

Professional Development – Take Charge of Your Writing Career

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Professional development is more important now than ever in our knowledge-driven society. Technology and business move at jet speed. The writing industry may be a little slower, but it still moves. If you are a career writer, you need to stay on top of the changes or risk being left behind.

You might find it easy to slip into passive mode and go about your writing day without stretching your creative, business or technical muscles. The longer you go, the harder it becomes. Nobody is going to step in and make sure you move forward. There is not one person who is more vested in your career than you. With this in mind, sit down, develop a professional development plan for a specific period of time and put it into action.

What is a Professional Development Plan?

Simply put, a professional development plan is an informal or formal document that provides details about what you plan to learn during the coming year/months. It is typically written after short and long-term goals are identified. The plan becomes a map used to guide and help you retain focus on your objectives. It is a living document, meaning it can change as new opportunities or needs become known.

Why Should a Writer Care?

Writers should care about professional development because without growth, writing becomes stale and old school. Imagine that you have a closet full of books all published ten to twenty years ago. Now imagine that you spend all your reading time rereading these classics. Then you write a book and submit it to an editor. Since you have not spent any time reviewing current books, you have no idea what the editor/agent expects. Additionally, your work is going to sound like it is stuck in the past. Everything changes over the years including the pace at which we speak, the words we use and the common knowledge we've experienced. We do things differently than we did decades or even a few years ago. Editors and readers want something they can relate to that's fresh and keeps pace with the times.

Development Planning

Forget about the cost of training at the moment. Think of all the areas associated with your writing career that need development. The craft of writing, business of writing and technical side of writing are three main areas that break into smaller components. Here are a few examples each category.

Craft of Writing

- [Goal, Motivation and Conflict \(GMC\)](#)
- Dialogue
- Description
- Characterization

- Plot structure
- Scene and structure

Business of Writing

- Types of corporations – incorporate or not
- Contracts
- Bookkeeping/taxes
- Marketing
- Sales (pitching)
- Distribution
- Publicity

Technical Side of Writing

- Web site development (usability, interface considerations, etc.)
- Web site hosting
- Web site maintenance

NOTE: Even if you don't plan to develop and maintain the site yourself, you still need to be educated on some of these components. For instance, what to expect from a company you hire to develop and/or maintain the site, how to kick off the development process, how to get results from the Web site, how to track Web statistics and use them to make marketing decisions, etc.

- Word processing skills (brush up, speed up)
- Software package skills (bookkeeping software, web development, word processing, etc.)
- Other productivity tools ([Alphasmart Neo](#), [Dana](#), etc.)

.Action Steps

Now that I have overwhelmed you, let's break it down into something more manageable. First, know that you cannot possibly learn about everything in one year. Second, you cannot possibly know everything about a topic. Even the experts have to look things up. The goal is to expand your knowledge formally and/or informally to give you a stronger base of knowledge to work from so that you can make informed decisions and increase the quality of your writing. It is all about life-long education.

To begin identifying what you want to accomplish this year, look at your three or five year plan. Don't have one? Start here. Where would you like to be in three or five years? Write it down. Remember, this is an informal document that nobody else needs to see.

Once you are done identifying these goals, take a hard look at your strengths and weaknesses. Write them down. Do not be shy.

Now it is time to figure out your plan of attack. How are you going to focus on the specified topics? Do you need a class? Can you study this on your own? The inevitable question is, where do you

find the resources necessary to support you? Below are some ideas of where to look for classes, etc.:

- Join a writers' group
 - Get involved in a critique group.
 - [Romance Writers of America \(RWA\)](#) offers a yearly conference that covers craft and business. They also have online discussion groups to put you in touch with other writers where you can discuss various topics discussed above.
 - Local chapters of RWA. If you are in Georgia, check out [Georgia Romance Writers](#). There are also online special interest chapters you can connect with. In addition to their normal offerings, many of these groups host online courses, in-person workshops/seminars and yearly conferences. RWA's Web site can help you connect to a chapter close to you.
 - [Sisters in Crime](#)
 - Other writing groups not associated with any of the groups mentioned.
- Personal study
 - Craft of writing books (Writer's Digest has an entire series)
 - Check out the business and technology sections of your local bookstore
 - Research the Web
 - Read books in the genre you are writing
 - Research publishers' submission guidelines
- Continuing Education
 - Workshops ([Break into Fiction](#), [Discovering Story Magic](#), etc.)
 - Writing retreats
 - [Gotham Writers Online Workshops](#)
 - [Writers Digest Writers Online Workshops](#)
 - Writing conferences not associated with RWA or the local chapters
 - Check out [Stephanie Bond's Web site](#). She has great advice posted.
 - Subscribe to Writing Magazines (Writers' Digest, etc.)
 - Continuing education programs offered through local colleges and high schools

Needless to say, there are an abundance of resources out there. All you have to do is a little research. Google your ideas and figure out what actions you would like to take this year. Customize your plan to suit your financial situation. The range of costs is from free to expensive. Do what suits you .

Sample Document Layout

Use this sample document to plan and track your progress.

Long range plan: make sure it is reasonable and something you can control	
Strengths	Weaknesses
Development Plan Focus	
Focus on the following topics in YYYY (year): pick one or two topics for the year	
Checklist	
Action	Completed

Execute the Plan

Once you have identified your topics of focus and the action steps, do not wait to get started. Before you know it, we will be celebrating another new year. Don't get left behind your peers. If you are a bit shy in pursuing some of the action steps, find someone willing to mentor you in the area you need help. The bottom line is to get started now.

Tammy Schubert crafts romantic stories about women who dare to take action and the men who love them. She also authors a technical column for writers that bridges the gap between the writing process and key software applications, empowering writers to achieve their goals more efficiently and to manage their businesses more effectively.