

YOUR CHAMPIONSHIP WRITING MENTALITY: How To Achieve It

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The first step to achieving your championship writing mentality is to decide you want it!

I've met so many people in my coaching practice who want to *feel* like an accomplished writer or actor, but who don't want to do what it takes to actually *become* a fine writer or actor.

It's not a decision to be made casually, because for most of us it means a sizable shift in our attitude, priorities and sometimes our lifestyle; it means resolving to train like a serious athlete.

My previous two Championship Writing columns are based on the essential principles of sports psychology, which I believe effectively helps individuals develop their talent and skills in any creative endeavor. This segment will focus on applying those standards.

By the way, a champion is normally considered someone who is sensationally gifted. A protégé. This is often not the case. The champion with less God-given talent is driven by the indefatigable quest to become the best in his or her craft, art, sport, discipline or occupation—and they seek help to devise a plan, a system that will show them what they must do to excel.

It doesn't have to be a complicated blueprint, but one that clearly outlines the steps you must take in order to achieve your own personal championship mentality.

Decisions, Decisions

Complete honesty about what you genuinely want to do with your life can be frightening.

Here are a few questions that may help you clarify your thoughts so you can make some sound resolutions for your future.

Closing your eyes after you read each question to divine its answer will help you uncover your deeper truth. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers. Let go of any barriers—money, time, age, gender, race,

weight, height, the disapproval of others—that you believe prevent you from even attempting to achieve what you desire. They're self-imposed and will stand in your way just as much as you let them.

Express only what you want for yourself, not what you believe others want or expect you to do—as a person or a writer. Closing your eyes during the process may also help you envision yourself living the life you wish as you respond to each self-inquiry.

Simple Questions, Tough Answers

Why do you want to write?

In your heart of hearts, do you have a burning, consuming passion to write? Is your passion *enough* to research, study and practice to construct your solid foundation in becoming a productive, reliable, consistently good writer for as long as you wish?

Day after day? Year after year?

Are you ready to make an all-out, 100% commitment to your writing? Or are you hiding behind the fear of uncertainty?

Can you see yourself writing for a living? If you are already a pro, can you see yourself enhancing your career? How?

Do you see yourself continually striving to improve your craft—not because you *have* to, but because you *crave* that enrichment?

Define your personal writing championship mentality. If you had it, what would you do differently? How would you do it? How does it feel to be a champion?

Do you understand that professional writers are not only artists, but also self-employed businesspeople? You are the manufacturer of a product that you must present (pitch) and sell to someone else. Writing is only one function of the trade.

Even if you wish to independently shoot your own script, you still must build a knowledgeable team to help you produce it.

In short, it's important to have communication, people and negotiation skills to advance your career.

The thought of interacting with all those people can make a writer who spends most of his or her time toiling in the misery of ecstatic solitude break into cascades of sweat.


However, if you set out *only* to create scripts for money, sooner or later your enthusiasm for the craft will fade. In the end, writing remains a deeply personal venture; something that thrives because of what goes on inside the creator. The verbal architect's internal process requires protection and nurturing to remain productive and maintain an original voice.

Do you envision yourself telling stories not just to make money—not just to squeeze your script into a fad formula, but for the love of the work? Because you believe you have a great story to tell?

How do you support, nurture and protect your talent and craft?

Do you see yourself surrounded with loving, respectful, positive people who care for you and about your work? Do you see yourself returning their devotion and affection?

Envision yourself enthusiastically doing



▶ Writer-director-producer Colleen Patrick's screenplay *The Director* was a quarterfinalist in this year's CineStory competition; last year her screenplay *The Lucky Penny* finished in the top 10% of Austin's Heart of the Film competition, and she was a finalist in the Disney scriptwriting competition with a "Frasier" script, *The Hero*. Colleen's feature script *Into Thin Air* was optioned by Landis Productions (US) in 1998. Colleen is a former president and international liaison for the Seattle chapter of Women In Film. Colleen's short film, which she wrote, directed and produced, *Life As Art* was an official 1997 Academy Award submission. She has written, produced and directed four short films, the most recent a pilot for the series, *Behind The Movie Screen*, a mockumentary associated with her feature, *The Director*. The pilot can be seen at <www.director3.com>. She is currently in development as writer/director with her feature, *The Director*. Colleen is a successful on-camera acting coach who also successfully coaches writers. One writer Colleen coached through her manuscript, Jojo Jensen, was picked up by a major New York agent; her book, "Dirt Farmer Wisdom" (Red Wheel Publishing) was released in March, 2002. She is the author of two published books, *Mind Over Media*, (CHEF Publishing) and *The 100% Solution* (Meadow Brook Publications).

your work, enjoying your success and having a happy personal life.

