

THE FOREST FOR THE TREES: An Editor's Advice to Writers

by: Betsy Lerner



Overview

Betsy Lerner went from having no idea what she would do after college to becoming one of the most recognized editors in her field. By intimately involving herself in her authors' lives, she gained knowledge of writers' processes and characteristics, as well as learning what makes or breaks a writer. In this book, Lerner hopes to teach beginning writers, regardless of age, about the publishing process from the editor's viewpoint. She also aims to teach authors about the writing process, handling rejection, and turning their personalities into sources of strength instead of sabotage.

"The best books, like newborns, come into the world screaming their arrival and gasping for breath."

PART I: WRITING

Chapter I: The Ambivalent Writer

If you come up with new ideas daily but rarely carry them out, if you keep switching between forms and genres (e.g. poetry, short stories), chances are you are an ambivalent writer. These writers constantly fluctuate between self-aggrandizement and worthlessness, a common trait. Yet they struggle to put their ideas to paper, constantly changing their writing habits and rarely finishing anything. They may ask others what to write, which is about as useful as asking others what to wear. No matter what people suggest, it's ultimately the writer's call.

"A writer gravitates toward a certain form or genre because, like a well-made jacket, it suits him."

Once a writer finds a form and genre that suits them best, sticking to it is ideal. It's easier honing talent on one thing at a time, and readers will appreciate watching a writer develop. Ambivalent writers who cannot decide on one style may not be psychologically equipped to write, or perhaps are held back by fear of failure. Yet fear can also fuel writing, especially the fear

of never getting your voice out there. If you think you're an ambivalent writer, try these tips:

- List what you read and write about and try finding underlying themes and patterns.
- Avoid conforming to the bestseller list and look within yourself for inspiration.
- Identify your obsessions.
- Find what drives you to write, e.g. strong feelings, a need to define yourself, or a desire for change

Chapter II: The Natural

Natural writers don't just have some innate talent or ability, but rather a craving to write all the time, even if just in their heads. To them, there is no greater pleasure than writing and no greater lesson than reading other people's work to find something to learn from, and perhaps to compete against!

Their secret to success is not any inborn talent or even passion, but rather their perseverance to keep writing, repeatedly. Their drive to keep submitting, relentlessly, even after facing scorching rejection. The amount of time dedicated to their craft is what truly hones great writers. It requires, in a word, *discipline*, which natural talent alone simply does not guarantee. Natural talent sans putting in the hours will not result in sales. There are many examples of books with writing styles that critics found lacking, yet which have become tremendous successes due to the writer's discipline and perseverance.

"A natural facility with language does not necessarily mean a natural ability to communicate ideas that find currency in the culture."

Several writers that people consider "naturals", such as George Orwell or Joan Didion, actually began writing from a young age and thus accrued many hours of practice. Whereas many young budding writers simply stop writing after college to pursue more financially stable careers, some writers cannot help themselves. If

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