

Build Your Own Working **Writer** **Contract**

A Complete Workbook for Professional Writers




POCKETMFA

Use the writing contract method that has led to the growth and success of hundreds of writers in PocketMFA. Find focus and get intentional as a professional author.

JOSHUA ROARK

Table of Contents

1	A Note from Your Guide
2	How to Use This Workbook
3	Introduction: Why Writing Contracts Work
4	Part 1: Develop Your Taste
5	Part 2: Write
6	Part 3: Build Community
7	Part 4: Publish Your Work
8	Your Complete Working Writer Contract
9	Next Steps: Growing Beyond This Contract

A Note from Your Guide



Joshua Roark
Founder & Director, PocketMFA

I'm Joshua Roark, founder and director of PocketMFA, and I'll be guiding you through this workbook. Over the past several years, I've had the privilege of working with more than 250 writers at PocketMFA who have transformed their creative practices through the contract methodology you're about to learn.

A little more about me: I am a writer and educator. I received my own MFA in poetry from Antioch University Los Angeles, where I now lead the Post-MFA Certificate in the Teaching of Creative Writing program. I have worked in publishing as well, founding and managing multiple literary magazines with the company Discover New Art—the same team with whom I developed and founded PocketMFA in 2023.

Writing and working with writers is my whole life, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I've taught both K-12, undergraduates, graduates, and non-academic learners throughout my career, and my personal writing includes both poetry and screenplays. My own writing has been published as a chapbook of poems about teaching with Unsolicited Press, poems in various journals and magazines, and a feature film currently in post-production—the main character is also a teacher. It'd be fair to say I'm a bit obsessed with teaching and writing.

The Working Writer Contract approach emerged from observing what actually moves writers forward: not inspiration alone, but intentional commitment paired with practical systems. It's very much built on the wonderful models of teaching both inside and outside traditional academic institutions, including my experience as a student and mentor at Antioch University LA, and best practices the education community has been developing for decades. This workbook distills one of such core methodologies that has guided hundreds of PocketMFA writers toward sustainable creative practices and professional growth.

I'm not inviting you to fill out a form just to get inspired. I want to help you achieve practical and significant progress as a writer, on your own terms and according to your own personal goals. I will do my best to explain why each of the following steps matters, and offer the same guidance I provide to writers at PocketMFA's 12-week program.

Let's begin.

How to Use This Workbook

This workbook represents a specific approach to professional writing development that we've refined through years of working with writers at every stage of their careers. You'll complete this in approximately 2 hours, but the contract you create is intended to guide your next 10 weeks of focused growth.

Feel welcome to adapt the timing as you see fit, but we've found 10 weeks to be both a manageable and significant amount of time for our goals as writers.

What You'll Need:

- 2 hours of uninterrupted time
- A pen or pencil and journal
- A timer
- Access to the internet for research activities
- Willingness for honesty

What You'll Create:

- A personalized 10-week Writing Contract
- A strategic reading list
- A writing process experiment plan
- A community engagement strategy
- A publication submission plan

I encourage you to either print this out and answer the questions on the page, or to write by hand in a separate journal.

[Look Up the Science: Check out this article from NPR on why writing by hand can produce better results for this sort of thing. \(https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2024/05/11/1250529661/handwriting-cursive-typing-schools-learning-brain\)](https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2024/05/11/1250529661/handwriting-cursive-typing-schools-learning-brain)

We'll work through each aspect of the contract, learning, researching, and honing our intentions along the way, and we'll end the workbook by creating a clear, concise, and individualized writing contract.

INTRODUCTION



Why Writing Contracts Work

Traditional goal-setting often fails writers because it can lack the specificity and systematic approach that serious artistic development requires. The Working Writer Contract method we've developed and tested with over 250 writers in PocketMFA transforms vague aspirations into concrete, actionable commitments.

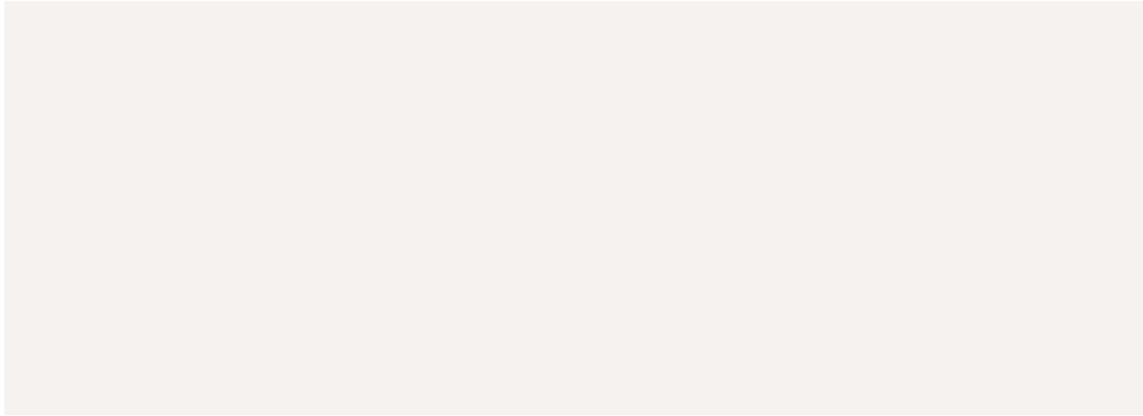
Four Pillars of Professional Writing:

- **Taste:** Developing your aesthetic sense and craft knowledge
- **Writing:** Creating a sustainable, productive writing practice
- **Community:** Building relationships with other writers and readers
- **Publishing:** Sharing your discoveries with the world

