promise you a

miracle in your own life. However, I can promise that this book will offer ideas, exercises and opportunities to make you more likely to get a break as a writer. I can also promise that this book was designed to be as useful as possible. If you are just starting on a writing career it can be read from beginning to end. If you are already underway each chapter can serve as a self-help manual for the skills you still need to develop, allowing you to dip into the book and come away with some positive possibilities in return for a few minutes reading and thinking.

If you are reading this with a view to buying the book, you might want to know what is coming. Here is a brief round up of the remaining chapters:

1 - The Talent

Considering strengths and abilities you may have. Drawing connections between your talents and a range of opportunities in the working world. Showing you that lack of ideas, lack of contacts or lack of time need not be impossible barriers when it comes to getting your work out there and making money. Giving you some exercises to help you identify the best routes to getting a break.

2 – The Job

A detailed look at professional writing, taking into account the range of the work on offer. Discussion of pros and cons of different areas of work. Concluding statements about the nature of professional writing work at present and in the

future. Consideration of likely earnings in the different areas of work.

3 – Get Yourself Connected

Practical strategies to build the gap between chapters one and two. Starting with a list of strategies for generating a ‘writer’s CV’ and exploring several case studies down to the specifics of likely income, level of difficulty and the pros and cons of each strategy. Examples considered include bypassing normal routes and going directly to a company, aiming for the softest targets available: such as charities.

4 – Are You Engaged?

Case studies of how to build relationships with those offering opportunities for writers. Consideration of professional development, and building self-confidence as work develops.

5 – Put Up or Shut Up

Chapter devoted to the development and sale of big ideas – like book and film submissions – detailing what agents and producers look for, formats for submission and examples of successful, and unsuccessful, submissions.

6 – Agents of Change

Chapter on getting and finding agents, also looking at other areas of help and mentorship available including websites, courses, professional mentors etc. Comments from agents and others involved in finding and managing talent.

7 – Out of the Box

Alternative strategies for making things happen. Case studies of writing success through unorthodox routes.

8 – In POD we Trust

Print-on-demand publishing, and other developing areas of low-cost independent publication for writers. Interviews and comments from those closely involved in these areas of work.

9 – The Write Stuff – AKA ‘Sources’

Round up of major contacts and sources with ideas of how to use these contacts. Discussion of how to build on work covered in book through use of reference works and web sites.

Glossary

A round up of the terminology used in the book that may confuse you. Explaining what terms like ‘development production’ really mean and why they might matter to you.

So, it’s time to get started. And, if you are leafing through this book in a bookshop, it’s probably time to decide if you are going to take it to the till and give the next nine chapters a chance to change your life. Obviously I’d like you to do that, so I will include a section listing ten good reasons to consider turning your writing into part of your working life.

10 Reasons to Think About Professional Writing

1. The costs of making work are dropping against inflation, and they show no sign of stopping this trend. Break even cost of piece of written work can now be very low.
2. Low costs of work mean many new 'niche' markets are opening up, allowing opportunities for more writers to get work accepted.
3. The skills you will develop in writing and engaging with markets can be transferred into many other situations, giving you the basis for a varied and exciting career.
4. You have ideas and interests. In short; you have passions, they matter to you and they matter to others. You can reach people who think and feel the way you do.
5. This is one area of work that is incredibly flexible. The skills you develop will allow you to work around children, other work commitments and a range of other obstacles that would halt a more rigid career in its tracks.
6. Despite what some people will tell you, writing can be fun, exciting, and completely fulfilling.
7. Writing and creative careers can accommodate a range of different talents. Your creative talent can help you find a niche but, surprisingly, this is an area in which people without a huge amount of creative flair can make a good living.

8. The fringe benefits, like access to people, places and things you want (like free clothes, hotel rooms etc) can be a real bonus.
9. Writing and creative careers will give you surprises, and when you have been working for a long time, these surprises will serve to keep you interested in life. This is not something everyone with years of experience in other jobs will come to expect.
10. You want it, or you wouldn't still be reading at this point.

1 The Talent

We are: Considering strengths and abilities you may have. Drawing connections between your talents and a range of opportunities in the working world. Showing you that lack of ideas, lack of contacts or lack of time need not be impossible barriers when it comes to getting your work out there and making money. Giving you some exercises to help you identify the best routes to getting a break.

So it is time to think about your own strengths and weaknesses as a writer. We will start with a brief look at what it means to be creative, and then think about how your own skills and talents fit into the world of creativity.

