

January 2010 GRW Workshop Presentation

What I Wish I'd Known When I First Started Writing

From a PRO Perspective

By Tami Brothers

I was reading Agent Janet Reid's blog and she referenced a comment on Rachelle Gardner's blog. Rachelle said, "You're not going to get free writing advice." Janet summed this up by saying, "You'll have to pay with either time or money. You either hire an editor OR you invest time in finding and participating in a good critique group or attending classes and conferences. One or the other, maybe both, but not NONE of them."

I can't stress the importance of this *one comment*.

Money or Time!

As you work towards your goal of becoming published, be conscious of how long this process is and just how much you have to put into it. Just like with this meeting. Today, you are paying for writing advice with your time. The three hours you spend here are three hours you won't get back. This doesn't include the fee you paid or the fees you pay to be a member of the organization. Sounds simple enough when I say it, but until this sinks in, you are not going to fully understand the price required for success in this.

This workshop isn't just from me. Of course I've learned a ton of stuff over my eight years worth of writing, but that's still only one person's point of view (POV). So, I polled some wonderful writers from the group blog I'm a part of (Petit Fours and Hot Tamales) and combined their comments into this workshop to give you the biggest bang for your buck. I'm sure with all of that, you will find some nugget of information that will benefit you wherever you are in your writing journey. Although I will reference the PRO program of RWA throughout this workshop, this information is also invaluable for new writers.

Pro

PRO is the designation that RWA (Romance Writers of America) labels those writers who are actively working towards publication, (PROfessional writers). A lot of people just write, whether it be as a hobby or just something to do. Very few actually finish the manuscript and

send it off to an agent or editor. The PRO program is a stepping stone on their way to publication and here to recognize and help that minority.

If you have completed a manuscript (over 40,000 words) and have received a rejection or acceptance letter from an agent or editor on that manuscript, you are eligible to become a PRO member. For more information on this process, contact your local chapter's PRO Liaison. They can give you the most up-to-date information on the application process.

More PRO information can be found on the RWA Website under the PRO members' only section. Some examples of this information are listed below:

PRO Career Series – this is a series of booklets that currently feature the following (note, these change constantly as time goes by so be prepared if the item you are looking for is not there or something new has replaced it):

PRO On The Brink – Contracts (13 pages) and Last Thing I Learned before I Sold (20 pages)

PRO Promotion – Websites (87) and Branding (54)

Business Basics – Writing Basics (103), Marketing (48), and Career Basics (102)

Professional Relations – Author/Industry Professional Interest (pre and post conference), Author/Agent Profession Interest

PRO Forums – These are announcement loops where PROs can learn more about agent and editor appointments, PRO boot camps (online workshops), booklets and newsletters, have your questions answered, etc.

PROspects – the PROs have their very own quarterly newsletter that gives out information targeted at people who are serious about achieving publication.

PRO Retreat – This retreat is a part of the National Conference and classes are targeted to address PROs' needs.. Just recently, the highlighted classes were Contracts (presented by Ethan Ellenberg Agency) and How To Survive Almost There.

As you can see, there are a ton of reasons to shoot for being a PRO member.

Brenda Davis - Reaching PRO was a love/hate thing for me. I understand PRO and am very thrilled and *love* that I finished a book, pitched it, and was asked for the first three chapters, then the full manuscript! I floated around for a few days just a few feet above the ground. I *hated* that it was not purchased and published. But first things first. PRO is definitely a step in the right direction.

There is No RIGHT Way

Ana Aragon – There are many ways to get published in this business. Don't look down your nose at anyone who happens to choose a different way than you would.

Tami Brothers – I've said this to people before and you'll probably hear it from me again. Everything I tell you, everything someone else says to you, is something that has worked for us or something we have heard, read about or was told about. The key point here is that it may not be the right thing for you. My friend Vonda attended the November meeting where Mark All gave us a fabulous look at breaking the process down into scenes. This was a great workshop for a "plotter." For Vonda, a self proclaimed "pantser" (someone writes without a detailed outline), this was information she couldn't use. Keep that in mind.

Money

Ana Aragon - Don't expect to make a dime in this business...that way, when you get your first advance, you'll be delightfully shocked! Oh, and don't quit your day job. Most authors have either multiple streams of income or a well-paying day job.

Tami Brothers – Money is a huge factor in writing. I've often said, "If I'd known then what I know now, I wouldn't have waited so long to go back to school." By school, I mean the bachelors degree I'm working on in business that will help me with the job that actually provides the paycheck I use to live on while I spend my "free time" writing.

I can't stress Ana's statement enough. I spent years putting my career on hold thinking that book deal was just around the corner. I haven't given up on the idea of making a living from my writing. I have accepted the reality that until my writing is good enough to catch an agent or editor's eye I need to have a career that keeps the roof over my head and the food on my table.

Professional Organizations

Brenda Davis - Becoming a member of GRW (Georgia Romance Writers of America) was the best thing I could have done. The workshops and conferences are a phenomenal help. The presenters know what they are talking about!

