6-1-2008

How to Write Stories...And lose weight, clean up the environment and make a million dollars.

George Singleton

Julie Speer

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine

Recommended Citation
Singleton, George and Speer, Julie (2008) "How to Write Stories...And lose weight, clean up the environment and make a million dollars.," Furman Magazine: Vol. 51 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol51/iss1/11

This Article is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Magazine by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines. For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.
How to Write
This plan will work if and only if the writer-to-be is, say, 25 years old and intends to live another 50 years. But it’s fun to play even if you start at age 30 or 40. Maybe it’ll give you the incentive to live past 90.

**DAY ONE**
Wake up early and sit in front of the computer, or open up a nice Mead composition notebook. It doesn’t matter. I will assume that you know what a short story is — basically a 5,000-word piece of fiction with a recognizable beginning, middle, and end that involves a protagonist trying to best an antagonist. There will be rising action, and conflict, and dialogue, and maybe even a beautiful lyrical passage shoved somewhere in the middle when you’re not quite sure where the story’s headed.

On the first day, put two characters in an uncomfortable situation. Maybe you’re writing about the time you were 16 years old and buying condoms, and your boyfriend or girlfriend’s mother walked up behind you. That’s pretty awkward, if you ask me. This is fiction, though, so you need to make up some crap. Make the mother limp, for instance. Have her holding a package of bunion pads.

Anyway, write 1,000 words on the first day.

Now go out — this will work if and only if you live out in the country, in a state that doesn’t offer a nickel for cans, seeing as no one in those states throws nickels out the open truck window, I doubt, like they do where I live in Dacusville, South Carolina — with a plastic bag and pick up at least 50 aluminum cans. This might take as much as a quarter-mile of walking. Stomp. Add to the first batch.

**DAY TWO**
Reread your first 1,000 words. Rewrite. If you chose to write in the notebook, type up the rewrite on a computer. I’m not going to mention this again. Make sure your characters’ names didn’t change somewhere in the middle. Pick right up where you left off, and add another 1,000 words. Then go out and gather another 50 cans, which might take you as much as a half-mile of walking. Stomp. Add to the first batch.

**DAY THREE**
Reread your first 2,000 words. Rewrite. Write another 1,000. Go out on that walk and retrieve 50 cans, which might now take three-quarters of a mile. Don’t forget to wash your hands when you get home. I should’ve mentioned that earlier, too.

**DAY FOUR**
Reread 3,000 words. Rewrite. Write another 1,000. Go walk a mile and pick up 50 cans. Stomp them when you get home. Make a note to change the antagonist’s name, because you don’t want to get sued later on in life by people who don’t have the tenacity to become famous, rich, skinny, and environmentally conscious the old-fashioned, difficult way. Add your cans to the bin and realize that you’ve picked up 200 aluminum cans already. Good job. You’re doing your part. If you want to celebrate, make sure to drink beer out of a can so you can add it to your collection.

**DAY FIVE**
Reread 4,000 words. Rewrite. Write another 1,000 words. Finish up that first draft of your story. You’ve probably been thinking up possible titles while taking your aluminum-can-gathering walks, so make a decision. First off, ditch the first two or three titles that came into your mind. One of them will probably be something like “The Lesson.” It’s been used. One of them might be “Good Country People,” seeing as you’re happy about good country people throwing out their empty PBR cans. You can’t use that title, either. So settle on something like “Captain of the Solitaire
Team," because you've been thinking about how all these home-schooled kids living in the area don't have sports teams or after-school activities.

Okay. Now go out, walk a good mile and a quarter down the two-lane road, and get your 50 cans. Bring them home, stomp on them, etc.

DAY SIX
Reread the finished story. Make some changes. Print out a few copies. Go out and get another 50 cans, which might take you 1.5 miles of walking. When you get home, stand on the scales and notice that all this walking has caused you to lose almost four ounces of weight. Maybe you shouldn't have been eating all those Little Debbie oatmeal pies while you wrote.

Now gather your cans and take them down to a place that buys scrap metal. Turn in the cans. On average, 34 cans weigh about a pound. Turn in 10 pounds of aluminum cans — which will come to about $5 on today's market. Use that money to buy stamps. Buy six 42-cent stamps and as many subsequent-ounce stamps as possible. I realize that in the future, postal rates will go up. But then again, maybe the price of recyclable aluminum will skyrocket.

Always be optimistic, like I am.

A 5,000-word story usually runs about 18 pages. Every four pages of typing paper weighs an ounce. Your story, plus the cover letter — which will only read "Dear Editors, Please consider the enclosed story 'Captain of the Solitaire Team' for an upcoming issue" — will cost less than a buck-fifty to mail. And you'll need a regular business-sized SASE enclosed for response. So that's, say, $1.92, tops. You'll almost be able to send your story out to three places, which for some reason is frowned upon by some editors, but what the hell — you wouldn't apply for one job at a time, would you? And the editors are way up in New York, more than likely, and won't send down their unpaid interns to rough you up, seeing as the unpaid interns will stay for good once they notice how you live in one of the cleanest square miles in America.