The first thing to note about being creative is that definitions vary. 'Creative' is about as useful a description as 'beautiful.' In other words; deciding who is creative is often in the eye, or ear, of the beholder. There have been attempts to make sense of creativity and psychologists continue to research the area. Arguably, the most serious and important work in this area started in the 1950s and one of the major studies was carried out by J P Guilford. He identified several traits of highly creative people, and his study was based on a large sample of people doing creative jobs, his subjects being advertising professionals, journalists, artists and others employed to use their creative talents. His work is still available if you want to hunt online. A very simple summary of some of his findings

suggests that creative people display a range of talents. Many creative people succeed because they concentrate their efforts in one or two areas of strengths. Typical strengths of creative people include:

- The ability to generate ideas around a theme.
- The ability to think laterally and flexibly.
- The ability to develop, embellish and conceive of the outcome of an idea
- The ability to focus and organize an idea.

One weakness in any study of creative people is that the studies tend to concentrate on people who have already become established in their working lives. These are the only people who can be identified as successful. So these studies are good at identifying what people do and how they do it. They are less effective at predicting how these skills will help you in the future. In the last few decades new areas of creativity have emerged with work in web design, cutting edge animation and other developing technologies. These require some of the traditional strengths, like focus and organization, but often demand very particular technical skills.

Alongside studies of creative people there have been attempts to define what ‘creativity’ means. Dictionary definitions often talk about the ability to ‘invent’ and show imagination or originality. This leaves us with the problem of trying to work out what imagination or originality might mean. This research

is certainly useful but it is only a guide. For a general idea of what we might agree on as creativity we could look at some of the definitions presented by two researchers called Besemer and Treffinger in 1981.

- Novelty: The newness of an idea in terms of process, techniques and application.
- Resolution: The extent to which an idea resolves a situation.
- Synthesis: The extent to which an idea combines elements which are unlike into a coherent whole.

This is a really simple run through the main points. Before we go any further, it is worth remembering a very important point often overlooked by researchers. Most professionally creative people, including writers, got to their positions without making a study of creativity. They achieved most of their success by getting on with their work and applying their talents.

For many years there was a problem in the creative industries; many intelligent and ambitious people wanted work in areas like advertising, but the people able to offer the jobs often struggled to tell the suitable candidates apart from the other applicants. The problem was that qualifications and experience didn't always give a good indication of what the people chasing the jobs could actually do. A graduate with a good degree could apply for a job in advertising and be interviewed on the same day as someone else who had spent a few years selling fruit from a market stall. Both would have

skills and knowledge useful for an advertising career but finding the right skills for the right job often proved very hard. To deal with this problem advertising agencies used their own research tool. Often known as ‘The Copy Test’ it formed part of an interview, and often meant leaving the applicant alone with a sheet of paper covered in questions before coming back after a set time to collect the answers. There was never one test done by everyone, most agencies had their own version of the test and most agencies would vary the questions depending on the kind of person they wanted to employ. Copy testing fell out of favour at the end of the twentieth century, mainly because most agencies no longer needed such an activity for interviews. By this point university courses, like the one I run, and other courses had produced thousands of students with portfolios full of work showing what they could do. Most of these courses had also coached their students in interview technique and had supported them with careers advice, so matching the right applicant to the right kind of position had become a much more predictable process.

A copy test is still useful on writing courses, or in the first chapter of a book like this, because it helps you identify your own skills. And it draws on the all research about traits of creative people, and what creativity might be, but keeps it all in an area where the results are practical and useful.

Despite the variety in copy tests there were certain types of question that kept recurring. The test below is something like a Greatest Hits collection of copy test problems. It asks you to produce novelty, synthesis and resolution and expects you to show particular traits to deal with each separate question.

Attempt all the questions but **DO NOT** get nervous and **DO NOT** think you are failing if you find any question difficult. Many creative careers have been built by people who could only perform well on one of the questions below. If the ability to answer one question well can pay a mortgage, feed children and keep a car on the road, that is something to celebrate. The point of the test is to help you find your own strengths. You **DO NOT** have to be good at everything all the time. If any question completely confuses you, there is a review of possible answers to help.

Copy Test

Take as long as you like but answer EVERY question.

1. Describe toast to a Martian in a maximum of 50 words.
2. You have two £5 notes; persuade someone to buy the note in your left hand.
3. You have no money, no mobile phone & no credit cards. Describe how you will spend a day in Belgium.
4. Describe the colour red to a blind person.
5. Write a notice asking members of a country club to shower before using the swimming pool.
6. Create an advert for a pair of indestructible socks OR a car that runs on air OR a brand of chewing gum that cures blood pressure problems.
7. Describe your face to someone who will never see it.
8. Write a poem of any length that scans perfectly but contains no rhymes.

