

"GO within. Search for the cause, find the impetus that bids you to write. Does it stretch out its roots in the deepest place of your heart? Can you avow that you would die if you were forbidden to write? Above all, in the most silent hour of your night, ask yourself this: Must I write? Dig deep into yourself for a true answer. And if it should ring its assent, if you can confidently meet this serious question with a simple 'I must', then build your life upon it." — Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), *Letters to a Young Poet*.

If you have felt the profound pull of the desire to write, you will understand what Rilke was asking this young poet to do. Not everyone who writes will feel their life depends on it, but there's no doubt that, if you feel this powerful urge, your life can be enhanced hugely by the act of creative writing, be it keeping a private journal or setting out on the journey of writing a novel.

Almost a million writers in Australia

During the 12 months prior to April 2004, more than half a million (556,500) Australians were involved in some form of paid or unpaid writing work, including writing for books, magazines, newspapers, journals and newsletters and creating scripts for films, television and plays. Another 317,200 Australians were involved in writing as a hobby. That's more than 870,000 people scribbling away in notebooks or tapping at keyboards over a whole year, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics report *Work in Selected Culture and Leisure Activities, Australia, April 2004*.

Guessing that a few closet scribblers didn't confess they liked to put words on paper, this means there are nearly a million writers out there in Australia alone — people who are entranced by the power of words and the desire to tell their own and others' stories.

Wellbeing, creativity or a career?

The motivations for creative writing, as a hobby or a form of work, are many and yet I believe that deep down they come from the same source. Writing is storytelling, one of the oldest human activities. It's a way for a writer to make sense of his or her own life and share that understanding with others.

Many theorists have posited that the notion of "story" is embedded into our DNA and the common elements of story go across cultures and genders, bonding us at the most basic level of our humanity. It's a Jungian notion that all stories consist of a few common structural elements, found universally in myths, fairytales, dreams and movies. Writer Christopher Vogler calls these elements "the hero's journey".

"The pattern of the hero's journey is universal, occurring in every culture in every time ... It is as infinitely varied as the human race itself and yet its basic form remains constant ... Such stories are accurate models of the workings of the human mind, true maps of the psyche. They are psychologically valid and emotionally realistic even when they portray fantastic, impossible or unreal events." — Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*.

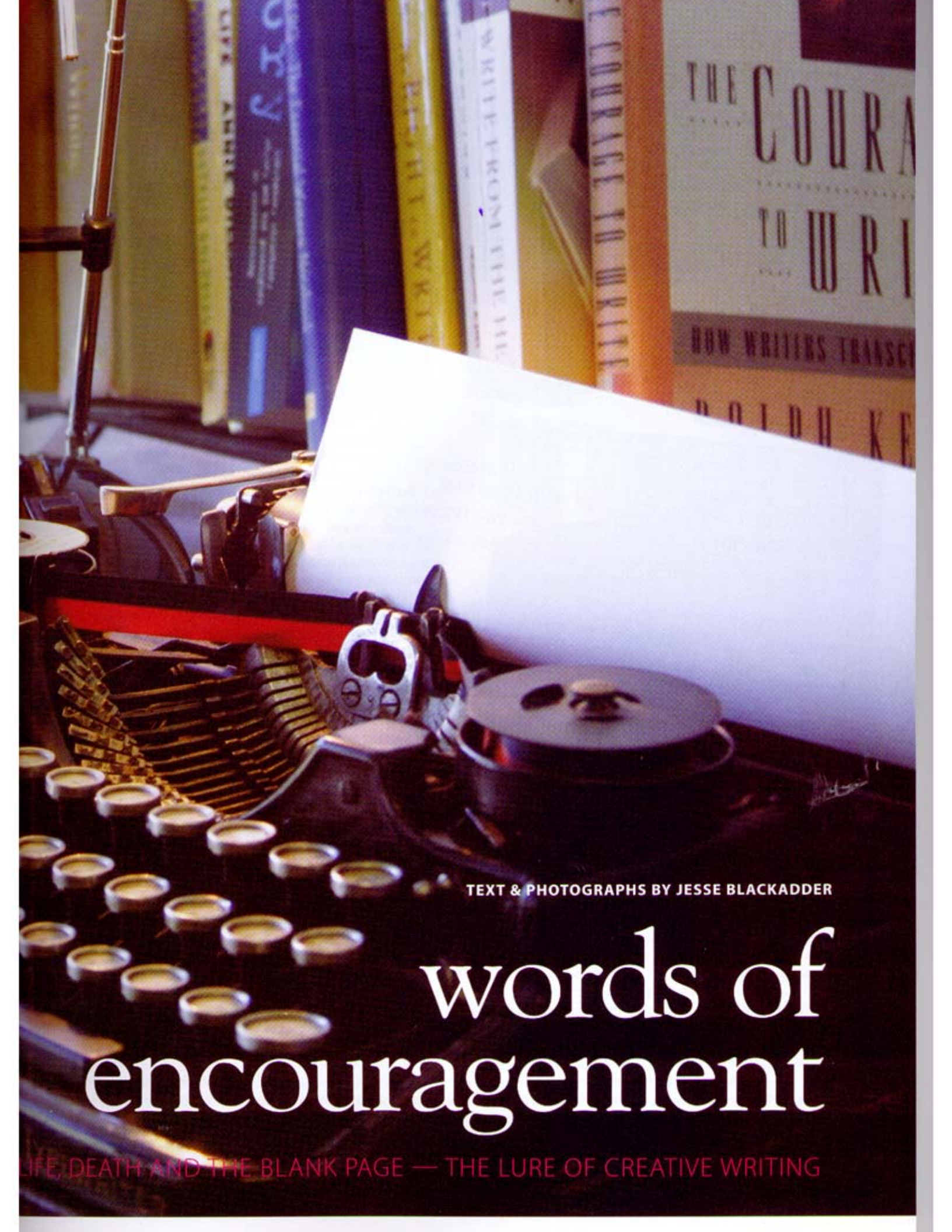
But what does this mean for an individual writer? The notion of writing a universal story that means all things to all people can be enough to freeze a writer in his or her tracks!

