

I Wasn't a Writer, So How Did I End Up As One?

By Danielle Villegas | *Member*

Being a writer doesn't come easily to everyone. In fact, it doesn't come easily to most people. I include myself as one of those people—writing eludes me on many levels. Yet, I am a technical writer and blogger. How did that happen? Here are some lessons I've learned that can provide you with some insight into being a writer.

Lesson One: The end of innocence isn't the end of the world.

First grade. I was sitting at my little desk at school one Friday afternoon. It was the early 1970s, and Friday afternoons were reserved for free time to paint, play, build puzzles, etc. I was working on some sort of story, drawing the pictures and writing my words on the lines provided, and thinking, "When I grow up, I want to write stories." I was told that people who wrote stories were authors, so for a while, I went around telling people I wanted to be an author. It sounded more prestigious than anything else I could think of to be.

As time went on, I lost that desire to be an author because I lost my initial love of writing. I had lots of ideas, but I didn't know how to put them on paper in a way that captured someone else's imagination the same way that it was in my head. I grasped at how to write lyrical details in my stories. I also ran out of ideas. Just a few short years later, my concept of being an author—let alone a writer—died. I hadn't even graduated from elementary school. My perception was that writers were really smart and creative book lovers who wanted to create the same thing. Writers and authors were so imaginative that they created whole books of wonderful stories with such intensive details. I could never come up with such a thing. I succumbed to trying to learn to read books for pleasure.

Lesson Learned:

As with many things that happen when we grow up, we lose some of that wonder and creativity that comes with childhood. Our tastes change and mature, but there's nothing wrong with embracing that same wonder and curiosity as an adult.

Lesson Two: It takes all types.

As I got older, my grasp of grammar was always good, but talking about literature in any language hurt my head. This became most evident when I went away for my undergraduate studies and declared my major in international affairs. This major was a good fit for me until I had to take literature classes in French. I had a difficult time with literature in my own language, and now I had to learn about it in another? It was not going to happen. This resulted in my switch to a history major. During my last two years of college, I had a great mentor from the history department who convinced me that I was a good writer and editor. I was not creative, but I could research the heck out of a topic, and pull together quotes and facts fairly well. But that wasn't writing...or so I thought.

Lesson Learned:

You don't necessarily have to come from an English background or a journalism major to be a good writer. You become a good writer with plenty of practice, some guidance, and passion about a topic. Share stories and information as best as you can.

Lesson Three: Good writing skills, like good manners, can get you far. You can never go wrong taking some constructive criticism in the process.

As my career took off, I had to write response standards for consumer affairs departments of major companies. I had some great training in the process, but some of it just seemed second nature. Proper grammar, using manners when writing, and writing coherently seemed to be skills that I had. It wasn't until I got to my first post-stay-at-home-mom job that I started to understand that my writing skills were not as shabby as I thought. Sure, there were instances that my managers would have to edit some of my work, but those were all part of the writing process, and I learned the nuances of better business writing and instructional design techniques this way.

Lesson Learned:

If you have the basics of grammar and writing mastered, you can write. If you are involved in technical communication in any way, you probably already have better writing skills than the average person. Remember that all writers need editing, whether it's self-editing or having

another person—professional writer or not—read things over. Many drafts are often needed to get it right. Learning to take constructive criticism provides you with a learning opportunity.

Lesson Four: We don't need no education ... or so you think.

With a little more training in technical editing, I was starting to get pretty good at it, and I liked doing it. Going to graduate school for my Master's degree sealed it for me. Suddenly, I was writing at the highest academic level I had in more than 20 years, and I was getting good grades. What? That can't be right. I'm not a writer, I'm a Web designer. But I was a Web designer who took editing courses and liked them. It was a weird conundrum for me. For over 35 years, I had not thought of myself as a writer, and yet here I was writing.

Lesson Learned:

If you don't feel confident about your writing, you can strengthen your skills. There are degrees, classes, books, webinars, and seminars available—including several that are regularly available through STC. You have great opportunities for learning, and in order to keep up with technology, technical communicators always need to adapt, which lends itself to improving your writing skills. Don't be afraid to learn something new! You might be surprised at how much you already know.

Lesson Five: Follow your interests. They may take you down new paths.

My blog, *TechCommGeekMom.com*, became the culmination of what solidified my understanding that I was a writer after all. I started the blog originally as a graduate school project, but it grew into more than that over time. The more I wrote about what interested me, using my own voice, the easier the words flew from my mind to my fingertips. I would write many drafts of blog posts, writing and re-writing, rearranging paragraphs until the post sang to me. This practice has continued to this day. In the process of this discovery, I was surprised to find that not only had I gained a readership for my blog, but I also received requests to write articles for other blogs and industry resources.

I still have the dream that I'd like to write a book one day. I mentioned this once to a renowned author of e-learning and m-learning books whom I admire, and told him I probably couldn't pull off writing a book until I wrote and published a PhD thesis. He corrected me and said that

anyone could write a book if you found a topic which piqued your curiosity and you did due diligence in researching the topic. There are no requirements other than a passion to share information, and making sure you explained and organized the content appropriately in the process.

Lesson Learned:

Writing, like anything else, takes a lot of practice. The more you write, the better you will get at it. A great way to practice is via a blog. Even if no one other than you and a few select friends ever read it, with enough self-editing and rewriting, the experience will allow you to get into a groove that is truly your own. You'll find it gets easier. You also don't have to be a world-class subject matter expert to be able to write on a given topic. The e-learning author's words encouraged me that I could still write a book someday, and so could you. The same principle applies to writing on a much smaller scale as well.

Lesson Six: You don't have to be a fashionista to have style.

My blog gave me my voice. Through blogging, I realized that being a writer simply means being able to express your voice however you want. Being a writer is not only saying what's on your mind, but being able to substantiate what you are saying as well. I found that the easiest way to find my own style was to write on a topic employing words I would use when I speak. If you've ever met me, you can definitely hear my tone as you read this.

Lesson Learned:

Style is relative. You don't have to adopt someone else's style unless you are trying to write a business brief, are ghostwriting, or are following rules for a professional document like a grant proposal. In order to hear your own voice, you might consider investing in a voice recognition app that can transcribe your words into a word processing program, then editing as needed afterward. This is a technique that my son, who has learning disabilities, uses. He will often dictate what he wants to say in a report to me, which I type it into my iPad. He then reviews it, editing and adding his personal flourishes. His language arts grade has gone up significantly since we started this practice with his teacher's permission. If it can work for a kid like him, it can work for you, too.

While over time I have been trained in how to be a writer, it has not come naturally to me. Time, perseverance, and learning skills that worked for me made me a writer. It took time to find the kind of writing that I excel at and what works for me. It was certainly learned through trial and error!

My training in history and my experience in business, as well as my training in technical communication, have brought me to this point.

I'm far from the next great American novelist, nor am I going to write a Pulitzer or Newberry Medal work. But when I help others through my blog or at work, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I've performed a writing job well done.

I'm a technical writer, and it suits me.

Danielle M. Villegas is currently a content strategist and Web publishing consultant at BASF North America, with a background in client services, project management, e-learning, social media, and Web content management. Danielle is best known in the technical communication world for her blog, TechCommGeekMom.com, which has continued to flourish since it was launched during her graduate studies at NJIT in 2012. She's also active in the STC Philadelphia Metro Chapter as the publicity chair. Danielle can be reached on Twitter [@techcommgeekmom](https://twitter.com/techcommgeekmom) or through her blog.