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Five Surprising Writers' Lessons from the Business World

by Noelle Sterne

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Like most writers, I keep bumping up against articles on how to treat my writing more like a business. Like many writers, I rebel at this advice, always wanting more time for the writing itself. But in an infrequent browse through a business publication, I came upon an article that didn't give me administrative *agita*. Even immersed in creative bliss, a writer can hardly resist the title: "Ten Traits That Make You Filthy-Rich" by Jeffrey Strain (*TheStreet.com*, February 1, 2008).

The five points I discuss here from Strain's article (his traits are in *italics*) may be new to writers. The parallels remind us what we need to do not only to become rich (yes, it's possible) but to stay true to our writing potential.

1. Patience

"Patience is one of the most important traits when it comes to saving money."

Ah, patience. We all struggle to develop it, and not only

squirming over the

interminably slow growth of our 401(k). Patience relates, daily, weekly, monthly, to the queries and pieces we send out and our screamingly empty email inboxes and silent phones. We're sure our submissions got sucked into some gigantic slush vacuum. Or the editor fell off her pricey ergonomic chair laughing at our manuscript, which fell to the floor and got swept up at midnight by an indifferent office cleaner.

Patience also means our endless time and effort in getting down the first draft and then loving it into bare acceptability. Patience means our single-mindedness to slog to the end of the work, even when the shiny new bloom and secret certainty of our brilliance have faded like an old birthday bouquet and we long to go to the movies. Patience means keepin' on to the written perfection of our vision.

2. Satisfaction

"When you're satisfied, there is no reason to spend money on nonessentials."

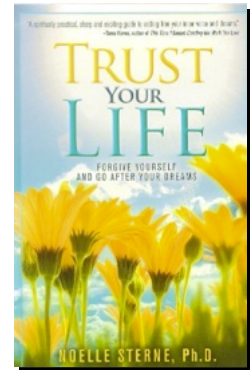
Satisfied in writing, we don't need to succumb to time- and energy-robbing escapes-chain sitcom watching, endless pizza stuffing, aimless shopping, pseudo-research blog combing. The astoundingly prolific writer Isaac Asimov had the right idea:

Whenever I have endured or accomplished some difficult task-such as watching television, going out socially or sleeping-I always look forward to rewarding myself with the small pleasure of getting back to my typewriter and writing something (<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/show/273690>).

Some might call this compulsion. I call it Satisfaction.

3. Reflectiveness

"It's important to be able to look at your financial decisions and reflect on their results."



You're going to make financial mistakes. Everyone does."

Substitute the word "writing" for "financial" above. We make decisions all the time-to write mornings or evenings, work on one piece over another, complete the current piece or leave it hanging while we chase the enticing freshness of a new idea, divide our time between writing and marketing, sketch out queries before or after the first draft.

Try different ways to work and reflect on the results. Eventually, you'll arrive at the best decisions toward your most effective and consistent writing.

And mistakes We get fired up about a subject, but after a few paragraphs the fire fades to an ember, and all fanning fails to revive it. We get a great idea for a seasonal feature but put off writing it until way after the editorial deadline. We gulp too thirstily agents' or publishers' fulsome praises of our work without investigating them. And we get taken, disappointed, or frustrated by their inability to deliver or extravagant requests for upfront cash.

Reflecting on such mistakes, we learn to do our homework. We stick to our schedules, develop more confidence in our work, and act on our best decisions.

Risk-Taking***"To build wealth, one needs to be willing to take risks."***

Financial wealth requires risks. So does writing wealth-a substantive body of work and a writing career.

Risky subjects : Do you write about only what's familiar, comfortable, comforting? You know you've hit on a hazardous area when your brain instantly howls, "But I **can't** write about **that!**"

Tiptoe to the panicked edge of risking. Bargain with yourself. Swear you won't send out the draft, or show it to your partner, or even talk about it. Scary, yes, but writing about **that** subject will ultimately free you and strengthen your guts for taking even more risks.

Risky sending : Sending out your work, do you stick with the modest, small, friendly publications? Maybe they even publish you. Great. Well, stick your toe into the frigid sea of the Big Mags.

What's to lose? Postage, email time? Face? What's to gain? Yet another rejection? You're used to them. Stretch your sending boundaries, and one day you'll see those exciting words, "We would like to publish"

Risky marketing : Marketing remains the bane of many of us, and we can sometimes shrink unbelievably from it. A writing colleague contacted a book review editor about her latest book and omitted saying that this was her third novel, came from a major house, and had received two awards. She told me she felt the book should speak for itself.

Well, there's modesty and there's foolishness. It's highly doubtful the editor would rush to Amazon to look up the book (many editors specify they won't go web- or link-hunting). My friend torpedoed herself before she started.

Other types of marketing require more risks. You may feel you're committing the sin of **hubris**, but if you want to be a published and eventually known writer, you've got to boast about yourself on paper, online, and in person. List your pubs and accomplishments, blog about your latest acceptances. Swallow, clear your throat, and tell everyone you meet about your writing and latest coup. Speak confidently into the radio mike. Face the audience, smile, and let your passion for your work carry you through. The more you take such risks, the easier it becomes.

4. Working Hard, Working Smart***"Creating wealth and staying out of debt rarely come about without a lot of hard work. Many people hope that the lottery will solve all their financial problems."***

It's well known that many people who win the lottery lose their winnings within a year. Gifts don't solve writers' problems either. A successful writing friend won a grant to finish his nonfiction narrative at a scenic retreat. He thought, Ah, three solid weeks of no-distraction writing.

My friend later admitted he could only work at the retreat three to four hours a day, about the same time as he put in at his own study. He "used" the rest of the time to walk in the woods, explore the local town, and share rejection stories with the writers-in-residence.

So, time and money don't do it. Like building monetary wealth and staying out of debt, if you want to produce polished, worthwhile pieces and publish, you've got to work at it. As if you haven't heard this before, set writing goals and stick to them. Give your writing all the necessary time and intelligent attention. That's working smart. And that's how you'll stay out of the worst kind of debt-knowing you had it in you but failed to bring it out.

As you apply these five lessons from the business world, you'll likely produce more work-more

regularly, more often, of better quality, and with increased creativity. And you'll gain greater success in producing real wealth-of-completed pieces, sold works, and ongoing fulfillment in your writing.

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Noelle publishes widely in print and online venues, with a current column in Coffeehouse for Writers. Her Ph.D. from Columbia University enables her to help doctoral candidates complete their dissertations (finally). In Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams (Unity Books, 2011), Noelle guides readers to reach their dreams and lifelong yearnings. Please visit www.trustyourlifenow.com.

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