



Top Tips for Young Writers by Jessica Andrews

ABOUT ME

I grew up in Sunderland. I always loved reading and writing and I went to the drama club at my local arts centre, which helped me make friends who were interested in art and gave me a space to be creative. When I was eighteen, I moved to London to study English Literature at King's College. I am the first person in my family to go to university and I didn't feel like I fitted into the academic world. I had a part-time job in a pub where I spent a lot of time listening to customers' stories and observing their mannerisms and the way they spoke. Artists and writers used to drink in the pub and they made me feel like a creative life was possible.

After university, I worked in the pub and wrote poetry in the afternoons before my shift, as well as articles for small newspapers and magazines for free. My grandad died and left a small sum of money and I put it towards an MA in Creative Writing. Doing the MA gave me a new confidence. I had never met a professional writer

before, but my teachers were poets and authors, which made me feel like it was something I could do one day. To fund my MA, I worked as a bartender, a nanny and an English tutor. Juggling everything at once was difficult, but it made me determined to keep writing.

When I graduated, I spent a year working in a café and trying to write. I knew I wanted to write a novel, but it was difficult to focus while I was living in a house-share in a busy city and working a lot. I decided to move to Burtonport, a small town in Donegal on the west coast of Ireland, where my grandad lived. When he died, he left a falling-down house, where I would be able to live for free for a few months and write. Burtonport is very remote and I don't drive and I didn't have any money, but I had lots of time and space to write my novel. I tutored a local student and cycled through the mountains on my bike. I read a lot of books, walked on the beach and wrote every day, and slowly my novel grew into *Saltwater*, which went on to be published and won the Portico Prize.

WRITING TIPS

In my experience, the most difficult part of writing is self-doubt. I find it impossible to write more than a few paragraphs when there is a voice in my head telling me that my writing is bad, that no one else will ever care about it and that I am wasting my time. Writing is strange in that you spend so much time working alone, and there is often a large chunk of time between getting your writing down and receiving feedback from readers. I think that lots of people never finish their novels or poems or story collections because self-doubt takes over. Here are some small things I have learned which can help:

1. Write what you know

Before I found Lucy's voice in *Saltwater*, I made a few failed attempts at telling the story through different characters. At one point, it was set during my grandad's childhood. At another, it was written in 3rd person and I even had a male protagonist. I was scared to write about my life because I thought it was trivial and

uninteresting, but it was only when I started to write a story that was closer to my own that the book began to come to life. Novels don't have to be very dramatic. The small things in your life are usually interesting to other people because they have experienced them, too. If you have never read a novel that reflects your own experiences, that means it is important for you to write it, because it hasn't been written about much before.

2. Notice small details and listen to stories

Train yourself to notice small details about people. Look at their shoes and the patterns on their clothes, the texture of their hair and their wrinkles. Listen to their voices and try to remember words or phrases they use. Watching people is the best way to develop your characters. Your memory will store all of these tiny details for you to use in your writing later. I listened to the stories my mam and my auntie told about their teenage years and our family for years. I stored them all in my head and used them in Saltwater.

3. Keep a notebook

I have been keeping a journal for the past ten years. I write down my thoughts and feelings, my ideas, things people say to me and lines from books I am reading. It is my way of working everything out and the basis of most of my writing. Before I start writing every day, I usually spend a bit of time getting all of my thoughts down in my journal. It helps to clear my head so I am ready to work.

4. Make a mood board or playlist

When I am writing or coming up with an idea, I like to stick images or quotes that capture the mood or feeling of the book I am trying to write above my desk, so I can look at them if I start to lose focus. I like making playlists that capture the time, place or character, although I don't usually listen to music while I am writing because I find it distracting.

5. Read a lot

One of the most important parts of writing is reading other people's work. It helps me to understand form and sentence structure and it makes me feel excited about what words can do. It is useful to read across forms and genres; I read a lot of memoir and poetry and they help me to write fiction.

6. Don't re-read your own work too much

When writing a novel or a long piece of work, I find that if I stop and try to edit too early, I end up resenting everything I have written and giving up in frustration. I find it very useful to write and write and write until I have a substantial body of work, before going back and re-reading it. There will be some bits that are awful, but there will also be some gold – and the more I have written, the easier it is to keep the good parts and get rid of the bad.

7. Keep a blog or Tynyletter

I find it difficult to show people pieces I have written when they are very new, because they feel very close to my most raw self. Some of my friends find it useful to have constant feedback on their work (and this can be very helpful, if you have a couple of close and trusted readers), but I tend to be very secretive about what I am writing until it feels ready. I find keeping a blog or a Tynyletter a good way to let go of my writing a little bit, and release it to a small readership, whether real or imagined (it doesn't really matter). Putting little bits of my work on the internet makes me feel as though I am moving in some kind of direction and feels more tangible than a sprawling, secret folder on my desktop.

8. Find (or create) a community or group of friends

Writing is solitary and emotional and it is very important to me to surround myself with people who understand that and who are willing to talk about it. Any kind of art practice is difficult in that you are probably doing it alongside another job or

studying, you don't know where it is heading and it requires a lot of self-motivation. Having friends who are musicians, or film-makers, or painters, who understand these kinds of ideas, has been vital to my work as a writer. If you don't know anyone else who writes or makes art (and I didn't for a while) it is good to join after-school clubs or go to films and talks or gigs. There is also a big literary community on the internet, and somewhere like Twitter is a good place to find people who are interested in the same kind of writing as you.

9. Perform your work (or listen to others perform theirs)

When I start to feel like writing is meaningless or too solitary, I find that attending readings, either as a listener or a speaker, helps me to remember why it is important. Writing is ultimately about connection, although so much of it happens alone, but I find that being in a room with people talking about their work makes me feel excited about it again. There are lots of events online during the coronavirus pandemic, which means that you can virtually attend things that might usually be difficult to travel to.

10. Avoid social media while you are writing

While the internet can be a great platform and a valuable source for learning about new writers and reading articles, browsing Twitter and Instagram when you are trying to write produces crippling self-doubt. Writing requires you to listen to your inner self, which is difficult when there are thousands of other people shouting from your screen or the palm of your hand. People Tweet about how many words they have written in a day or how many books they have read, which is very exhausting when you are trying to focus on your own work.

11. Remember that publication doesn't necessarily mean quality

Publishing work, either in print or online, is often to do with the moment in which you are writing, news cycles, tone, topics or themes of a particular issue, similar stories that might have recently been pitched, or stories that have been run in the

past. If your work is rejected it doesn't mean that it is bad, it often means that it doesn't quite fit with the publication.

12. Write for yourself

I find that my best work comes when I am trying to work something out for myself. I begin with a question, or a feeling, and I am writing my way around it. When I write this way, it feels vital and necessary and it doesn't matter to me who will read it or whether it has any value in the world; it has value to me, and that is the most important.