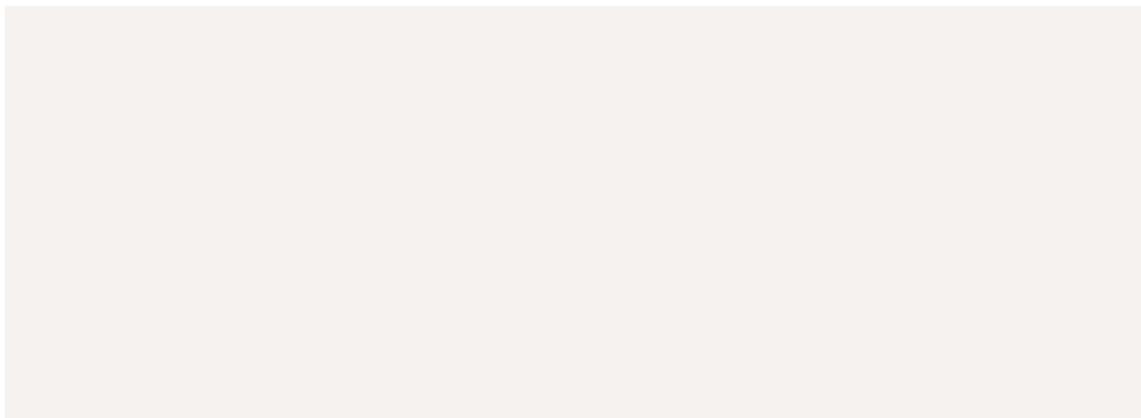
Look Up the Science: Dr. Gail Matthews' research at Dominican University found that people who write down their goals are 33-42% more likely to achieve them than those who only think about their goals. When accountability is added—such as sharing progress with a supportive friend—success rates increase by up to 65%. This is why PocketMFA's cohort model, which combines written learning contracts with peer and mentor accountability, has proven so effective for hundreds of writers. (<https://www.dominican.edu/sites/default/files/2020-02/gailmatthews-harvard-goals-researchsummary.pdf>)

Before we begin, take a moment to reflect on your current writing situation:

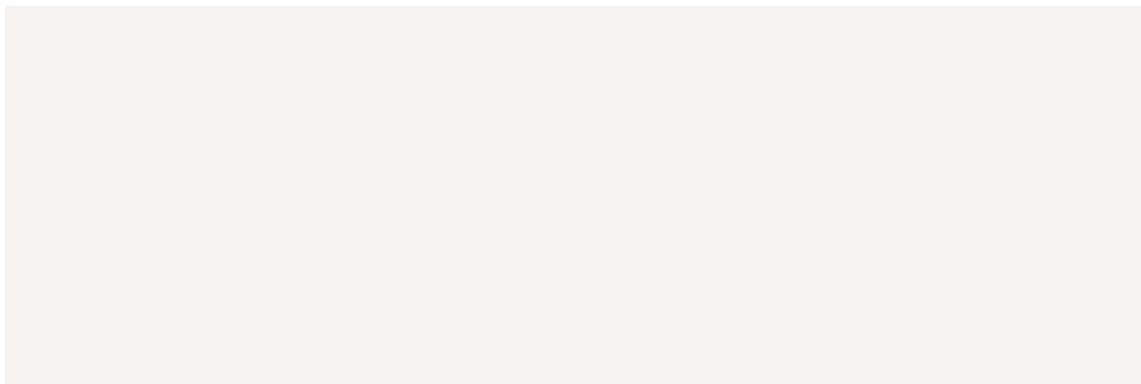
- *What is the most pressing challenge as a writer you are facing right now?*