A dollar and ninety-two cents times three comes to $5.76. Maybe you should've picked up more than 50 cans a day. I should've mentioned that it's easy to find empty aluminum cans in the garbage bins at the convenience store, gas station, in most parking lots, and so on. Maybe you understood that already. I hope so. I'm hopeful that you got obsessed about picking up aluminum, and that you have enough for extra stamps. I know it happened to me. When people ask me — rudely, I think — about my retirement plans, I say that I have all my money wrapped up in the aluminum market.

Now send out your story to The New Yorker, Harper's, The Atlantic Monthly, Playboy, Esquire, or any of those slick magazines that pay upwards of $3,000 a story. The chances of two of those magazines wanting the same story are slim. Don't sweat over it.

If you do sweat over it, just think of it as another way to lose weight.

DAY SEVEN
Start over. Start a new story. Write 1,000 words. Go out and pick up cans and notice how you're now walking farther. Or further. Make a note to get out the dictionary and look up the difference between those two words when you get home, stomp, and wash your hands. Do the same for "lay" and "lie" so you no longer have to write sentences like, "I reclined on the couch" or "You're telling a big fat untruth!"

DAY EIGHT
Don't be discouraged by the rejection from The Atlantic Monthly. How did the post office get the manuscript to the fiction editor, and he get the answer back so quickly? you'll wonder. It'll seem like the editor rented a Learjet to give you the bad news. He's that fast.

Rewrite the first 1,000 words of the second story, write another thousand, and realize that you need to get the first story back out in the mail soon. You might have to jack the number of cans up, for you'll need more postage.

END OF YEAR TWO
You finally hear about that first story you sent off from those magazines that weren't The Atlantic Monthly. Because you've sent a story a week to them, you think, "Man, they're still holding 103 stories of mine."

Meanwhile, you've taken each story and sent off to literary journals that pay 50 bucks a page, or 25, or 10. You've also started sending off to places that just offer you contributor's copies.
But that's all right. You're up to walking anywhere from six to 10 miles a day in order to find cans. You've lost 20 pounds or more.

YEAR EIGHT
*The Atlantic Monthly* takes a story. Or *Harper's*. No matter what or where, you get three to five thousand bucks upon signing the contract.

Do not go out on a 15-year drinking binge. Promise me that you'll not go on a 15-year drinking binge.

Take the money and invest it in either a CD getting five percent interest, or in a mutual fund that's not Putnam Voyager B.

YEARS NINE THROUGH FIFTEEN
You've sold stories now to a few of the slick magazines, you've been in a number of literary magazines, you've been anthologized, you've told a number of agents that you were “thinking about” writing a novel, and so on.

You still live in a trailer, but the countryside is spectacular.

You've invested all that money and now can boast about being a twenty-thousand-dollaraire.

YEARS SIXTEEN TO NINETEEN
Surely someone will take a chance on publishing your first collection of stories. You've now written about 832 of the things, 10 of which are okay.

You look good, except for all those nasty sores and lesions on your hands from forgetting to properly wash them after getting cut by aluminum cans.

YEAR TWENTY
Sign the book deal, no matter what. Like the rest of your money, stash 90 percent of the picayune advance into a CD or mutual fund that's not Putnam Voyager B. Take what's left over to wash and wax your trailer.

AFTER TWENTY YEARS
You'll never understand the workings of interest rates, but over time — notice how you don't have kids with which to bother, or a spouse, seeing as you've been slightly focused on your work — your savings will grow and grow and grow. You'll get more book deals, and a chance to leave the trailer in order to speak to people at colleges. They'll pay you more money than the magazines, somehow. And you'll speak at writers' conferences, even though you never even attended one over the years.

You never attended because A) they cost way too much money; and B) you wrote over that time instead of talked about writing.

CAVEATS
This little outline, of course, must be adjusted if you have a full-time job on the side. Maybe you have medical problems that need to be looked into. Maybe you live in a dry county where there's not enough discarded beer cans. Maybe you live in a county with a high rate of diabetes and there aren't Coke or Pepsi products laying or lying around. Maybe it's difficult to write a story a week — one every month is fine, but you'll have to multiply all those years above by four. Maybe the trailer gets hit by a tornado and you lose the will to live. Maybe you went on that 15-year binge like I've heard that most writers do. Maybe you fell in love with someone coming from the other direction, picking cans up off the side of the road, and now there's a bad jealous rivalry going on between two writers.

Well, then, don't write.

Reprinted with permission from *Oxford American* magazine, Issue 59.