

THE POSITIVELY PRODUCTIVE WRITER

HOW TO TURN YOUR CREATIVE DREAMS INTO
WRITING REALITY

SIMON WHALEY

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PRAISE FOR THE FIRST EDITION OF THE POSITIVELY PRODUCTIVE WRITER

“Genuinely helpful in encouraging new writers to manage their time well, and to believe in themselves.”

Kate Long - Bestselling author of *The Bad Mother's Handbook* and *Swallowing Grandma* and *Mothers and Daughters*.



“Writing is, in many ways, like any other job. You need talent and tenacity to succeed - but from time to time, you also need a little encouragement to stay positive. *The Positively Productive Writer* offers practical advice to help you harness your confidence and keep your writing goals in sight.”

Isabel Ashdown - Award-winning author of *Glasshopper* and *Hurry Up and Wait*.



“A brilliantly positive book by a brilliantly positive writer.”

Della Galton - Prolific short story writer and author of *Passing Shadows*, *Helter Skelter* and *The Dog With Nine Lives*.



“Simon Whaley’s advice for writers is sensible, practical and inspiring. *The Positively Productive Writer* delivers a well-judged kick up the butt for writers everywhere.”

Jane Wenham-Jones - *Writing Magazine* columnist, novelist and author of *Wannabe A Writer?* and *Wannabe A Writer We’ve Heard Of?*



AMAZON REVIEWS:

“For the last two years I have been wanting to give up my job and become a freelance writer. I have always blamed lack of time for not fulfilling my ambitions. However reading Simon’s book I realise that I don’t need big chunks of time. I CAN do a bit here and a bit there and get as much done. I work full time at the moment and am hoping to drop a day in the New year and my goal is to be able to give up my job completely and write full time by this time next year. So far I have only had letters published in magazines not proper articles but Simon has filled me with a new confidence. I can do it and I will. It is a brilliant book. I have also discovered his website and it is full of really helpful information. If you are an aspiring writer who needs inspiration get hold of this book as soon as possible.”

Jane Keightley



“The Positively Productive Writer is without doubt, the best motivational book on writing I've ever read. If you're struggling to write, hold down a full-time job, and juggle family life too, Simon Whaley shows you how to get organised so that your writing time is planned in advance, in manageable time slots that fit in with your commitments, going to great length to show how you how to do it, so that you'll know exactly what you'll be working on at any given time.

Having read the book twice, I'm fully charged and raring to go, at last my head is in the right place thanks to Simon's positivity and I now realise I can do this! This book really is a 'must have' for writers everywhere.”

Maria Smith

*Just like the first edition, I dedicate this book to **all** writers: those who sit down regularly to write and those who dream of sitting down regularly to write. In particular, it's dedicated to writers who will some day sit down to write, only to discover that the words won't flow. This book is for those days.*

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INTRODUCTION

This is not a how-to-write book. It's a how to keep writing in order to achieve your writing dreams book. It's for any writer who wants to achieve more. **You can** do it, if **you** really **want** to. Whether you want to see your name in print as the writer of a star letter in a magazine, enter a highly prestigious writing competition, become a regular columnist in a magazine or newspaper, or improve as a poet or a novelist, thinking positively can make a difference. Whatever your writing ambitions are, this book will help you achieve **your** dreams, but only if **you** put in the effort.

If you dream about being the next J K Rowling, Stephen King, Stephanie Myers, Thomas Keneally, Chetan Bhagat or Terry Pratchett, then there's something you need to know. They didn't achieve it by dreaming. They did it by sitting down and producing written work. That means putting a bum on a chair and either picking up a pen and notebook, or caressing a keyboard with some fingers. And that means regularly. Ideally, it means **every day**. But then, in your heart of hearts, you already knew that, didn't you? However, there's more to putting your bum on a chair and writing. You **need**

to believe you **can** achieve **your** writing goals. You **must** believe in **yourself**.

And that's the important word. **Believe**. You must believe in yourself, because it isn't anyone else's job to do so. I've lost count how many workshops I've run where someone has come up to me and said, "Oh, I don't think I could ever write a book." And guess what? They haven't. Because that is what they believe. They don't write a book because they don't believe they can. It's called the self-fulfilling prophecy. So, why not turn that self-fulfilling prophecy around into one that helps you?

Why, though, should you listen to me? Do I have a degree in creative writing? No. Did I get a good grade in my English Language O level? No, (I scraped through with a C grade, which in those days was the lowest pass.) Are my mother or father the head of a big publishing company? No. (More's the pity!)

I have failed miserably. There are some days when I'm a failure several times a day. I've lost count of how many times I've been rejected. But I've also had my successes, too. Because I believed in myself. Hodder & Stoughton published my first book that (somehow) spent three weeks on the UK's top ten non-fiction paperback bestseller lists. Three weeks! And I'm not talking about three weeks in February, but the three busiest weeks of the year (the run up to Christmas) when book sales rocket.

I've also won competitions, had hundreds of articles published, written over a dozen books, some of which are traditionally published and some I've self-published. So I've seen both sides of the coin. I know all about rejection, and I'm also a successful writer.