Reality Strikes

Some will find that candidly answering these questions—and others that naturally occur in the process—startling. Why? Because they may realize that their genuine passion actually gravitates to something *other* than writing.

If this describes you, you can thank writing for helping you gravitate to what truly inspires, possesses, entices, intrigues, excites, arouses and intrigues you; what makes your heart flutter into a frenzy.

Be compassionate with yourself and grateful that you have had this insight and celebrate your discovery!

Now repeat the same questions, replacing the name of your newfound calling where the word “writing” appears.

If this is your realization, the rest of this column will be just as valuable to you as it is for those who experience a renewed or enhanced passion for writing from this process.

Motivation

In my experience, two things motivate and drive people with championship aspirations—*love*, and *fear*.

Love

Perpetual, ceaseless **passion** for not just the work itself but the process of developing and creating the work dominates the dyad. The champion athlete not only loves to play the game—she or he loves the minutiae that builds their skills, strength, stamina and quick reactions that allow them to feel free and have fun when it comes time to actually play the game effortlessly and well—reliably and consistently.

We may not witness the thousands of hours a champion spends on fitness, agility, strength and stamina-inducing exercises, but they are an integral part of their involvement. This “tedious” training, usually done daily, helps prevent injuries (minor and career ending) and accidents as well as help forge winning attitudes, aptitude, expertise, proficiency, competence and confidence.

Fear

The second major championship motivational emotion is fear.

The fear we won’t be able to continue to do what we love.

The anxiety created by this dread can propel us to work harder, longer, more effectively; striving to repeatedly surpass our current personal best.

Some of our greatest champions—in every occupation—have shared this fear; afraid of never working again; afraid of losing their “magic,” afraid of losing their hard-won victorious standing in their chosen field.

Sometimes that fear swells into a reliance on superstition; believing that using something unrelated to doing the

Break down the work to its most infinitesimal elements, and you will always have a place to start, wherever you might be frustrated or bogged down in a project. Go back to basics to rebuild your confidence.

Some of the primary basics of screenwriting are:

Reading screenplays, expanding your vocabulary, creating finite character personality traits (to be used now and later), and studying genre elements. Establishing production goals like writing a certain number of pages, or writing for a period of time each day; organizing your working area; reading good books and magazines

Establishing basic and long-term goals and creating a plan to put the goals into action is a good system.

work will influence their performance positively. Like a good luck charm taken a little too seriously, becoming superstitious—having a false notion of cause and effect.

The way to avoid succumbing to the unreliable promises made by superstition is to create a work preparation ritual. You won’t leave the quality of your performance up to chance—you’ll put it in your capable, expectant hands.

Goals

Now that you’ve identified your passion, the champion in you needs to devise a series of goals that will guide you to your destiny. You’ll need goals that can be attained easily and immediately to create a sound foundation of work habits, and well-grounded knowledge to be used for a lifetime. You’ll need long-term goals that include more challenging tasks which can only be attained with what you’ve established in your foundation.

Foundation Goals: The Basics

What are the basics of your work?

The ability to visually sculpt a character with words? Creating original stories inhabited with strong individuals? Presenting your story in a format that tells your tale in the most effective way?

that contribute to your knowledge, and watching films.

Business matters—do you have a screenwriting business card, along with functioning writing and communication equipment?

Figure out what specific basics you’d like to work on daily, or as often as possible, to fill your inner tank of creative juices so you can come up with the goods when you need it.

I actually have a list I check off to remind me to revisit my basics daily. Things like reading my thesaurus for vocabulary work, read a poem, read a screenplay (even a page a day is good), listening to conversations in a coffee shop and jotting down plot ideas in a small notebook.

If you follow any sport, you know that the best players have their basics *nailed*. When the pro’s run into trouble, they go back to basics. When things go wrong, it’s usually because they start getting away from the elementary, basic moves that translate into huge, game saving or winning plays.

Award-winning writers, actors, artists and athletes all know this.

