

The Toolbox

The Basic Things Every Writer Needs To Write (In No Particular Order)

Before we get started, it needs to be pointed out that The Toolbox is not intended to improve your writing craft but to allow you to write. Sometimes we all need to be reminded that we don't need all those fancy (and sometimes expensive) things in order to formulate words and string them into sentences that will, hopefully, make a story.

1. The Blank Page

Whether it's a blank page in a notebook or the white page displayed in a word processing program on the computer, every writer needs a space that their words can call home. Don't limit yourself, either. LJ and Tricia both write in notebooks, on sketch pads, and on the computer. Doris does most of her work on the laptop and on graphic paper. Others make use of white boards and index cards. Use the formats of the blank page that work best for you and try to keep one or two of them handy at all times. You never know when inspiration might strike.

2. The Writing Utensils

If your Blank Page is a computer screen, then the computer is both the Page and the Writing Utensil. For most other formats, though, you'll need pens, pencils, markers, and/or highlighters for most writing and self-editing forays. If you're the type of writer who is visually stimulated and has a bit of artistic talent, then things like colored pencils, paints, and brushes would also be considered writing utensils. Even scissors, tape, and glue would fall into this category, especially if you're building a character morgue. (See the section on characters.)

Keep these items handy with as many Blank Page formats as you think you need. Little is more frustrating than having a great idea to jot down or sketch out with no pen or pencil in sight.

3. The Basic References: Dictionary, Thesaurus, and the Grammar Book

We can't tell you how many times we've had to use these since leaving school. Whether it's choosing the right word for the context, double checking the spelling, or looking up punctuation rules, every serious writer uses these to one degree or another. There are editors and agents out there who won't finish reading a manuscript if they see a lot of mistakes with words and grammar, so do yourself a favor and dig out those books. They'll come in handy.

Recommendation

We recommend *The Oxford Writer's Thesaurus*. It's a near perfect reference for any writer with contextual references, alternate phrasing for words, and notes about word choice and usage.

4. The Imagination

As a writer, your most valued assets are your mind and the stories that live there. Whether or not they are inspired by the works of other people, or just grow of their own volition, your ideas are the basis for every story you craft. Don't stifle them, and don't let them stagnate. If you find yourself out of ideas, then turn your attention to something else. Play a game, do laundry, work on another project, review your notes, get with a fellow writer to discuss your problem, listen to a podcast, or read a book. As frustrating as it may be for a story to stall, sometimes that imagination of yours just needs something else to do. You'll find inspiration in the works of others, or the solution to the problem will suddenly appear in the back of your mind as you do the household chores.

Recommendation

If you're looking for a podcast that can inspire and encourage that writing drive, we recommend *I Should Be Writing*, hosted by author Mur Lafferty.

5. The Time

Time is perhaps the one thing that most us wish we had more of. Working full-time at a day job takes up to 45 hours a week (with 1 hour lunches and not counting commute time), family life - for those of you who are married and/or have children - takes up a good portion of the evening hours, and then there's household chores, appointments, grocery shopping, etc. Many of us look at our lives and say, "When do I have time to do any writing?"

You do. You just have to find those pockets of it that already exist and exploit them. Take 30 minutes on lunch break to jot down notes, think about plot and characters on the drive to work (yes, this counts), have a notepad next you in the kitchen so you can scribble a few paragraphs while cooking dinner, or just schedule an hour every night or every other night to lock yourself away in the bedroom or office to write.

We've used our breaks, the time before our day job shifts start, and have scheduled blocks of time on the weekends to write. To paraphrase author Glenda Finkelstein, you have to want to write badly enough. If you do, you'll find the time, somewhere, somehow.

The Pitfalls of the Toolbox

Many writers – ourselves included – look at office supply stores as a type of toy store, or the places selling software tailored specifically for writing as some kind of Mecca. We “ooh” and

“ahhh” over the plethora of things that we can use in order to write our stories, poems, scripts, what-have-you. Some put a great deal of thought into this.

“If I’m going to write, I need an office set-up and that entails this, and that, and these...”

Should you be one of these people, allow yourself to plot it out on paper. Then list all of the ways that you are, realistically, going to use those items. If you can’t think of a practical use for something, then you don’t need it. Yes, it’s fun, it’s cool, it’s something neat to play with, and it gives you that warm and fuzzy feeling when you first bring it home, but let’s face it: it won’t help you on your way up the publishing ladder.

It’s also spending money that most writers who are just starting out don’t need to be spending. If you have money to burn, invest it in something that you’re going to use every day that you write: a good computer, a user-friendly word processing program, a decent printer, pens, and notebooks if you do hand-written notes.

This is, of course, an opinion. What you do with your money is entirely up to you.

The gist of all this is that there aren’t many tools that you need just to write your story. Your Toolbox can be anything that you want it to be, so long as it covers the basic necessities of the writing craft. Should you absolutely have to have the cute set of multi-colored pens, the post-it pads with clever sayings, and an inspirational quote-of-the-day calendar, be our guest. Just don’t let them distract you from your true purpose: writing.