Anna Steffl - Join a professional organization sooner rather than later. You can learn so much by having a published author critique just a few pages of your work. You can read all the books in the world, but still not see where you're going wrong.

Tammy Schubert - Get involved in a writer's organization and stick with it. Get involved in their volunteer efforts and participate in whatever they have to offer. Don't forget to try and find a way for you to give back while helping yourself. For example, write for the Galley, give a small workshop on an area you specialize in that is relevant to some part of the writing journey, etc.

Susan May - Being a member of a professional group keeps you encouraged.

Tami Brothers – I can't stress enough how much being a part of Georgia Romance Writers has affected me. I'm the type of person who probably would have given this up a llllooonnnngggg time ago if it weren't for the friendships I've made over the years. I think back on several different things I wanted to do over the years. I know if I'd had the encouragement and the comradery I found in this organization, I might be in a different place right now.

I will say that each and every time I attend a monthly meeting, I come away refreshed and full of excitement about writing. People who aren't writers don't fully understand the hurdles, the pain and frustration writers deal with every single day. As much as we love our family and friends who are non-writers, there is NOBODY like the friends you make through a writing group.

Critique Groups

Brenda Davis - You keep hearing about critique groups. I want to be a part of a good critique group. I think it is essential. Get a critique partner.

Tammy Schubert - Get into a critique group (obvious to all the PROs now). Know when to get out when it isn't working. Exit gracefully. Also, don't fall for expensive gimmicks like book doctors, especially early in your writing career. Your critique group's advice is free and extremely valuable.

Darcy Crowder - About contests, unless you have no other options, I don't suggest contests as a first form of feedback for a new writer – get a critique group, or take a class where you can get instructor feedback.

Sally Kilpatrick - You can't see your own mistakes. You need good readers to help you find not just typos but also the "word of the manuscript," excessive adverb usage, confusing passages, etc.

You can't rely on what others say exclusively. It has taken a great deal of time, but I think I'm finally learning what to take and what to leave when it comes to commentary from others. When I doubt myself, I remember what the mentor of one of my mentors (Richard Bausch) once said. To paraphrase, self-doubt is an indicator of talent. In his experience as a fiction teacher, the students who never questioned their abilities were the ones who didn't have true talent.

Susan May - Critique partners are important.

Workshops and Conferences

Brenda Davis - Go to workshops. Every workshop has *something* you can use.

Darcy Crowder - Margie Lawson's workshops (all of them) are worth their weight in gold.

Take a good plotting class like Dianna Love & Mary Buckham's workshop. Don't drown in the details of learning how to write the perfect sentence – focus on crafting the story.

Susan May - Conferences help move your career forward. You always have to keep learning, attend workshops, ask questions.

Contests – March Workshop

Tami Brothers - The biggest point here is to get a second opinion on your writing before you send it into an agent or editor. And I don't mean your mother or best friend. As knowledgeable as these people might be, you need to have someone who writes what you write or who knows the industry you are trying to get published in. These are the opinions you're looking for to determine if your writing is really ready to move to the next step.

You need to keep the theme of time or money in mind when you read over the critiques you'll get from GRW's March Workshop. Remember the published authors who review our manuscripts are giving up their valuable writing time to give you professional advice. It is the same thing as paying an electrician to fix your dishwasher or an IT person to fix your computer. The hours it takes our wonderful volunteer, published authors to critique your pages is time they sacrifice from a paying job. A simple thank you note is a bargain for what they are giving up to help you on your journey; yet, you'd be surprised how many people don't actually write that thank you note. Please remember this in a few months, and also when you get your critiques back from your contest submissions!

Tammy Schubert - Pick and choose contests and conferences wisely. Don't waste your money on one that doesn't help you achieve your professional development objective. Identify your primary goal before making the selection. Figure out what is being offered, who is judging, etc. Ask yourself how their offering can help you achieve your current objective. Maybe the opportunity isn't right for you this year. Look again next year when you have a new goal to achieve and have more experience under your belt.

Darcy Crowder - Don't enter a contest until you have a book at the very least three quarters finished. You may surprise yourself and get a request.

Brenda Davis - I have written other books many years ago and sent some queries to publishers and agents only to be soundly rejected. The difference? I finally got a published author (in the line I was targeting) to **critique** my work. No compliments wanted nor needed. What I needed was a new set of eyes to look at my work, “see it for the first time” and tell me the truth about what works and what doesn't.

Pitching

Linnea Newsome - One of the funniest and informative presentations for pitching is this YouTube entitled "How To Make The Perfect Pitch (Without Striking Out)" with Terry McLaughlin. It's hysterical! It's the second one on the page:

<http://killerfictionwriters.blogspot.com/2009/08/two-years-discriminating-tastes.html>

Finish the Book!!!

Ana Aragon - The likelihood you'll get published goes up incrementally as you accrue finished manuscripts, not twenty-five pages and a synopsis of multiple contest entries. Enter contests, yes; but not to the point that you forget to finish manuscripts.

