

The Joys and Frustrations of Being a Beginner

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Personal Perspective: What happens when you try something new after many years?

After 35+ years in the academic and research world, I'm sticking my foot into the world of writing fiction. At the start of the pandemic, I took a Zoom course and wrote my first bad novel in about six months. I asked a few people to look at it and got an awakening. This novel-writing business may be easy for some, but I'm not even at the starting line.

I didn't take creative writing in college but rather jumped into years of nonfiction writing—research reports, academic journal articles, books on topics like transition economies, women working abroad, [creativity](#), and insight. Then came newspaper columns (very short), a daily local NPR radio “column,” and this blog for *Psychology Today*. I wrote some short, very accessible books for leaders about creativity and culture. Most recently, I wrote a set of profiles of Vietnamese who lived through war and famine and now lead the country in [education](#), business, and government. All that has taught me to write clear nonfiction, and, naively, I thought it would help me leap into fiction.

Was I wrong?

Learning how to be a beginner again.

I joined a fiction workshop, where eight of us submitted 2,000 words a week for feedback. This group of [fantasy](#), sci-fi, romance, thriller, and historical fiction writers baffled me. I was the lone “gentle mystery” writer: no violence, gore, or torture. Just a story about a murder in a hot spring in the wild mountains of the Pacific Northwest.

The reviews from my colleagues were direct and felt brutal on first reading. But I've received many callous reviews on academic journal articles, so I did what I always found useful: I put the feedback in a drawer for a day or so and then took a look. And I realized, of course, that the reviewers were fair, honest, and pointed out many places where I needed to improve.

They chided me about point of view, the purpose of a scene, why to drop extraneous characters, scenes, chapters, and words. They clarified the difference between story and plot, subplots, and "episodic chapters." And that was just the first few weeks. I understood yet again that I am a beginner, but that also has its benefits.

For years, I've been an "expert" in my professional discipline and rarely embark on something completely new. So my writing adventure is a way to put myself into a situation where I can ask all the dumb questions. I can play since I've nothing to prove. As a fiction-writer-in-training, I feel completely free to be a beginning learner. There's a freedom that comes with that. And being a beginner gives me [empathy](#) for people in my classroom who may themselves be beginners.

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