Copy Test discussion

Toast

This is about generating ideas around a theme. It also tests your ability to get ‘novelty’ into a message. If you found this easy and came up with a range of different approaches you may well have potential to work in any area demanding a high turnover of ideas. Somebody who does well on this question would – for example – probably cope with coming up with a stream of ideas for the adventures of a comic book character, or topics for a long-running television series. When teams of people come together to plan future adventures of fictional characters the work is known as ‘storylining, or ‘story lining.’

Advertisors used this question to test for people who could see familiar products and services in a new way. Over the years I’ve seen answers from students that describe toast as ‘human fuel, simple and effective.’ I’ve also seen clever scientific answers that talk about its food value, and others that link it to a time and place, normally explaining it as part of breakfast. If anyone ever chose to advertise toast, all of those ideas could be a good starting point.

Two £5 notes

This is about focus and organization. You have to create ‘differentiation,’ finding differences where none appear to exist. Someone who delights in this question is often very good at planning creatively. Such a person might work effectively writing or creating work for a well established market. A good journalist would probably cope well with this question because he or she might be writing a copy with enough of a personal touch to

make it stand out in a crowded market. Useful answers to this question include selling the note in your left hand because you think it once belonged to a celebrity. You can also sell it with a personal endorsement; ‘I love £5 notes, but I’m prepared to share this love by selling you one.’ You could also sell its properties; ‘I’ll take your clunky change and swap it for this light, easily portable alternative.’ This question tests the same skills that advertisers use to sell products in a market crowded with similarities. Nobody ever advertises a hatchback family car by saying: ‘It’s 4.6 metres long, offers the same number of paint and seat colour options as the competition and more or less matches their fuel consumption figures. If you shop around one other manufacturer is probably offering a better bargain than us at the moment.’ But that is often the truth. Cars are made for markets and developing a new model is hugely expensive and risky, so manufacturers repeat successful ideas of the past, and then make an effort to advertise them in ways that suggest the new cars are new and different to what went before. Peugeot offer; ‘The drive of your life.’ The Fiat Punto was advertised with praise for its ‘spirit’ etc.

No money, mobile phone...

This is attempting to find something about your personality, and there really is no ‘right’ answer. There are, however, wrong answers. The wrong answer might involve an admission that you would panic, or you wouldn’t know what to do. The right answer would depend on the circumstances in an agency setting the question. Sometimes I have seen inventive answers involving committing a small crime in the hope of getting deported back home. I have also seen people discuss busking for cash. Other solutions involve trying to find a means of

making a free call; like heading for a police station to report your predicament.

The question is looking for synthesis and resolution. Your initial reaction to the question should give you some insight into how best your creative talents can be applied. People presenting ‘small crime and I get deported’ answers might well be maverick talents with good ideas, but they are probably not team players, and may well be good novelists, songwriters etc. By contrast, someone coming up with a practical solution like going to the police and being honest about their problem, might use the same skills if they were employed in an agency booking out talent, or if they worked in an area combining creativity and planning, like development production in television.

Red to a blind person

Any successful answer here needs focus and also the ability to think laterally (i.e. around a problem). Successful answers often revolve around being empathic with your blind audience, and finding some object or experience that has a similar association with red. I’ve seen people respond to this by suggesting you rub a blind person’s cheek and say ‘that’s the red area.’ I also once saw a response suggesting the blind person attempted to read a cheese grater as if it was Braille! If you find such a question easy or exciting it is likely you have the kind of creativity that sees things in terms of a big picture, or ‘conceptually.’ Pushed to its limits this ability can pay very well because it often helps you to see the potential of a huge idea, and how it can be aimed at a market. People involved in production management have the skills to answer this question well, but the danger of such a responsible job is that you lose

touch with ‘real’ people and with it, the ability to channel ideas towards them. On a small scale people who do well on the red question can also work in areas, like music production, art direction and directing actors. There are plenty of opportunities for people who can focus an idea and find effective ways to communicate.

Country Club Notice

In all the years of using copy test questions with groups this question, or variations on it, have caused the most problems. Many people simply miss the reference to the country club and – with it – miss the creative challenge of the question. A right answer here depends totally on understanding your market, the people reading the notice have joined a country club. This will be expensive. For most of them this achievement means they see themselves as deserving of respect, and would expect the notice to open with words like; ‘Would patrons kindly...’

This question is a test of a few creative skills but it focuses most tellingly on your ability to conceive of the outcome of your idea. You have to be able to get into the minds of those who will read the notice. It is also a test of organizational ability and attention to detail. In this respect it shows more clearly than any other question how someone who doesn’t see him or herself as creative can play a crucial role in a creative team. The attention to detail here is vital to success in the same way good editing is vital to the success of an ambitious novel or complicated film script. The person with the ambitious or creative idea may well be talented, but may also lack that attention to detail.