Storytelling is a powerful art, but telling our own stories might be as simple as writing in a journal, writing letters or even blogging — anything that takes our own specific experience and shares it with others. It starts with knowing that you want to write.

Knowing you want to write

Some people are aware of the desire to write from childhood, while others come to it later in life. For some it may be a desire that's met by keeping a journal or writing letters; for others, nothing less than that Holy Grail — writing a complete novel, play or screenplay will suffice. The fact that only a minuscule percentage of completed manuscripts make it to publication seems to be no deterrent; neither

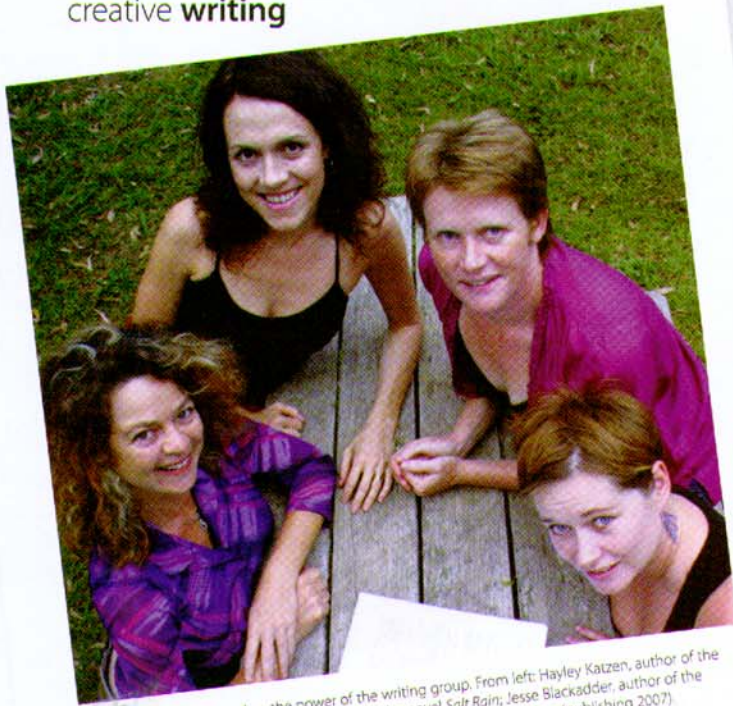




TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY JESSE BLACKADDER

words of encouragement

LIFE, DEATH AND THE BLANK PAGE — THE LURE OF CREATIVE WRITING



Published and performed — the power of the writing group. From left: Hayley Katzen, author of the play *Pressure Point*; Sarah Armstrong, author of the novel *Salt Rain*; Jesse Blackadder, author of the novel *After the Party*; Emma Hardman, author of the novel *Nine Parts Water* (publishing 2007).
PHOTO: CAL MACKINNON

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is the fact that it's extremely difficult to make a living from writing fiction in Australia.

Although I wrote poems and short stories and even made a (truly awful) attempt at a novel as a child, I wasn't conscious of the writing urge as a strong force inside me until I left school and eventually began studying creative writing at university. Like many would-be writers, I then worked in related fields to make a living: journalism, public relations, promotions and writing annual reports and newsletters. Creative writing took a back seat for a number of years, but the desire to do it never truly went away.