Long Range Goals

Now define objectives that can be developed over a period of time, incorporating your essential basics—projects, marketing,

networking, scripts, books, articles, short stories ... directing your own script ... awards, fellowships, and accolades. Each requires a stepladder system of smaller tasks building up to it.

Basics can help your script—but you must make certain it's good. Non-professionals frequently don't understand what makes their scripts not-so-good. It's important to learn how a script needs to be adjusted to make it good. One of my upcoming columns will deal with *What Makes A Good Script?*

All these things need careful investiga-

tion—another week to prioritize and decide how much time you want to devote to each, and when. Once a day? Once a week? Once a month? Less often?

The most important component of this work is to devise a personally effective, organized system for your work. One that clearly shows how the first step leads to the second step, which leads to the third step, and so on.

For those who feel they're most creative when they're "out of control," establish your work system in a way that gives you plenty of "out of control" time. You'll find

It either works or it doesn't work. If it doesn't work, adjust it until it does. If it works, great. Doesn't work? Adjust it.

In truth, all artists are in the constant process of *problem solving*. Champions are in a constant state of solving problems, no matter the occupation. That's all it is. Find the problem and solve it.

The difference between the novice and the champion is that the champion recognizes what the problem is, and has the tool to solve it—whether that means seeking outside advice or using tools already at hand.

Write With Awareness

I find that when I write with awareness and gratitude—appreciating my ability to do this work, the fact that I am actually doing it and believing many people benefit from what I do—my energy level soars, regardless of how tired I might feel otherwise.

Remembering Successes

One of the most effective motivators I've discovered is to remember past successes. That goes for *anything*, not just writing or work.

On a 3x5 card, write as many successful experiences that you can recall in your life. Keep adding more as they come to you.

Make copies of your Success Card. Carry one with you; put one on your desk, another in your car, next to your bed, at your workplace. If you have one, paste one on your locker at school or at your job. Keep reminding yourself how successful you've been, so you feel confident about your ability to succeed.

If your successes have come in other areas of your life or other fields of work, think of how those actions can be paralleled in your writing career.

Plan Of Action

Persistence pays the greatest dividends—especially in an occupation of attrition like writing.

But to incorporate persistence in our lives, we must take action. Make that first step in making a commitment— aspiring to championship heights in your work and in your life. ■

NEXT COLUMN: CHAMPIONS TO ADMIRE

There's no right or wrong, good or bad.

tion—one place to start that research is <www.screentalk.org>, which has a lot of valuable information. For more, click on *Link Center*.

One of the biggest problems I recognize in writers I coach (and myself!) is impatience. They don't want to take the time they need to write as well as they are capable of. Quite honestly, trying to dash through a book or script and send it off too soon has caused many a talented writer's budding career to stall.

The logline is good enough to get a read, but the script doesn't live up to its advertising.

Establishing basic and long-term goals and creating a plan to put the goals into action is a good system. Patience—have lots of it—especially before sending your script to others, but protect yourself from paralysis by inventing a system that helps you advance your script as quickly as possible without sacrificing quality.

Priorities, Priorities

List your basic and long-range goals—give yourself a full week to jot down all of your ideas, no matter how far fetched or impossible they may seem. Let your imagination rule!

After a week of assembling your aspirations, divide them into two categories, "Basic Goals" and "Long Range Goals," then prioritize each.

Where do you start? Your weakest areas, because they need the most attention. Take

you're more creative during that time than ever before.

Your work system should feel tight, organized, simple to follow and *achievable*. The first tasks are elementary and confidence builders—the more challenging work builds from there. This should not feel like an avalanche of work that you'll never accomplish. The way to avoid that is to keep breaking the work down into smaller components and prioritizing those more narrowly defined tasks.

I've devised an artist's business plan for myself and the folks I coach which helps them understand what they need to do in the business of being a writer. There are literally hundreds of business plan templates on the Internet—choose one that suits your work and career and make one for yourself.

Breaking Down Walls

Consider what walls you've put in your own way. Be honest with yourself—is it laziness? Fear of reaching out? Whatever they might be, if you have any, now is the time for an attitude change.

The way we deal with fear defines who we are. Are you happy with the way you deal with fear?

The champion sees major challenges and constructive criticism as *positive*—even *inspiring*.

The non-champion experiences the same challenges and criticism as *threatening*.

There's no right or wrong, good or bad.