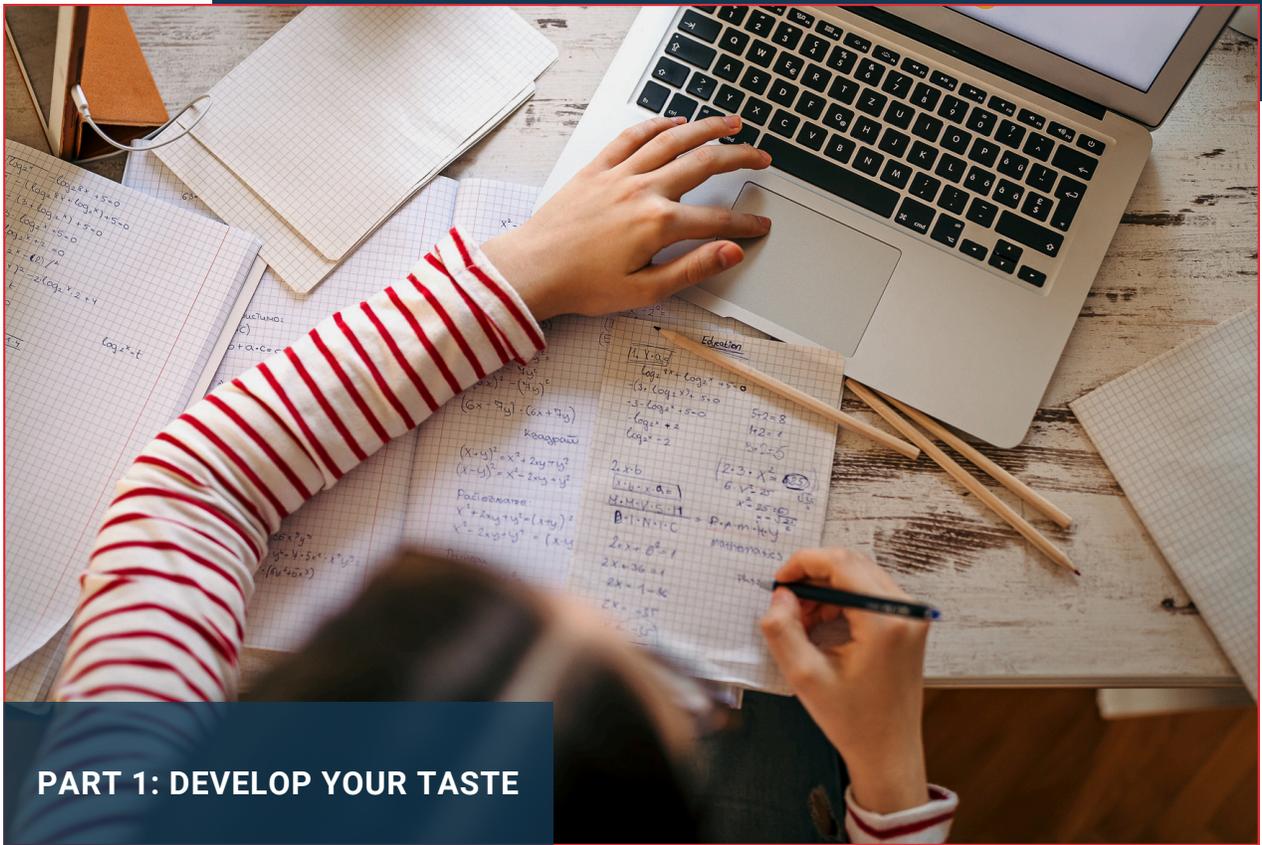


- *What brought you to this workbook?*



- *What is the writing project you'd like to make meaningful progress on?*





PART 1: DEVELOP YOUR TASTE

Understanding Your Learning Style

In my years of working with writers, I've observed that those who succeed understand a fundamental truth: great writers are, first and foremost, great learners. Ken Bain's research on "Natural Critical Learning Environments" confirms what I see in our most successful PocketMFA writers, that effective learning happens when we:

- Start with authentic problems we care about solving
- Give ourselves permission to fail and experiment
- Seek consistent feedback from trusted sources
- Reflect regularly on what we're learning
- Surround ourselves with community for both accountability and inspiration

Quick Taste Assessment

Circle the elements (not an exclusive list) that most appeal to you in writing you admire:

» **Language & Style:**

- Lyrical, poetic prose
- Sharp, economical sentences
- Rich, detailed descriptions
- Evocative, startling images
- Conversational, intimate tone
- Experimental, boundary-pushing language
- Clear, accessible communication

» **Structure & Form:**

- Traditional narrative arcs
- Experimental structures
- Multiple perspectives/timelines
- Episodic/vignette style
- Circular or cyclical patterns
- Linear, chronological progression

» **Language & Style:**

- Character-driven stories, essays, or poems
- Plot-driven narratives
- Philosophical exploration
- Social/political commentary
- Personal/emotional revelation
- Historical or cultural examination

» **Genre Preferences:**

- Literary fiction
- Commercial fiction
- Creative nonfiction/memoir
- Poetry
- Hybrid/cross-genre work

- ***Based on your selections above, articulate in one to two sentences what kind of craft elements you want to become stronger with over the next ten weeks:***

Strategic Learning Plan

Not all learning opportunities are created equal, and part of my role is helping you navigate these choices wisely. There are a few categories of available instruction out there, and at different times of your writing career, one may serve you better than another.

	PROS	CONS
Traditional Academia <i>Universities, MFA Programs, etc</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rigorous Curriculum• Professional Community• High Quality Instructors• Deep Mentorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Highly Expensive• Time-Intensive, Often Requires Relocation
Regional/Virtual Programs <i>Hugo House, The Writers Studio, Loft Literary, Gotham Writers, Grub Street, etc.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More Affordable• Flexible Scheduling• Access to Publishing & Craft Communities• Focused, Short-Term Offerings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Less Cohort Cohesion• Limited Mentorship or Long-Term Guidance
PocketMFA <i>At PMFA, we try to blend the two</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Affordable & Accessible• Professional-Level Mentorship• Cohort Model with Flexible Structure• Emphasis on Publication & Career Readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not Accredited• Requires Self-Motivation and Independent Work Ethic

My highest recommendation, of course, is our own **PocketMFA (www.pocketmfa.com)**. We run cohorts **every 12 weeks** or so, and we have an application process to make sure everyone who joins is ready for the commitment it requires. A 12 week cohort, plus lifelong membership in our professional community of writers and **all that entails, is \$3597**, while a typical two year degree for an MFA is nearly \$60,000 today.

For anyone for whom a traditional MFA or PocketMFA does not quite make sense, I encourage them to explore the great many options that are now available for writers at those regional programs, so much of which is accessible virtually:

Other Online Courses & Programs (*typically \$250-\$500 for a 4-6 week course*):

- Hugo House
- The Writers Studio
- Loft Literary
- Gotham Writers
- Grub Street
- Lighthouse Writers Workshop
- Local university continuing education programs
- & more



In-Person Options:

- Community college creative writing courses
- Local writing centers and libraries
- Independent bookstore workshops
- Writers' conferences and retreats
- Regional non-profit writing center events and workshops



Self-Directed Learning:

- Craft books and writing guides (see our mentor and alumni recommendations: <https://bookshop.org/shop/pocketmfa>)
- Podcasts: Writing Excuses, The Shit No One Tells You About Writing, Between the Covers, Thresholds, Commonplace, etc.
- YouTube channels and free webinars
- Online writing communities and forums

Research Activity: Course Shopping

Find and evaluate 3 writing learning opportunities. For each, note:

Option 1:

- **Name:**

- **Format:**

- **Cost:**

- **Time commitment:**

- **Why it appeals to you:**

Option 2:

- **Name:**

- **Format:**

- **Cost:**

[Redacted area]

- **Time commitment:**

[Redacted area]

- **Why it appeals to you:**

[Redacted area]

Option 3:

- **Name:**

[Redacted area]

- **Format:**

[Redacted area]

- **Cost:**

[Redacted area]

- **Time commitment:**

[Redacted area]

- **Why it appeals to you:**

[Redacted area]

Core Texts

One of the most powerful tools I can offer you is a strategic approach to reading that intentionally develops your taste as a writer. For this part of the contract, feel welcome to do your own research online, or use our Mentor Recommendation list to explore potential texts that align with your goals for the next ten weeks: <https://bookshop.org/lists/mentor-recommended-reading>

Your 4 Core Texts:

① Craft-Focused Book for Your Specific Element

Based on your taste assessment, choose a book that explores your primary craft focus (either general or specific):

- **Your choice:** .