A powerful dream in my early 30s was a turning point. In the dream, I lay in bed next to the sleeping form of my lover. A stream of young girls started passing by the bed. They were poised at adulthood but still with the vibrant energy of youth. I recognised them as classmates from my final year at school. I watched them flow past, enjoying the life that rippled out of them. At the end of the line was me, and the shock of recognising myself felt like a physical thump in my chest. The air around this younger "me" glowed with a golden energy and my younger self seemed full of beauty and potential. Then a voice spoke: "You must write." The words seemed to resonate right in the core of me and at the sound of them I felt a splitting apart and a great sob came up from my heart.

I hardly needed a dream analyst to help me discover the hidden meaning of that dream! There was no doubt in my conscious mind that creative writing had to come back to centre stage. Within a year or two of having the dream I had moved to Byron Bay and started work on a novel. Creative writing had taken its rightful place again.

How do you know if you want to write? The feeling could be anything from "a feeling in the ankles" (as described by novelist Ruth Park) to a complete obsession. It can be strongest when you're not actually writing — for me it is a feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach when I'm not doing it.

It's important to treat this urge kindly, especially at the beginning. If you feel you want to express yourself through writing and don't

know where to start, there are any number of inspiring books that can help, such as *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron, a step-by-step course in discovering and healing your creative self. When you first start writing — or even when you first acknowledge the desire to write — you may have to overcome a lot of resistance from your inner critic, that voice that will tell you repeatedly you're not good enough and you won't be able to do it.

The wild mind and losing control

Entering into the creative world of writing can be as wild and psychologically challenging as any spiritual practice. Zen teacher and writer Natalie Goldberg, one of the earliest and best-known authors in the "how to write" genre, used her creative writing practice as a Zen meditation, and encouraged her students to step bravely into the danger zone of the psyche — or "wild mind".

I first came across Natalie Goldberg's book *Wild Mind* more than 15 years ago. Her four rules of writing practice have stayed with me and I return to them when I'm feeling blocked. They are: (1) keep your hand moving; (2) be specific; (3) lose control; (4) don't think. She supplements them with a few other guidelines: (5) don't worry about punctuation, spelling and grammar; (6) you are free to write junk; (7) go for the scariest parts where the energy is.

"...[S]it down in the middle of your wild mind. This is all about a loss of control. This is what falling in love is, too: a loss of control. Can you do this? Lose control and let wild mind take over? It is the best way to write. To live, too." — Natalie Goldberg, *Wild Mind*.

In the 15 years since *Wild Mind* was published, there has been a spate of books full of exercises for unblocking creativity and to help writers face that frightening moment when we come to the blank page, full of fear and anticipation. I have used many of them and I still come back to Natalie Goldberg's first writing exercise in *Wild Mind*. She says to use the starting phrase "I remember..." and to just start writing without stopping. Every time you get stuck, go back to that phrase and start again. While you're doing this exercise, you follow her writing rules. Go for 10 minutes — don't stop no matter what.

It sounds simple, but the results can be extraordinary. The rules give you a way of bypassing the inner critic and going to a deeper part of the mind. You can allow your "first thoughts" — those containing life, daring and power — to flow onto the page.

A 10-minute timed writing can be an exercise in its own right or a limbering up before working on something else. I know people who have written entire novels (that were subsequently published) using this technique.

Another popular way to encourage any form of creativity (not just writing) is "morning pages", as described by Julia Cameron in *The Artist's Way*. Morning pages are, not surprisingly, three pages of long-hand writing, done each morning, strictly as a stream of consciousness. Their function is a brain drain: by getting the dross out of your head and onto the page, you stop it standing between you and your creativity. No one reads them except you. As with Goldberg's exercises, you ignore structure completely and let anything happen. The results can be truly magical.

These techniques are useful for both the hobbyist and the serious writer. If you do want to take your writing beyond a hobby, there's something important you'll need: the courage to write badly.

Getting serious — writing badly

"Writing is easy. All you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead." — Gene Fowler (1890-1960), American journalist and biographer.

My favourite books on writing

The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity by Julia Cameron (New York: JP Tarcher/Putnam, 1992). For those who need creative recovery or help in awakening creativity.

Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life by Natalie Goldberg (US: Bantam Books, 1990). A foundation book for any writer, full of practical exercises you can use over and over again, with a spiritual slant.

Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life by Anne Lamott (US: Anchor Books, 1995). I promise Anne will make you laugh and might even make you cry.

On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft by Stephen King (US: Scribner, 2000). You don't have to like King's writing to love this book — if you respond well to having the whip cracked, this is the one for you.

The Writing Life by Annie Dillard (US: Harper Perennial, 1990). A poetic exploration of the literary life.

Letters to a Young Poet by Rainer Maria Rilke (US: New World Library, 2000). Pure inspiration.

