An Essential Guide

From Literature Wales

**Planning and Organising Your Writing Life**

**Introduction**

As writers, we can be passionate about our craft, immersed in creativity and it’s easy to miss the administration which supports that creativity. It’s easier to reach our goals when we haven’t just missed the submission date for a long-awaited competition or didn’t realise our dream agent was closing their submission window (for the year). But by setting up simple organisational systems, we can support our creativity with a framework that allows us to get lost in the worlds we create - without losing what we need to keep track of in this world.

**Goal Setting for Writers**

We begin our plans with goals - setting ourselves up for what we want to achieve. But setting goals can be confusing for a writer. The publishing industry can be mysterious and opaque, especially for people under-represented in publishing. It can feel like an enigma to understand how anyone gets a commission, wins a competition, finds an agent or gets published. Because of the multitude of factors in each of these milestones and the overall lack of transparency, it can be hard to know the steps to our dreams. You may have heard of Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound (SMART) goals, which are useful, but we also have to consider what we can control. It can be draining to pour lots of energy into thinking about things outside of our control.

Let’s look at an example. Say a writer wants to sign with a literary agent. They might set the goal of “Sign with the best literary agent for me this year”. The goal is specific, measurable, relevant and time-bound but it can be unclear whether or not it’s achievable.

**What’s not within the writer’s control?**

* Whether an agent is open for new clients.
* If they have an author writing a similar book/similar subject matter on their list already.
* When the agent will have time/capacity to read their submission.
* How the market and editors at publishing houses are responding to books like theirs at the moment.
* Who the agent thinks they could sell the book to.
* If/when the agent signs them.

**What’s within the writer’s control?**

* Writing the best book possible.
* Taking a class on proposal writing.
* Reading copies of *The Artist and Writers’ Yearbook* at the library for tips on polishing their proposal.
* Getting feedback on their sample chapters from a writing friend and making edits.
* Researching agents to find someone who may be a fit.
* Writing a pitch letter and taking it to a pitch event for feedback.
* Pitching their top five agents and editing their proposal based on any comments.
* Being a generous literary citizen by supporting and signal boosting other writers, being part of the writing world they want to live in.

If we set goals that we have agency over, we are less likely to feel demoralised or powerless. We often set goals that are really dreams, and they are dreams we hang our hopes on. We can think that when we get *\_\_x\_\_,* we will feel *\_y\_\_\_.* That winning/being commissioned/agented/published will put us in a certain place. Finally, our family will pay attention, we will prove that teacher wrong, we will be a ‘real’ writer, it will all have been worth it etc. But when we get there, we will still be human, still messy and real. If we think about what we’re hoping will happen after we reach a certain goal, can we ask, “What would happen if I gave myself that recognition today? If I treated my work that seriously now?” Is that possible?

Writers often question if they have ‘talent’, if they are ‘enough’. Alexander Chee, author of *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*, has an interesting perspective on this: “Talent, in some ways, is a little bit of a thief. It seems to offer you limitless access to opportunity—but even as it does, it reassures you that maybe you don’t need to work as hard as everybody else. And that is the thing that will be your undoing. So that the person who steadily works at writing and gradually improves often becomes a writer more often than a talented person.”

Once we have set the goals, we need to think about how we measure progress. Rather than look at the gap between where we are and how far we have to go to our goal (“I have written every day for a month and I don’t even have a decent chapter”), we can measure the gains (I have shown up to the page every day, written 5k words and my dialogue has really improved”). Measuring our progress can help us remember what we have achieved when we next meet a rejection: “I haven’t signed with an agent, but I have learned to write a strong synopsis, my proposal writing helped me strengthen my world building and my editing skills are much sharper.”

**Finding Opportunities**

Once we have set our goals, we need to find opportunities that will help us reach that goal. This can be a helpful process as there can be lots of opportunities, but we have limited time, energy or funds for submission/competition entry fees. Once I have found opportunities, I schedule them into my online calendar and set reminders to prepare for their submission openings. I also make a point to share these opportunities with other marginalised and under-represented writers and to signal boost them on social media.