- **Why this book:**

② Book in Your Current Project's Genre

Here are some databases to see prestigious award winners and small presses that may more specifically align with your writing, as well as a rich list of works by writers of color from Felicia Rose Chavez:

- <https://www.bookbrowse.com/awards/>
- <https://www.theindependentbookseller.com/book-award-database.html>
- https://www.pw.org/small_presses
- https://docs.google.com/document/d/1FpJzDz1kbgisqsyZbbgZpBwy0_JEySYUB/edit

Select an exemplary work in the genre/form you're currently writing:

- **Your choice:** .

- **Why this book:**

3 **Book Outside Your Genre**

Choose something that will stretch your aesthetic boundaries:

- **Your choice:** .

- **Why this book:**

4 **Short Work Collection**

Select an anthology, literary magazine, or short work collection:

- *Best American Short Stories (any year)*
- *The Pushcart Prize*
- *Genre-specific anthologies*
- *An issue from one of these top magazines: <https://cliffordgarstang.com/2025-literary-magazine-rankings-overview/>*
- *Poetry collections if you write prose, prose if you write poetry*

- **Your choice:** .

- **Why this book:**

Contract Part 1 Drafting: *How Will I Develop My Taste as a Writer?*

Complete this contract using your work from above:

By (date 10 weeks from today), I will have deeply explored the craft element of by taking the course and intentionally reading and reflecting on the following books.

My Reading List:

- **Craft Book:**

- **Completion target date:**

- **Craft Book:**

- **Completion target date:**

- **Genre Book:**

- **Completion target date:**

- **Cross-genre book**

- **Completion target date:**

- **Short works:**

- **Completion target date:**

- **Signature and date:**



PART 2: WRITE

The Science of Focus and Deep Work

Your goal this next ten weeks is to experiment and continually refine your own writing process—which is essentially an attention-management process—so that every precious moment you can find to write leads to the best results possible.

Cal Newport's book, *Deep Work*, explores this aspect of our professional lives with rigor and insight. The book transformed my own relationship to my work, and I highly recommend reading it for anyone in the knowledge work field as writers are.

I also highly recommend the text *Atomic Habits* by James Clear. His text explores the tools and systems we need for maintaining a long-term healthy habit of writing.

Look Up the Science: Dr. Gloria Mark's workplace studies found that it takes an average of 23 minutes and 15 seconds to fully refocus on the original task after an interruption. Her research also showed that people switch activities approximately every 3 minutes. (<https://gloriamark.com/attention-span/>)

Key Principles from Deep Work Research:

- **Cognitive Switching Penalty:** There is a real and substantial energetic cost to the deactivation & activation cycle of switching cognitive contexts
- **Attention Residue:** Part of your attention will remain stuck on the previous task for a period of time
- **Flow States:** Peak creative performance requires sustained, uninterrupted focus, and these have a typical cycle of about 90 minutes

A Deep Work inspired writing session might look like:



(15 minutes) Shifting your neural networks into the context of writing. This can be done by journaling, reading, studying, taking a walk with a podcast/book or your own thoughts, or some other activity that gets you to progressively engage with your skills and questions around writing.

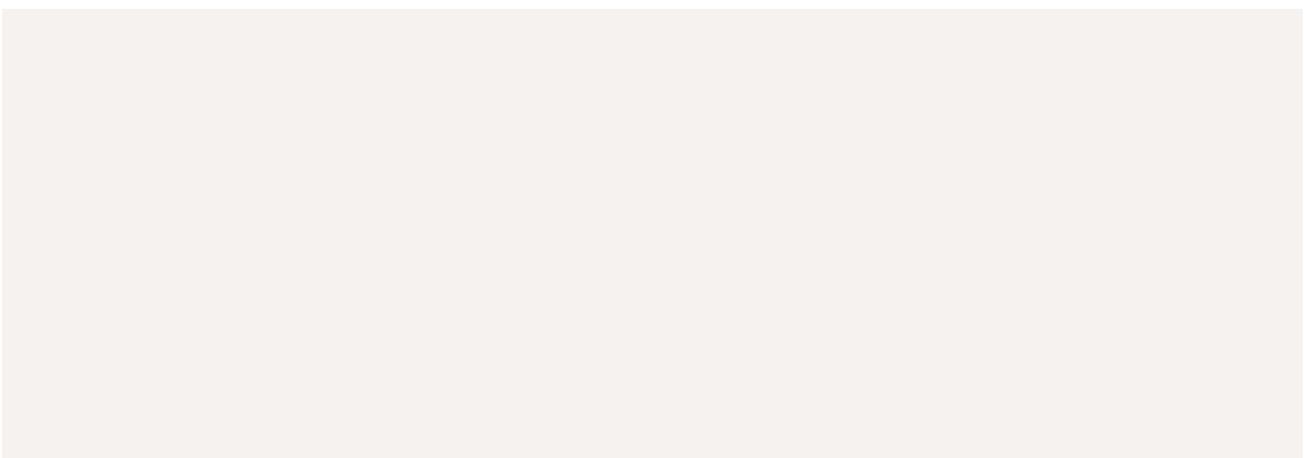


(60 minutes) Deep, distraction free work on a single project. This is drafting, researching, outlining, revising, etc. This is the hard stuff that scares off most folks from this journey we're all on. No phones, email, social media allowed—these highly-emotional distractions will disrupt the neural networks necessary to producing your best work and only lead to more feelings of friction and effort.



(15 minutes) Easing out of the writing project as your brain hits its natural limits of effortful focus. This can be similar activities as the shifting-in: journal, reading, reflecting, taking a walk, listening to a podcast or book, talking to someone about your work, etc.

- **Your Focus Audit:**



Current Writing Environment Assessment:

Rate each element from 1 (terrible) to 5 (excellent):

Visual distractions (clutter, movement):	___/5
Audio distractions (noise, conversations):	___/5
Digital distractions (phone, notifications):	___/5
Physical comfort (chair, lighting, temperature):	___/5
Psychological safety (privacy, interruptions):	___/5
Total Score: ___/25	

- ***How can you improve this score?***

Peak Energy Time Identification:

In internal polls with writers at PocketMFA, we find the two majorities of optimal time to be 8-11 AM and 10 PM to 1 AM. What is your highest energy period on a typical day?

