

Top Writing Tips

My Five: Top Writing Tips from Alvin Pang

Poet and editor Alvin Pang shares invaluable insights on the business of being a writer.

1. Read widely — both work you like and work you don't. Learn the difference

I cannot emphasise this enough. A good writer is inspired, formed and nourished by a lifetime of voracious and attentive reading. If you're a writer, reading is your basic homework, your self-directed learning, your market research, your tea break, your mental gym, your most reliable teacher and friend. If you want to live a life of words, you need to know what words can do. Don't just stick with your favourite writers either – to learn and grow, you need to develop a broader sense of what works for you and what doesn't, in writing. Then try doing it yourself, with practice, practice, practice.

2. Don't worry too much about being "original"

Originality is in some sense overrated. Many good writers owe debts of style, tone, theme, technique and form to writing they have read, studied or otherwise encountered over the years. Originality is often about offering a new insight into an issue; a new and useful way of looking at things differently or more deeply. A poem which alerts the reader to something small but important in their lives which had been forgotten or overlooked might be considered as original as a 100-stanza poem without the letter "T". Good sonnets have been written and continue to be written well before and after the age of Shakespeare; each, however, attempts to suggest a fresh perspective pertinent to contemporary times. "Fresh" is hard to define, and a sense of it tends to emerge with years of reading and experience, although it may not, after all that. But it has to do with the feeling, after reading a poem, of having learnt or understood something, or of seeing more clearly. It's also often relative to the reader's age, culture and frame of mind; what may seem fresh to a 16-year-old student in Manchester might be familiar territory to a 60-year-old woman in Beijing, and vice-versa. Nevertheless, there is a generally agreed sense that if one is adopting a known style or form, one's work tends to get compared to the best traditional examples of that form, so you do need to be aware of what has come before, so see #1.

3. Build your readership and cred through journals, anthologies and the web

Many aspirants believe that being a writer is about getting a book published. But the more conventional and (in Singapore) under-valued route to becoming a recognised writer is to get your work published in as many credible journals, magazines and anthologies – on and off the web – as you can find. These periodicals, whose mission is often to discover exciting new voices, are a great way to get your best efforts read and recognised (it may surprise you which of your stories or poems turn out to be the most well received). They also offer a ready audience of readers who are already keyed in to good writing — particularly if you find the appropriate sort of journal or anthology for the type of writing you wish to be good at. Google will direct you to a list of journals easily. Seek out credible publications interested in writing which resonates with your own.

Getting published in a respected journal with experienced and well-read editors is no small feat, and you can proudly show it off as an achievement. If you're unsuccessful, try and try again. But if you succeed time and again, you can be sure that you have a body of work that is of some value and you can then bring it to the attention of a publisher, citing all the journals/magazines/anthologies in which your work has been accepted for publication. Indeed, that's how many professional writers in many countries earn their wings.

When approaching publishers and also anthologies/magazines/journals, be sure to provide a short bio and if possible a sampler of your work (5 to 10 pages but nothing more unless it is requested), history of writing and contact details. Be patient (don't expect instant responses) and be prepared to take no for an answer. Not all publishers are willing to give comments or advice on your work but it may still be useful to ask for it. Again, be gracious if you encounter a rejection.

4. It's one thing to write well, and another to expect to be published, read or even paid

It's important to enjoy writing as an activity in itself, because no matter how talented you are, there is no guarantee that you'll be able to make a decent living from it. That's because writing and publishing are two very different endeavours. Publishers are commercial entities whose purpose is to market and distribute a given work — for profit, usually but also sometimes because they believe in the value and quality of the work. Publishing — getting a work to print — is an expensive and time-consuming business. Understandably, publishers are quite selective of the kinds of work they do want to publish (regardless of their merit). Their considerations can range from the quality (and yes, sometimes originality) of the work to the expected size of its audience, its historical, cultural, social importance, the reputation of the poet and so on.

If you do want to seek publication patience and humility are virtues: you may be rejected by dozens or even hundreds of publishers (and many publishing houses will not even look at manuscripts that have not been referred to them by a professional reader or agent) before being picked up by one. An alternative route is to self-publish: basically fork out the money and pay someone to design a book cover, print and bind the book and put it in bookstores. Many famous publishing houses were in fact founded this way, by the leading writers and literary activists of their time (including City Lights, where the Beat poets emerged), but there is a risk if you are inexperienced that you will not know how best to produce a book that will attract audiences. Publishing online has also become a serious option: the web represents a cost-effective and efficient way to get your work out to as many people as possible: in theory, further and fare more than you could reach with any printed book. In a sense, getting web-published offers you a much better chance of reaching a receptive audience because you overcome natural barriers to readership such as distance, time, cost, stock availability and habit. And if your main intent in getting published is to be read, this is a good way to go.

5. You don't have to walk alone: get involved with your community

Writers have a reputation of being loners and individualists (a reputation pretty much started during the Romantic era, even though most of the famous Romantic poets were part of a tightly-knit clique of classically trained scholars). But to be a writer is also to be part of a community and a tradition of informed opinion, deeply considered ideas and thoughtful language use. Sharing your work in a group and getting to meet other writers is probably a good way to get started and to figure out where you stand, not to mention receive feedback that can help you improve your work. Try lurking around blogs, Facebook and Twitter: social spaces many working writers hang out, share and discuss work, without actually meeting face-to-face. You may want to test the waters there.

I always recommend that writers find and hold on to at least three sorts of reader in their careers:

(1) Fans – credible and supportive readers who appreciate your writing and can give you that all important moral support – or let you know if you're not writing as well as you're capable of.

(2) Critics – readers who enjoy (or write) different kinds of writing from you, who may not necessarily enjoy your style BUT who respect your seriousness in trying to write well. You need critics to keep you on your toes, to show you alternative ways of looking at your work,

and to remind you that your readers will have different points of view. A writer needs to be comfortable with being disagreed with.

(3) Editors – readers who can help you improve your work or prepare it for publication. This might be a mentor, a more experienced friend, a professional editor, or a publisher. Everyone, even the most talented writers, could benefit from a second opinion or an objective pair of eyes to help them spot continuity errors or find areas for improvement. Get used to the idea of your writing being in the public eye; after all, writing is a public act of expression.

Of course, do check back with [Writing the City](#) regularly: it's a great resource that addresses many of the points I've raised here.

Most of all, good luck and keep writing! Like anything worth doing well, it gets better with practice.

For a list of writing resources, [click here](#)