For many years, I tutored on a distance learning course, and I've also facilitated workshops at conferences and weekend residential courses. This exposed me to the way many writers think and react to their efforts. And we're a funny bunch,

really, aren't we? We're brilliant at seeing the worst-case scenario in most situations... and thinking it's all our fault.

I've been writing now for over three decades, so I've picked up a few tips and tricks along the way. And I've learned how our productivity and positivity often revolve around the way we think about certain writing situations.

The way to remain positive is to keep hold of your beliefs. Believe that you **can** do it and you are more likely to take the necessary steps required to ensure that you reach your goal.

A positive writer is a productive writer. A productive writer is more likely to be a successful writer.

The first edition of this book began life as a workshop I gave to a writers' group I go to. It was our January meeting and our AGM, so we wanted a workshop that members would want to come to (even though they had to endure the AGM first).

Being January, it was also the start of a new calendar year, so I pushed the workshop as an opportunity for members to give their writing mojo a kick-start.

It worked. Afterwards, several members came up to me and said the workshop had been just what they needed: a motivational boost, inspiring them to start their writing projects for the new year. Just over three weeks later, one member emailed and said:

"Since your workshop, I've set myself the target of writing 500 words a day, and I'm achieving this. As a result, I've achieved over 12,000 words of my novel since our last group meeting. It's fantastic. I'm overjoyed!"

I also used that workshop as the basis for a blog post, and this generated a lot of positive feedback too. An e-zine picked it as the prime article for their next issue. They even paid me for it. How positive is that?

I realised other writers might find a book on the subject useful and, on 27th January 2012, Compass Books published the first edition of *The Positively Productive Writer*.

The praise received from other published writers was overwhelming. And, whenever I was at writers' conferences, talks or events, it was wonderful hearing about the projects readers had successfully completed because *The Positively Productive Writer* had given them the confidence to write them.

Time marches on, and the world has changed considerably. On a personal level, I'm now older. (I won't say wiser because that's up for debate.) I've also experienced more moments in my writing life when my positivity wavered. But I learned how to overcome them, and these are some of the new lessons that I wanted to share in this revised edition.

Much has happened since that first edition. I've gained an agent, published several new books (both traditionally and self-published) and I've had hundreds more articles published all over the world, including a monthly column in *Writing Magazine* that began in 2014 and is still going strong. And that's despite doing a three-year part-time employed contract during that period, too.

I often dipped into the first edition, not only to remind myself of what I wrote but to boost my productivity whenever things weren't going well. Because life doesn't go well all the time. Every writer (published and unpublished) has bad days. Experiencing these moments of despondency and rejection in our writing lives helps us put the successes into perspective.

Being a positively productive writer is about learning how to spot those negative moments and then using the tips and tricks I mention here to turn your mood around.

Some of the world's most successful people are also some of its biggest failures. Nobody is successful *all* the time. Thomas Edison failed over a thousand times to create a lightbulb that worked. In a 2007 article, Sir James Dyson explained how he made 5,127 prototypes of the bagless

vacuum cleaner before succeeding. Think about that for a moment. He failed 5,126 times before he was successful. Thirty publishers rejected Stephen King's *Carrie*, before one took him on. Sixty publishers rejected Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*.

So being successful means being a failure too. Are you ready to embrace your failures and turn them into successes?

Go on, grab a coffee, or a glass of wine, and make yourself comfortable. Because the next 40 chapters may make you change the way you think about your writing and yourself as a writer. Because you *are* a writer. And, by the end of this book, you'll be a positively productive writer, too.

INTERNAL STORYTELLING

I want to tell you a story. Because that's what writers do, right? Actually, *everybody* tells stories. We tell them all the time. The most important stories are the ones we tell *ourselves*. For these are the ones that affect our mindset.

We're unique. The way we experience life differs to the way everyone else does. It's why eyewitness accounts of events often vary, despite people witnessing the same thing.

When I began work at a High Street bank, I spent the first few days on an induction programme. That included some training on what to do if ever we found ourselves in the horrendous situation of a bank raid.

One exercise I found interesting was where we had to watch a video of a fictional bank raid. Afterwards, we were asked to write down exactly what we had witnessed, giving as much detail as possible, as if we were giving a police statement.

Once our time was up, the trainers asked us some questions. In which hand was the armed robber holding the firearm? *We couldn't agree*. Some were convinced it was the right, others the left. What kind of bag was the armed robber holding? *We couldn't agree*. Some were certain it was a sports

holdall, others thought it was a rucksack. One person was convinced there was no bag at all.

But, even though we'd all witnessed exactly the same video, the stories our minds were telling us were slightly different. This is why autobiographies are so fascinating. They're not recounting *the* truth, but the *writer's* truth. We all see and experience things differently.

Whenever we experience an event, our brain turns it into a story. This helps us to process it and put it into context. It can also help with forming a memory, as we recount it (either to ourselves, or to others). It doesn't have to be a shocking event. Our brains attach a story to *everything* in our lives.

