

Building a Writing Life

A Story Principles Guide



When you move through the world with a sense of control and confidence, you will make more intentional choices and better manage the tradeoffs that come with your decisions. For example, if a writer wants to delve into the minds of barflies, they might take a job at the local dive. That job will come with bad hours and worse pay, but they won't feel resentment because the choice was made consciously. An overall sense of control and purpose will free up massive creative energy that used to go to stress, worry, and anxiety. Life becomes much more interesting and the creative energy you free up goes directly into idea generation and problem solving. The key is to identify and get comfortable with your best writing life.

With a relaxed, open mind, read through each of the following personas you might adopt to build your writing life.

The Lone Wolf

This writer demands total freedom and has the guts to bear any burden in pursuit of realizing their art. Their force of will is strong. They will sleep on other people's couches, eat their food, borrow money, live in abject poverty, and will not be denied. They may do some questionable -- or even straight-up immoral -- things to hit the big time. But the ends will justify the means when their genius is gifted to the world. They don't have a Plan B as it would only weaken Plan A. They don't want a spouse or kids and if they have them they make it clear to all that these people come second to their work. If the Devil himself leapt out of Hell to insist they quit writing and get a 9-5 job, they'd kick him in the nuts. The Lone Wolf puts their creativity above everything else in the world. They'll be successful or die trying.

The Part-Timer

This writer is someone who is fine working a part-time job to pay the bills. They don't care what it is -- legal secretary, barista, dog walker. Since the gig is not too taxing or demanding, it takes the stress off their creativity. Writing is hard enough without needing it to make rent. They don't curse the job or see it as a threat to their identity as a writer. It's just something they'll do until their writing career takes off. And it is a welcome distraction from writing. They like having something else to do so their mind is not eaten up analyzing every word they put down. And it



provides stimulation from interacting with people and generates ideas for stories that come from being in the world. The Part-Timer is a practical person. They accept living a modest, even humble lifestyle as a necessary sacrifice to pursue their art. And, while writing, they may be every bit as fierce and dedicated as The Lone Wolf.

The Full-Timer

The Full-Timer works a full-time job to pay the bills. They might even have a stable marriage, kids, and a dog. For whatever reason – circumstance, obligation, duty to family, personal temperament – they choose to work a “real” job and provide a good life for their loved ones. Writing is not their identity, or not their entire identity, and they will not die in agony if the world doesn’t respond well to their stories. When writing her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison worked as an editor at Random House. This was a high-stress, high-profile, full-time job where she worked with major celebrities like Muhammad Ali. Poet Wallace Stevens worked as an attorney at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company for most of his career. These writers need to just finish few pages a day, which they can do by writing when time allows -- often early morning or late at night. They don’t write for money because they insist on creative freedom. And they will only share their work once it’s reached their standards of excellence.

The Wanderer

The Wanderer travels the world and follows random paths that serendipity presents. This persona was profiled in David Epstein’s excellent book, *Range*. The idea of the book is that many great artists did numerous things early in their life, then synthesized their varied experience into a coherent whole that inspired their art. Van Gogh worked many jobs – day laborer in the fields, country preacher – before becoming a painter. This fueled his art. He didn’t get an MFA, bury himself in debt, and stress out about justifying his life from his early twenties. He didn’t have a “tiger mom” bullying him to practice painting 20 hours a day. If he did nothing but paint from a young age, he would not have had the life experience that inspired his paintings. Masterpieces like *The Night Café*, *The Potato Eaters*, and *Landscape Covered with Snow* came from living in the world. This persona lives by Gandalf’s famous line from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, “Not all who wander are lost.”



The Mooch

The Mooch romanticizes being a writer and could never do anything else. A real job is something lesser people do. The difference between the Lone Wolf and the Mooch is the Lone Wolf hits milestones along the way – landing an agent, selling work, winning rave reviews. The Mooch shuns accountability. No matter how little they earn off their writing, no matter how few stories they actually finish, they cling desperately to their identity as a writer. Like vampires, they depend on others to provide for them and tend to their daily needs. They mooch off enabling parents. They mooch off friends. They mooch off spouses who believe they're supporting an artist. And when the poor spouse falls on hard times The Mooch will not step up. And if God forbid the spouse questions The Mooch's plans or writing, The Mooch will fly into a rage, question their spouse's faith in their genius, and even burst into tears. The Mooch is a fallen soul whose tragic flaw is seeing art as an identity and not something that occurs naturally as a byproduct of living a meaningful, interesting life. They don't realize the job they so desperately fear would actually make them a better person – and likely a better writer.

The Escape Artist

The Escape Artist seriously considers the writing life but chooses not to pursue it. They are not "quitters" in any negative sense. This persona's life plays out something like this. She goes to a good school, studies literature and writes well. Her professors admire her work and after graduation she gets a book published by a small press. She lives a quiet, humble life. But in time gets married, has a child and deals with the 10,000 daily tasks of a working mother. Tired of struggling to pay the bills she realizes that she is not having fun, not writing at the highest level and not fully engaged with her family. She sees countless books published each year by more successful, inspired, famous and connected writers and calculates the odds of success as being very low. So she stops writing and builds a career – with steady money, health insurance, doing work she finds meaningful. When she spends time with her family she is present not obsessed with her status as a writer. Over the years she builds a meaningful, connected and comfortable life. At times she misses



writing, and wonders what might have been, but she accepts the life she's lived and is content.

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Workbook:

Make a decision. Which one is best suited to both the reality of your situation and how you wish to live? After you make this decision check in on it in a week, month, and three months later. And notice how it feels to take responsibility for your creative life.

While it's not pleasant to consider being The Mooch, becoming one is a risk you take when you live the writing life. As time passes and pressure to live up to your dreams mounts, its easy to fall into bad habits, grow darker and take advantage of others. At Blackbelt we respect Charlie Munger's advice to "invert always invert." He meant to articulate how *not* to do things in order to avoid mistakes and make better decisions.