- Early morning (5-8 AM)
- Morning (8-11 AM)
- Late morning (11 AM-1 PM)
- Afternoon (1-4 PM)
- Evening (4-7 PM)
- Night (7-10 PM)
- Late night (10 PM+)

- ***Your optimal writing time***

Learning from Master Processes

Every person is different, and everything I can tell you about best practices is conditional to a particular person in a particular time. However, the work others have done can be models for us to experiment with and modify until we can find the right process-fit for ourselves. Here are some of the most famous ones:

Maya Angelou's Hotel Room Method:

- Rented a hotel room with only a Bible, thesaurus, and yellow pads
- Arrived at 6:30 AM, wrote until 12:30 PM
- Removed all artwork from walls to avoid distractions
- Lay across the bed to write, never sat at the desk

Toni Morrison's Pre-Dawn Routine:

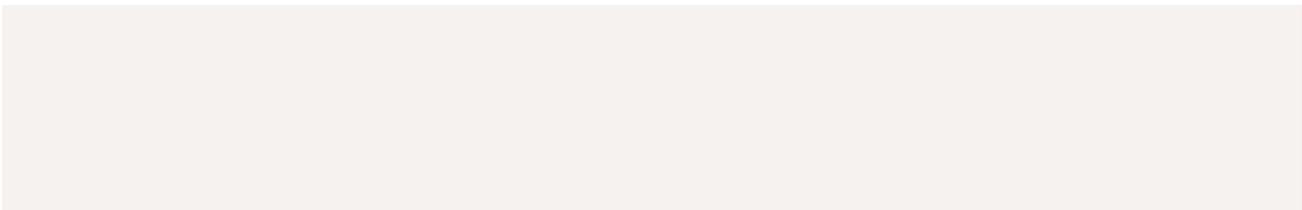
- Wrote before sunrise, before the world woke up
- Used the quiet, liminal time when "the mind is not yet contaminated"
- Made writing the first creative act of each day
- Protected this time fiercely from other obligations

Stephen King's Daily Quota System:

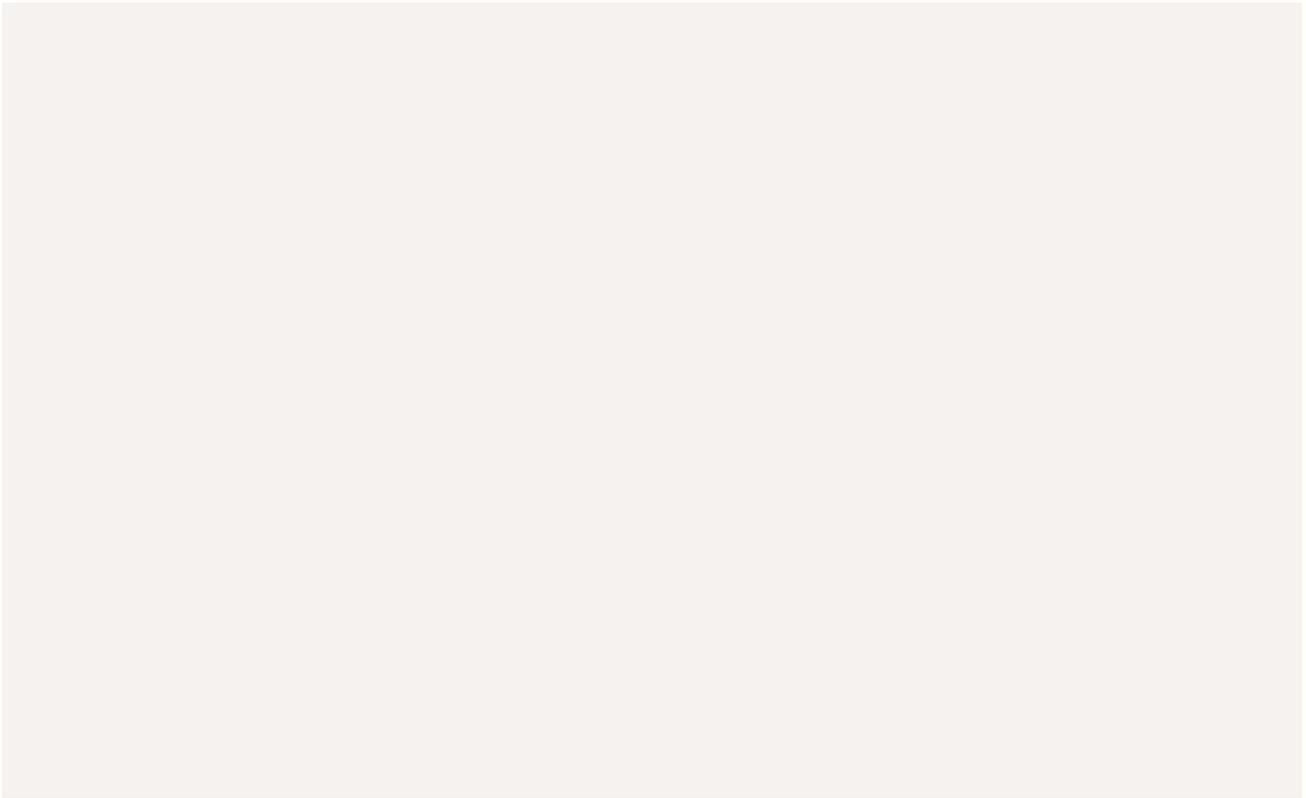
- 2,000 words every day, including holidays
- Same desk, same time, same tools (fountain pen, specific paper)
- No leaving until the quota was met
- Focused on consistency over inspiration

Zadie Smith's Multiple Project Approach:

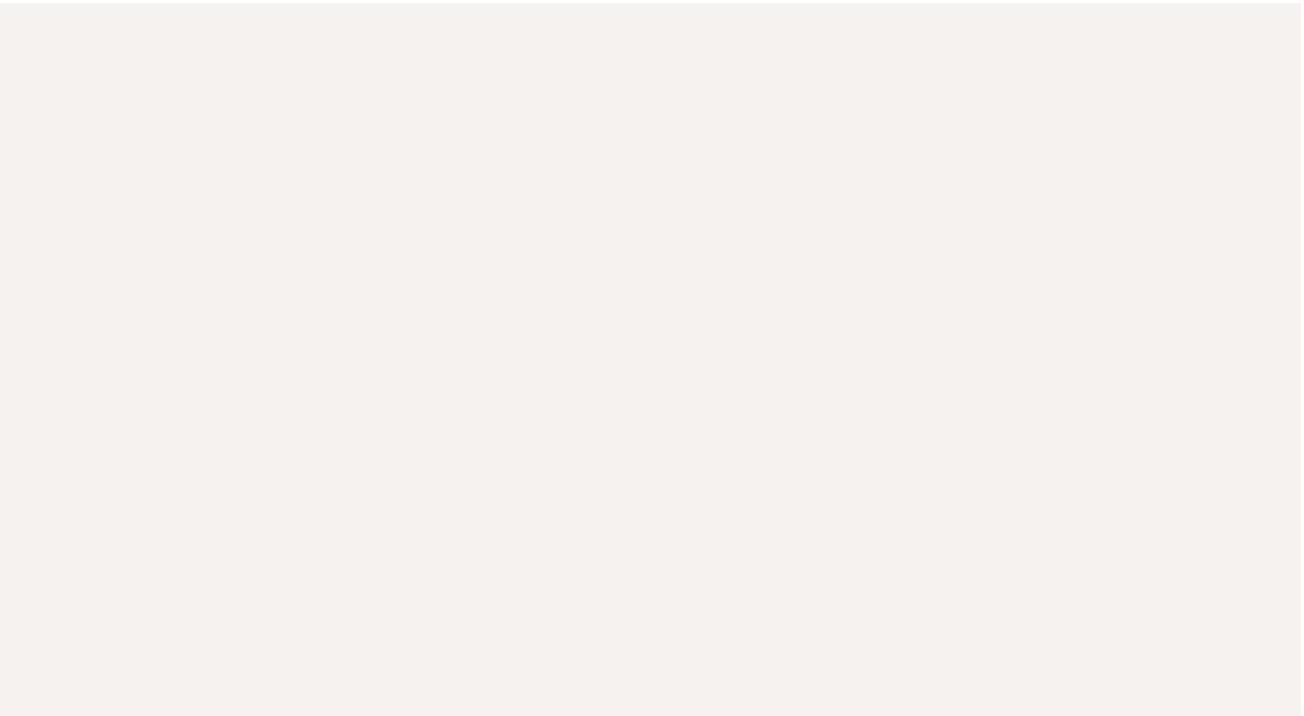
- Works on several projects simultaneously
- Switches between projects when stuck
- Uses different physical locations for different projects
- Allows natural rhythms to guide which project gets attention
- ***Which master's approach most appeals to you and why?***



- ***What elements could you adapt for your current life situation?***



- ***What obstacles would you need to overcome to implement this approach?***



The Most Important Question Method

In my work with writers, I've found that those who develop most rapidly are the ones who engage consistently with deeper questions about their craft. This practice, which has been called the Most Important Question method, helps writers develop what I consider essential: the ability to think critically about their own motivations, process, values, and taste.

You should engage with your Most Important Question consistently, every day, and you should stick with the one question until it is done with you. You'll know when.

A handwritten journal page or 7-10 minute freewriting session should suffice for each regular session. This would fit well at the start or end of a Deep Work writing session for instance.

Powerful Context-Shifting Questions:

- What is good writing?
- How am I a good writer?
- How can I be a better writer?
- What are my stories or poems really about?
- What am I trying to discover in my writing?
- What is the most honest thing I can say?

- ***Choose Your Most Important Question:***

- ***Why did you choose this question?***

- ***How will you engage with this question daily? (journaling, reflection, discussion)***

The Complete Writing Process

Let me address a misconception I think we all struggle with from time to time: the belief that only drafting counts as writing. Our work is much more than the typing of one word after another, but we can often create unnecessary guilt and shame around how our time is spent in the labor of writing. If that's something you carry, let it go.

Every stage of the process is writing and vital toward the development of your skills and advancement of your projects. Understanding this is crucial for maintaining momentum and measuring genuine progress. **Here is a way of thinking about the whole process, in four stages:**

Ideating

- Collecting raw material (observations, overheard conversations, dreams)
- Regular freewriting
- Making connections between disparate elements
- Asking "what if" questions
- Developing a clear logline or simple synopsis

Structuring

- Mapping the emotional journey
- Outlining the narrative beats that your readers will expect of this genre
- Creating frameworks flexible enough to accommodate discovery
- Building scaffolding you can tear down later

Drafting

- Generating raw material without judgment
- Following the energy of discovery
- Writing past points of resistance
- Prioritizing momentum over perfection

Revising

- Seeing the work with fresh eyes
- Making structural changes
- Refining language and rhythm
- Getting and responding to feedback from peers
- Serving the writing over your ego (kill your darlings)

- ***Which phase do you most enjoy?***

- ***Which phase do you most avoid?***

- ***Why do you avoid this phase?***

- ***What would help you engage more fully with your avoided phase?***

The Work Packet System

One of the most effective accountability tools we've employed for PocketMFA is the Work Packet system. This is a common tool of the curriculum for low-residency MFA programs, and it is how they maintain momentum for independent work while their student body is spread out across the country and world.

This system transforms writing from a private struggle into a shared commitment. And I don't mean through public exposure or social media performance, but through thoughtful, structured sharing with people who matter to your artistic development.

If you were enrolled at PocketMFA, these packets would go to your Mentor every 3-4 weeks, for instance. As you can imagine, this creates meaningful accountability as the last person you'd like to disappoint is the talented professional giving you their time and expertise. You can mimic this system on your own however, to a certain degree, by still sending out your work and progress regularly to a respected friend or colleague.