Although the news media focus on the Oscar winners for acting, Best Director and Best Film there is a reason the other awards exist. Complicated works like feature films depend on quality in every department and good sound technicians, camera operators and script editors provide an input that supports the better known people involved in the work. It is likely that a good script or book editor could devise a dozen excellent answers to the country club notice question in the time it took a person burdened with massive ideas to devise one or two suitable replies. If you are that person: there are things to celebrate in your ability to give attention to detail. You have a marketable skill. This skill can get you employed, and probably keep you employed when others around you struggle to stay in work. For example; if you worked as an editor on a project – like a book – that was a spectacular flop, it is likely that the author would be the one taking most of the blame, whilst you went on to more editing work.

Indestructible socks, car that runs on air...

The key point here is that the world *has* changed. These impossible products would bring about a difference to most of our lives. A breakthrough in technology does sometimes change the world. For example; DNA profiling has brought about convictions for crimes the police thought they might never solve.

In terms of creative skills major changes in the world demand you take on board the novelty of the new product, produce work that synthesises the new information with the way we live, and think flexibly around the problem. In other words; the right answer here is one that shows clearly how the world

has changed, but still remembers that we want to feel secure. Too much new science doesn't work, and pretending the world is just the same also doesn't work. Show people the difference, but make them feel like they understand it. To show how this might work on the copy test question I once came up with a storyboard for the indestructible socks. In my idea a young man in a suit shuffles into a room with bare walls and seats, another young man comes to meet him. They are obviously uncomfortable. They exchange a little conversation until it becomes obvious that one man is picking up the ashes of his grandfather from a crematorium. Having got the box of ashes, he turns to leave, only for the other man to hold up a pair of socks and ask; 'What do we do with these?'

People who enjoy questions like this are often those who can think in the abstract and find themselves happy with notions of change and difference. They are also people who can get things done because they can see the end of a process whilst they are still working on it. Such people are often useful in a team, whilst they tend not to make the best managers, editors or technical people, they do have the creative vision to drive a project forward. One place such skills truly come into their own is in a team writing scripts under pressure. Many comedies and series are written in some form of script factory, a process that usually involves writers coming together, finding out how an entire series will pan out, and then splitting to write their own work. In some cases, whole teams end up in the same room arguing out the final version of the work. The 'indestructible socks' skill matters in these circumstances because the scripts for comedy and drama series often veer into impossible territory when characters are killed off or

other massive changes come on board. The ability to absorb these events and write them in a way that never leaves the audience struggling to believe what is going on is central to keeping shows like *Eastenders* at the top of the ratings.

Your face

This is a difficult act of synthesis. A right answer here needs some self-knowledge, some sign that you are able to see yourself the way others see you, and the ability to generate ideas around the theme. On top of all that it needs the kind of editing skills seen in the country club notice and the ability to be focused and not ramble on about yourself. Used by an advertising agency, this question would test the ability to think clearly about a difficult subject and would help the agency to identify someone who might progress to become an account handler. In other words, the kind of person who would spend part of their time explaining creative ideas to clients and then go back to the creative people in the agency and keep them focused on what the client wanted. Someone doing well on this question may well have the ability to see a problem clearly from two sides and could, therefore, find themselves working to manage a project. It is also likely that someone finding this question exciting or inspiring could go on to write personal and very detailed pieces of journalism. Novelists, and those working in the developing field of creative nonfiction, would probably perform well on this question.

Poem of any length that scans perfectly but contains no rhymes

This is a test of your sense of balance, timing and rhythm in writing. It demands creative skills and organizational ability,

it also demands some intelligence. The usefulness of the question to advertising is obvious, catchy and memorable slogans get products and services noticed. The skill of summarizing a complicated idea in a few words, and also grabbing attention, can earn a writer good money. A number of famous writers have started a career in advertising. Some – like Fay Weldon – worked in the area for several years. One of the most famous former advertising copywriters is Salman Rushdie. Rushdie won the Booker Prize for his novel *Midnight's Children* and when the Booker Prize had produced 40 years of winners, Rushdie's novel was voted the best winner of all, a unique award. For all this success, it is likely the best known words he ever wrote are still the three that formed the slogan for a hugely successful advertising campaign for cream cakes: 'Naughty. But nice.'

People who cope well with this question could go on to a range of writing activities in which the sense of how the words sound is as important as the information they carry. Poets form one end of this group, using words to make complicated and emotional points. At the other end, sub-editors in the news media need a sense of rhythm to write attention grabbing headlines, or bulletins that will sound right when read on radio or television. Some people with these skills work effectively in jobs where they speak to groups of people. Teachers, trainers, comedians, radio and television presents all need to be able to invent phrases in the moment.

At the start of the chapter I said we would be: *Considering strengths and abilities you may have. Drawing connections between your talents and a range of opportunities in the working world. Showing you*