The other day, I went to my car and found it wouldn't start. The battery was flat. Then I noticed the switch for the air blowers was on. I'm usually fastidious about switching off everything when I get out of my car. Clearly, this was my own stupid fault. I'd left the air blower on and it had drained the battery.

Thankfully, the local garage sorted it later that day, and by 5:30 that evening I had a brand new battery in my car and a dent in my wallet. "That'll teach me for leaving the air blower on," I said to the mechanic.

He frowned.

"When I got in the car this morning to start it," I explained, "I noticed the switch for the air blowers was on. That probably drained the battery, didn't it?"

The mechanic shook his head. "The power is cut to all those things as soon as you switch off the ignition. Only things like lights, which you might need on in an emergency, keep their power supply when the ignition is off. Your battery was flat because it's nearly seven years old and incapable of holding a charge for very long."

Oh. Not the air blower switch then. I hadn't used the car for nearly a week, and this was long enough for the old battery to drain completely. That was the *real* story.

See what I mean? Leaving the air blower on is the story I told myself. That's how I explained what must have happened. And notice how, by telling myself *that* story, I didn't bother looking for any other interpretations. Once I told myself a story, that's the story I went with.

The problem with being a writer is that we have fantastic imaginations. That's good when it comes to writing, but for our mindset it can also cause us problems.

Many years ago, when I tutored writers on a distance learning course, one of my students emailed to say that the article they'd submitted had been rejected. This was obviously a disappointment, and she was now wondering whether she should continue with the course. She explained how she'd hoped this piece would be accepted because she'd got another idea she wanted to try with the same publication.

But in her mind now, there was little point in developing the second idea, because the editor clearly didn't think she could write. "I bet the editor either collapsed in fits of laughter at my sheer incompetence, or shook their head in despair as they read my article," she wrote.

Er, hello? How did my student know what the editor had done? She wasn't there in the room with him when he opened her email, was she? *But that's the story she'd told herself.*

In fact, there are two stories here. First, there is the story the student told herself about what *would* happen. Her first article would be accepted, and that's when she planned on submitting the second article.

In some ways, this visualisation of future events can be a useful tool when it comes to mindset. That's a positive story to tell yourself, especially if it helps you complete your writing project and get to the stage where you can send it off.

But, on this occasion, the reality didn't mirror my student's imagined story. Cue the second story, which she embellished with some other facts she perceived must also have played a role in his decision. The editor had rejected her work.

Therefore, the editor was probably exasperated at having to deal with her poor writing skills, and had rejected her out of hand.

That internal story of *I was rejected because I am a poor writer* is common.

But we don't know what *actually* happened on the editor's desk. We don't know what the editor was thinking. We don't know what the editor did between opening the submission and then rejecting it.

The easiest solution is to make something up. To create a story that fits those facts. So what we end up doing is creating an internal story that has the potential to damage our mindset.

It makes sense then, not to create these internal stories in the first place. Or, rather, we should avoid creating these negative stories. And if you find that's what you're doing, stop. Acknowledge what is happening. Then try rewriting your internal story into a positive one.

Whenever you tell yourself a story, ask yourself two questions: *What are the facts, and what have I made up?*

That step can help bring you back to reality. But you can only take it once you've recognised that you've created and told yourself an internal story. Over time, as you spot yourself doing it, you can then take steps to change the stories you tell yourself.

My agent has been busy submitting my novel to publishers. Many have rejected it. It would be easy for me to tell myself the story that my fiction writing skills are diabolical. Over two dozen publishers have rejected it. Why wouldn't they? I'm a rubbish fiction writer.

But that's not the *right* story. I know this because that novel secured me my agent. Agents don't take on rubbish novels. And the story I tell myself now is that that novel can't be rubbish, because although two dozen publishers have rejected it, two separate editors at two different publishers took my novel to their acquisitions meeting. Yes, that's right. Two

different editors loved my novel so much, they took it to their acquisitions meeting where they tried to persuade the other departments that my novel is a book worth publishing.

Because of that, I know the internal story of me being a rubbish writer of fiction is inaccurate. Yes, I'm still deeply disappointed and hurt when it gets that far in the publishing process and still isn't taken on, but I remind myself of the facts that two different editors loved it enough to take it to acquisitions.

Once you become more aware of the internal stories you tell yourself, you can then question the facts you've based them on. The chances are, those facts are not facts at all, but the result of a fertile imagination.

The danger of not spotting this is that, over time, these false stories mount up and become the foundation for future decision-making. If the last dozen stories you've written have been rejected because, as your own internal storyteller has decided, you're no good at writing, then why bother writing another one? It's not worth the effort, is it? If you can't get a short story accepted for publication, then why even bother starting a novel?

These inaccurate internal stories do a lot of damage. That's why it's important to question *why* you think *what* you think. Ask yourself, where's the evidence? Okay, a rejection is evidence, but it is evidence of an unsuccessful attempt of publication. That's all. It doesn't always evidence *why* your piece was rejected.

Don't beat yourself up over this. After all, talented writers need fertile imaginations. But question the stories you tell yourself, because they could do you more harm than good.