Remember the Science: *Dr. Gail Matthews' research at Dominican University found that adding accountability—such as sharing progress with a supportive friend—success rates increase by up to 65%. (<https://www.dominican.edu/sites/default/files/2020-02/gailmatthews-harvard-goals-researchsummary.pdf>)*

For this Working Writer Contract, we recommend sending out two packets, one every 5 weeks. However, if you feel confident and comfortable with your current momentum, you can change that to weekly, smaller Work Packets instead.

Components of Effective Work Packets:

- **Writing Check-in Letter (1-2 pages):**
 - What questions you've been wrestling with as a writer
 - What you've been learning about craft
 - Challenges and breakthroughs since last packet
 - Context and introduction for the new pages you're sharing
- **New Pages of Work:**
 - 20 pages of prose OR 5-8 pages of poetry
 - May include additional pages of revisions
- **Reading Discoveries:**
 - <200 word digestions of books you've read

- Frame as recommendations to other writers as to what can be gained from the text
- Focus on craft elements, techniques, and the text’s approaches to meaning-making

Who will receive your work packets?

Preferably, this is not a close family member, but a friend or colleague similarly involved in the pursuit of being a writer. If you don’t have access to that kind of relationship at the moment, that’s okay, choose a family member or friend—part of this Working Writer Contract journey will help you build such a network of writing peers.

- ***Name***

- ***Relationship***

- ***Why them***

Contract Part 2 Drafting: How Will I Write?

By (date 10 weeks from today), I will have written
.....(describe specific, measurable
progress: word count, pages, revisions, drafts, number of stories/poems/chapters, etc.)

- ***Most Important Question:***

- ***My experiment with process will begin with this plan:***

- ***When I will write: (specific days, times)***

- ***Where I will write: (location, setup)***

- ***How I will write: (tools, routine, environment modifications)***

What will be in the 2 Reader Packets that I will send out, and when will I send them?

- Reader Packet 1

- ***Send by:***

- ***Will include:***

- ***How many new pages?***

- ***Reading annotations for now many texts?***

- Reader Packet 2

- ***Send by:***

- ***Will include:***

- ***How many new pages?***

- ***Reading annotations for now many texts?***



PART 3: BUILD COMMUNITY

The Art of Giving and Receiving Feedback

Through my editorial work and my role in developing PocketMFA's workshop methodology, I've learned that feedback is both the most valuable and most misunderstood aspect of a writer's education. Good feedback, as George Saunders reminds us, helps writers see their work more clearly, not differently. My job—and yours, when you're giving feedback—is to help the writer achieve their vision, not impose my own.

The first week of PocketMFA's curriculum is a full week of training in workshopping and feedback. I have learned that it is incredibly important and valuable to have a community on the same page for this very vulnerable aspect of a writer's professional life.

The first training session is about giving feedback. This is based on lessons learned over the years as a writer and instructor, as well as heavily inspired by this series of essays by George Saunders (<https://georgesaunders.substack.com/p/office-hours-7e9>), and the texts *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop* by Felicia Rose Chavez, and *Craft in the Real World* by Matthew Salesses.

Our second training session is a discussion around how to receive feedback well. There is an art to making any and all feedback work for you—especially when you do not have easy or regular access to feedback from experts and rely on responses from your peers. The general advice we land on is that we should not fall into the common traps of poor reception: defensive, dismissive, or defeated. The more intentional we can approach our search for feedback, the more effective the effort will be.

Our final training session is about the method of workshopping we employ, and the walk through of our Author and Reader prep documents. At PocketMFA, we utilize the Critical Response Process, and I highly encourage you to explore this method and put it to use in your own writing groups as well: <https://lizlerman.com/critical-response-process/>.

No matter what, you should seek out ways to give other writers feedback on their work—not necessarily solely as a way to get feedback in return, but as a way to be a good literary citizen and to develop your own taste through a close reading and examination of your peers' writing.

Some general tips for giving feedback:

- **Share what worked:** identify specific moments, phrases, or scenes that resonated
- **Ask questions:** help the writer clarify their intentions
- **Offer neutral observations:** point out patterns or effects without judgment
- **Get permission to give opinions:** don't throw the ball at their face when they don't know it's coming, give them the chance to be ready to catch it



And remember, Matthew Salesses reminds us that "craft" isn't neutral—it carries cultural assumptions. Consider:

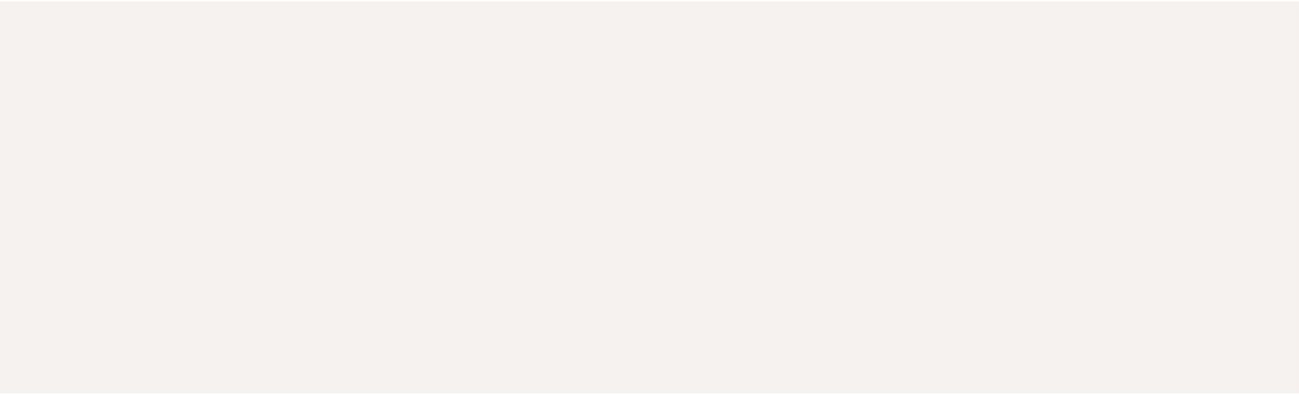
- Whose storytelling traditions inform your feedback?
- What cultural lens are you applying to this work?
- How might the writer's background differ from your own?

