



COURSE YOU CAN

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Finding time to develop your writing skills isn't always easy, but one great way to achieve this is to go on a residential writing course. It's a great way to escape from the distractions of life at home, or work, and you can get expert tuition from a course leader. Courses take place across the country (and even the world), depending upon how far you want to travel and how much free time you have. Their duration can range from a long weekend to an entire week, if not longer. However, if you like the idea of leaving behind your busy day-to-day life don't pack your bags just yet. Invest some time in finding the right course, and then consider how to make the most of the event, while you're away.

Bear in mind travelling times when considering courses. Make them appropriate for the length of the course. For example, if attending a weekend residential course, you don't want to spend an entire day travelling to get there. Ideally, you want to arrive feeling refreshed and raring to go, not exhausted and brain-dead from a nightmare journey. Don't let a long and tiring journey spoil the first session on a weekend course that might begin with formal tutoring on the first evening of arrival. Whereas on a week-long residential course formal tutoring may not start until the first full day, which gives you time to recover from any stressful travelling.

A good place to find courses is to check out the writing magazines, such as *Writing Magazine*, *Writers' Forum*, *Msexia* and *Writers Digest*. Alternatively, you can browse the courses run by reputable organisations such as the Arvon Foundation, Ty Newydd, Relax and Write, Skyros, Arte Umbria or Chez Castillon to name a few. (See useful websites at end of article.)

Finding the Right Course

The first step is to check what courses are on offer, which ones take your fancy and which one is right for you. Will it deliver what you're looking for? What topics will be covered and how long will the tutor spend on each? If the information isn't clear, get in touch with the organisers, who may forward your request on to the tutor. Organ-

isers are keen to answer any queries from potential delegates.

When reviewing course details, look for whether delegates are expected to have an existing level of expertise or knowledge. Is it aimed at complete beginners or writers with an intermediate level of knowledge? If you're unsure whether you're at the right level for the course ask the organisers. See if you can be put in touch with the tutor, so you can chat about any concerns you have.

Research your course tutor. What experience do they have, and is it relevant to the course they're teaching? Most organisers are keen to commission tutors who are knowledgeable in their field. Check out the tutor's website and read some of their published material.

Some courses allow you, or even require you, to submit an example of your writing in advance. If this is a requirement, make sure you can fulfil it. It's a missed opportunity if you can't – you're the one losing out, not your tutor. Try not to let the critiquing of your work concern you. On a residential course critiques of pre-course submitted work are usually given privately, face to face. And tutors are keen to offer encouragement and support, so if they find areas where your text can be improved, they should show you how to change and make those improvements. Critiquing should be a positive experience. (The last thing they want you to do is punch them in the face, if they upset you!)

We all learn differently, so find out what methods the tutor uses for teaching. Sometimes there will be a mixture of flipchart, audio-visual presentations, and hand-outs, whilst at other times there may be more formal readings. Writing exercises may be solitary affairs, or there may be opportunities to work in pairs, or small groups.

Find out how many are on the course, or what the maximum group size will be. Smaller groups offer more individual attention, but if they're too small the course may not be economically viable. I've run courses where I've had as few as four delegates, but have had more than thirty on others. Smaller groups work better, because there's more opportunity for individual feedback and discus-

sion, however, anything up to ten is a good number because it's large enough to have a variety of delegates, but small enough to be able to answer everyone's queries. I know from my own experience as a tutor that it's nice to give everyone an opportunity to read out their work after undertaking a writing exercise.

Make the Most of the Time Away

Although a residential course is an opportunity to learn, having some free time is important too. Our brains can only take in so much information, so regular breaks between sessions are beneficial, and some free time during the day and in the evening is often welcomed. Not only does this free time give you a chance to relax, it's also an opportunity for you to work on your own writing, or put into practice something you've learned during the sessions.

Bedrooms will be comfortable to retreat to, making them a great place to work on your own, but the venue may also offer some other interesting working areas. Make the most of the time that you're away from home. If the accommodation has lovely grounds, then explore your surroundings and get some fresh air. A perfectly positioned bench with far-reaching views may be the perfect place to spend an hour, enjoying the opportunity of being alone with only your muse and a pen and notebook for company. If you're visiting an area for the first time then use some of the free time to explore. Not only does this give your brain a chance to relax from the formal tutoring, your explorations may inspire new ideas.

While you shouldn't stalk your tutor during the entire course, do make the most of them. Meal times will often be taken together and most tutors are happy to answer any questions you have. Sometimes delegates aren't confident about asking a question during a tutoring session, or they're unsure whether their question is relevant for a particular session, so these informal chats at meal times or during tea and coffee breaks can provide a better opportunity. However, do respect a tutor's privacy. They are entitled to some free time themselves because tutoring can be mentally tiring. If you're unsure, simply ask your tutor if they're happy to answer your question. Generally speaking, if the tutor remains with the group outside of formal tutoring sessions, then they're happy for you to ask them questions.

Some tutors will offer their contact details at the end of the course in case any questions arise on your way home ... as so often happens. Respect the tutor's time. Get in touch, but don't worry if it takes a couple of days before you get a reply. While

tutors are teaching on a residential course it means they're unable to keep on top of their other commitments, so it can take a few days for them to catch up with what's come in whilst they've been away.

If the opportunity arises, swap contact details with other delegates. Staying in touch with one another can be a great way of motivating each other once you've got home. Some strong friendships have flourished from these courses!

As with most things in life, what you get out of a residential course depends upon how much you put in. Always have a go at any writing exercises a tutor asks you to do. If nothing flows, don't worry about it. At least you tried. You can always have another go when you get back home. Use the opportunity to share ideas and give each other thoughts and criticism. Sometimes a comment made by another delegate can inspire a whole new idea. Hopefully, by the end of the course, you'll be fired up and raring to get going again with your new-found skills.

Think of a residential course as an investment in you and your writing. Yes, it will also be a break away from the family and work life, but it's an opportunity for you to develop and grow as a writer. It could be the final step you need to take to achieve your writing dream.

Useful Websites:

Arvon Foundation: <http://www.arvon.org>

Ty Newydd: <http://www.tynewydd.org>

Relax & Write: <http://www.malagaworkshops.co.uk>

Skyros: http://www.skyros.com/writing_holidays.htm

Arte Umbria: <http://arteumbria.com/courses/creative-writing.php>

Chez Castillon: <http://chez-castillon.com/courses-tariffs>

Simon's Courses:

Simon's next courses include:

Photography for Writers at the Writers Holiday (Fishguard July/August 2015): www.writersholiday.net

The Complete Article Writer (Weetwood Hall - 25-27 September 2015): <http://www.simonwhaley.co.uk/september-2015-the-complete-article-writer/>