Be prepared to let it go

Ana Aragon - Don't be enamored with every word you put down on paper because those are the ones most likely to get cut in the final draft. Your goal in this business is to get published. If that means you have to cut 20,000 words out of your masterpiece, so be it.

READ!!!! Everything!!!

Brenda Davis - Read. It is important to read books in the lines you are pursuing. Read “how to” books, such as those on point of view (POV) and *Breaking Into Fiction*, and *Writer's Digest Writing Kit*.

Read – books like you want to write.

Read – books that are published where you want to be published.

Read – “How to” books.

Read the GRW and RWA sites!

Tammy Schubert - Books - *Emotional Structure* by Peter Dunne - really breaks things down, especially the difference between plot and story. Then he shows you how to implement his recommendations.

Actually read the Galley and the RWR. They have valuable information. Although something might not apply to you now, it probably will in the future. It's all part of the professional development process. Look around at authors' web sites to find articles they have written about writing. It's free advice from people who achieved the publishing dream.

Darcy Crowder - Donald Maass is a genius! Can't stress this enough. Get both his books, *Writing the Breakout Novel*, but I'm especially blown away by *Fire In Fiction*. I've read tons of how to books – and they all end up saying the same things...but his cut to the heart in a unique and deeper way. And let's face it, he's an agent.

Read Stephen King's *On Writing*.

Shrunk & White is the perfect grammar reference book.

WRITE!!!

Darcy Crowder - Don't get caught in the trap of endlessly studying craft to the exclusion of not actually writing. Don't read every craft book you can get your hands on, be discerning. Keep writing.

Sally Kilpatrick - Finish the book because it's a great habit to have. Even if your word count is low, it will get longer with each book you finish.

Another key to getting the appropriate word count is to plot. As writers we tend to think that the best writing is unforced and spontaneous. For most of us, however, waiting for unforced, spontaneous words will result in not writing.

This one's important: you don't need three hour chunks to write. If you're really dedicated you can carve out an hour here and thirty minutes there and whittle your way to your weekly goal.

Chasing Trends

Sally Kilpatrick - I wish I'd heard Sherrilyn Kenyon's speech about not chasing genre trends a long time ago. Of course, I probably wouldn't have listened.

Ana Aragon - If a sub-genre is hot, it's already too late. Write what you know and hope for the best.

Wrap-up

Brenda Davis - Relax, keep writing and pray.

Linnea Newsome -I wish I'd known the difference between being a good writer and being a good commercial writer.

Tammy Schubert - Don't let shyness hold you back. During meetings, workshops and conferences talk to people. Get to know them. Make friends with other writers. It not only helps you personally, but you can help each others through the writing journey. Learn to network.

Invest in yourself. Get the laptop, buy the craft books, go to conferences, enter contests, etc. It is all about professional development. Every career oriented person must invest in themselves to get ahead. Do what you can with the resources you have available. Be creative in how you go about it. Do what is right for you. Capitalize on the resources already available around you. Always, always remember that learning is a continual process no matter what else is going on in your life. Ask others how they are investing in their career. Everyone has their own approach, and you may find another way to develop yourself, your craft and the business side.

Sally Kilpatrick - It's not always about accomplishing your goals; sometimes it's about continually coming back to them. Persistence is more important than perfection.

Susan May - Writing is hard work.

Rejection is part of being a writer.

Not everyone will love your work or read it.

If you want it bad enough you will keep working to have it.

The story is about the characters.

Ana Aragon – Share your story ideas with any writer willing to listen. Writers do not steal story ideas; they're too busy writing their own.

Be prepared to put your dream of publication in the hands of a twenty-two-year-old assistant to the assistant editor, because that is who is likely reading your requested full manuscript. But don't despair—they know good writing when they see it.

Marilyn Baron -

Don't accept the first offer from an agent or the first contract you're presented. Ask around. Check out the legitimacy of the offer and the reputation of parties involved with other GRW members.

Register early for Moonlight and Magnolias Writers Conference. Early registration offers the best chance to get an appointment with the editor or agent of your choice.

It may take some time to find your voice. You may start out writing contemporary romance, but you will probably write several manuscripts and change genres several times before you find your voice or settle on a genre.

Don't use Writer's Market to find a publisher or an agent. I've found that RWA offers the most effective and streamlined list of editors and agents in my market.

Don't send a manuscript (partial or full) to an agent or editor until you feel it's ready. It's more important to get it right than to submit it early.

Tami Brothers - I have to put in my disclaimer here (again). Anything that was said here is just one or a few people's opinions on this. Everything in this industry is done by trial and error. What may be "true" for one person might not work or even be feasible for another. Workshops aren't really designed to be the "holy grail" on how to write a book. What they are designed to do is present an idea or technique that worked for someone else out there.

My final piece of advice is to go away **ONLY** with what you think will work for you and your writing. The rest isn't important, at least not yet...

Tami Brothers finds the time in between her busy work schedule and equally busy school schedule to write contemporary romance and young adult stories. When she isn't spending her remaining time with her family, she can be found blogging with her blog sisters at <http://petitfoursandhottamales.blogspot.com/> or at www.tamibrothers.com.