Check out the **Resources** section below for places that offer great round-ups of writing opportunities.

When you find the opportunity, you may have ideas or a rush of thoughts around the topic when you first read it - do your best to capture those, in a voice note or notes app or scribble on paper to hand, but try to grab them as those first thoughts often contain the seeds you will grow your piece from. When I reply to letters, I jot down my responses and thoughts on reading the letter on the back of the envelope it arrived in. Otherwise, I read the letter full of excitement for my loved one's’ news and then when I sit down to reply a week (or a few weeks) later, the news is stale, and I can’t think of anything to say. But if I turn to my excited notes, I can re-capture what I would have said if we were having a live conversation and it’s the same principle here. It’s easier to avoid writer’s block when we’re working from a starting place.

**Keeping Track**

I have a weekly date with my planner - pot of tea, podcast and my pastel highlighters lined up with my Passion Planner to prep for my week. That’s how I balance my portfolio career. I use a spreadsheet to track my submissions - more details on that in the resources section.

It can be useful to choose what you want to track - I track application dates and what I submitted, but I don’t keep track of dates shortlists or awards are announced. If I get awarded, it’s a lovely surprise but that means I’m not agonising over the announcement. Once I have submitted, I’m on to the next thing as once I have pressed submit, it’s not my business.

**How to tackle applications**

We can, as writers, get distracted by applications and miss out on writing time. I find it useful to focus on which opportunities are likely to get me closer to my goals and I prioritise the ones I have more chance at getting. For example, an international prize with many thousands of entries is a longer shot than a local literary magazine - but it would likely to lead to more for a writer, in terms of agent interest. So, it can be useful to apply for smaller and bigger things, and think about the number of things you can apply for, given your time and budget.

Once you have selected opportunities to apply for, think about how long you think the application will take. If you have a writing sample to submit, a bio and a personal/artist statement written that you can adapt to fit the theme, it will be quicker. But it can be useful to think how much time is reasonable to spend on this. My calculation is:

My financial capacity + my energy capacity ÷ how important this opportunity is for me = the number of hours I will spend on it.

If I have said I will apply to 3 opportunities this month, but I have been sick and it’s the last week of the month, then I will prioritise my most important one and give it the time I can, say 2 hours. In that case, I will add an extra half an hour to that calculation for finding files, re-reading and any distractions. Then, I will set a timer for half an hour and start. When the timer goes off, I will check if I’m a quarter of the way through. If not, I need to speed up or shift my timings.

Just like exam and interview technique, it’s possible to improve our application technique by ensuring we follow all the guidelines, developing a good bio and artist statement and responding to any feedback we get. A clear, complete application makes it easier for assessors to focus on our writing.

*Resources overleaf… /*

**Resources**

**Opportunities Round-Ups:**

[Literature Wales, Opportunities](https://www.literaturewales.org/for-writers/opportunities/)

[Sian Meades-Williams](https://mailchi.mp/69d207801f23/freelancewritingjobs), Freelance Writing Newsletter

[The Practicing Writer](https://erikadreifus.substack.com/)

[Women On Writing Markets](https://www.wow-womenonwriting.com/)

[Study Hall Newsletter](https://studyhall.xyz/pricing/)

[New Writing North Newsletter](http://newwritingnorth.com)

**Planning:**

[Passion Planners](https://passionplanner.com/)

Setting up a submission spreadsheet:

[Audrey Niven, SubClub workshop and meet ups](https://thepropellingpencil.com/2023/03/27/book-your-spot-at-subclub23/).

**On balance:**

[Do you want to be known for your writing or your swift email responses](https://catapult.co/stories/do-you-want-to-be-known-for-your-writing-or-for-your-swift-email-responses)?

**On applications:**

[Writing an artist statement](https://www.artdex.com/the-complete-guide-to-writing-an-artist-statement/)

[Writing a queer speculative artist statement](https://catapult.co/dont-write-alone/stories/speculative-artists-statement-for-queer-writers-writin-exercise-atom-atkinson)

[Courtney Maum, Before and After the Book Deal](https://courtneymaum.substack.com/)

[The Empowered Author](http://theempoweredauthor.com)

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