What morning pages and timed writing exercises have in common is you need the courage to write badly while you're doing them. This is the starting place for most writers. Anne Lamott, in her humorous book about writing, *Bird by Bird*, calls this the "shitty first draft". Unless you can find the courage to write a dreadful first draft, you'll never be able to move to a good second draft and a fantastic third.

Facing the fear of the blank page and the fear of writing a terrible first draft is something most writers have to do on a daily basis. It gets easier with practice, but courage is one of the main prerequisites for the job.

The most often repeated advice if you want to be a writer is to write every day. Natalie Goldberg says daily writing practice teaches you the basics of writing and reminds you to go back to the beginning over and over again. She likens it to jogging: the writer needs daily practice to keep fit. Stephen King says if you can't take writing seriously enough to write 1000 words a day, don't waste your time! And Annie Dillard describes how a work in progress quickly becomes feral — like a lion kept in your study — and if you don't visit it every day and reassert your mastery over it, you become afraid to open the door to its room.

This advice can be a bit overwhelming for the beginner, but there's no getting around it: if you're serious about writing you'll have to face the demon of the blank page, every day if possible.

Take a lover

One of the great misconceptions about writing is you need huge amounts of free time to do it — preferably a year off if you want to write a novel. This is a luxury most of us won't have. Most writers, even those who are successful, have to fit writing in around the rest of their lives and their jobs.

The best advice I've come across for doing this is to treat writing like a new lover. You fit it in the way you would fit in a passionate affair — finding snatches of time here and there when you're busy, having the luxury of a whole day or weekend every now and then.

The old adage "one per cent inspiration, 99 per cent perspiration" is nowhere truer than in creative writing. If you want to be serious about writing, your job is to turn up at the desk day after day, no matter how tired, busy or uninspired you may feel, and write. To put it another way — a large pot of bum glue is invaluable.

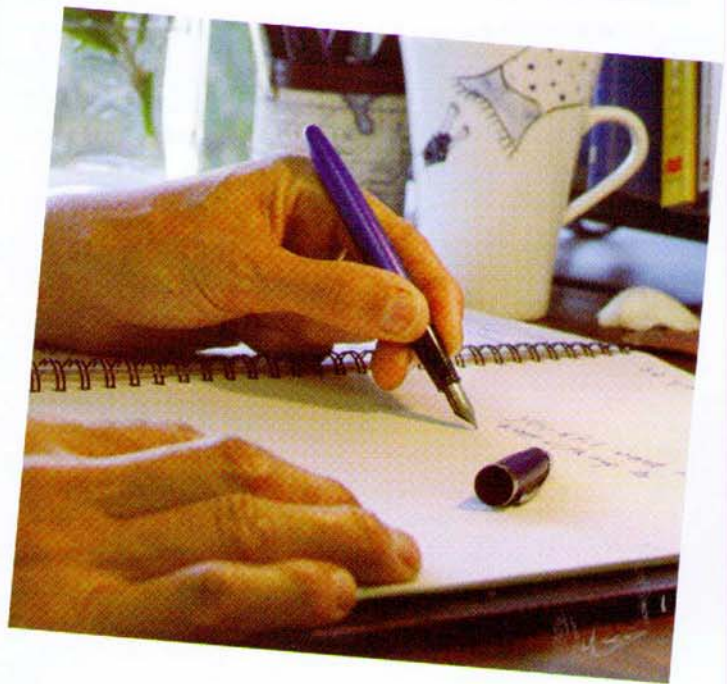
Join a writing group

Writing isn't an easy profession or hobby. It requires large amounts of time alone, and sometimes the powerful desire to write can be matched by a paralysing terror of the blank page.

One way to overcome this is to join or form a writing group. You can meet to share your experiences or, better still, spend your time together doing writing exercises (such as a Goldberg timed writing) and then read what you've written to each other. This builds trust and acceptance of your own and each other's writing and eventually makes sharing your work with a wider audience less terrifying.

I've been in a writing group with three other women for several years. When we first met, none of us had published fiction, though one had written a law textbook. We got together every two weeks, shared food and drink and stories, did writing exercises together and read and gave feedback on each other's drafts of novels and plays.

As I'm writing this, the last member of the group to be published has just had an offer from a publisher for her novel. The other three of us have all published a novel or play while we've been together — and become firm friends in the process. I can't recommend a good writing group highly enough.



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Make it your life

Like the great poet he was, Rilke summed up what is needed to be a writer in a simple sentence or two. If you must write, then simply do it. Build your life upon it. You may never be published, but writing will enrich your life immeasurably by giving it observation, reflection, creativity, spirituality and that sacred and vital contribution to being human: the sharing of our stories. ☺

Jesse Blackadder is a freelance writer based in Byron Bay, northern NSW. Her novel, *After the Party*, set in Byron Bay and dealing with life, love, fate and cane toads, was published by Hardie Grant Books in 2005. W: www.blackadder.net.au.