Some general tips for receiving feedback:

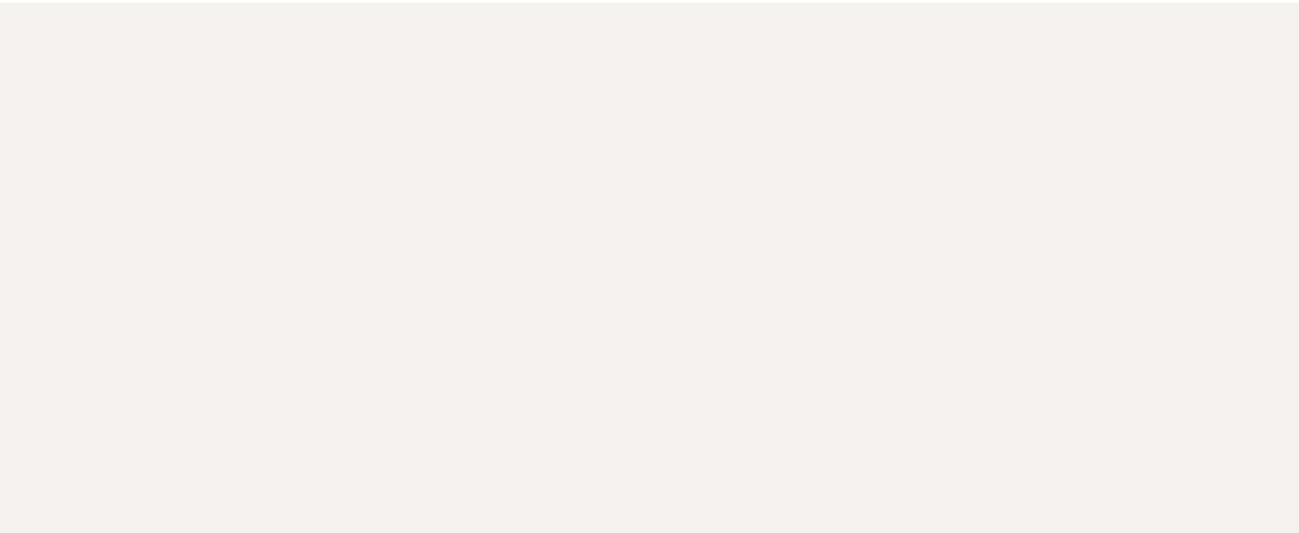
- **Be intentional:** know what you're looking for, and let the reader know too
- **Look for patterns:** if multiple readers highlight the same issue, it's likely a genuine concern
- **Implied reader:** who is the reader? How do they fit into your intended audience?
- **Let it bake:** do not make any decisions or changes until at least 24 hours after receiving the feedback
- **Note beneath the note:** readers will often have lots of suggestions for fixes—these are often wrong, your job is to discover what made them want to suggest a fix in the first place
- **Curiosity first:** don't interrupt, lean in, ask clarifying questions
- **Self vs work:** do your best to have an objective view of your writing, these critiques are not critiques of you, nor are the praises



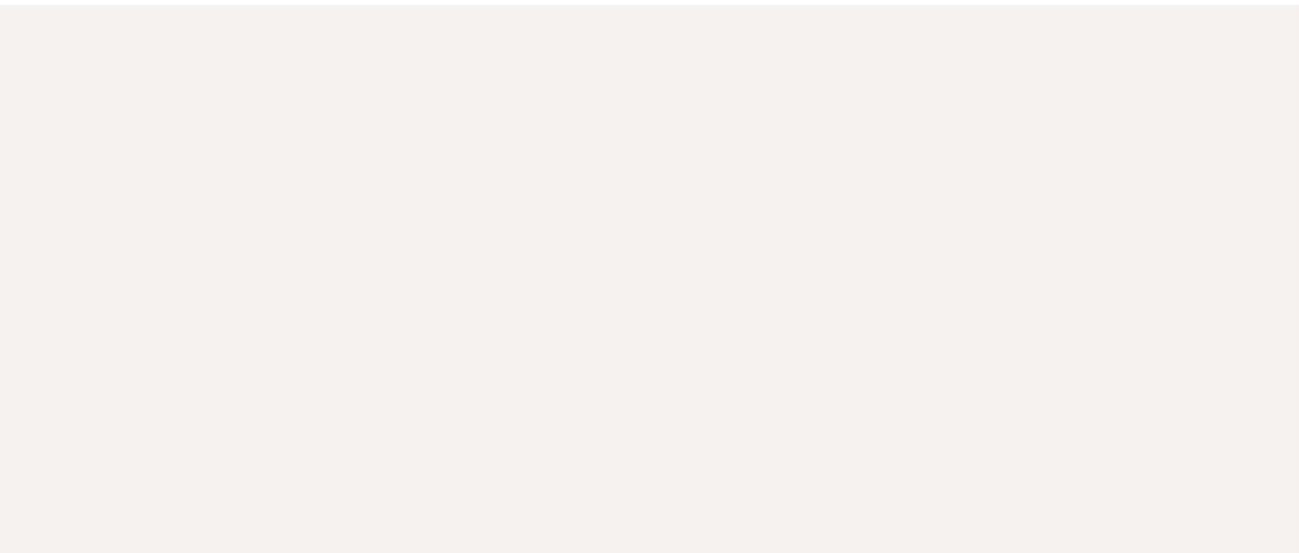
- ***Your Feedback Philosophy:***



- ***What kind of feedback do you most want to receive?***



- ***What kind of feedback do you most want to give?***



Finding Your Creative Community

In creating PocketMFA, I was addressing a problem I witnessed repeatedly and experienced myself: talented writers working in isolation, lacking the professional community that could accelerate their development. There is no one solution that fits everyone. Each of us have to find or build the right community for our particular needs and artistic goals.

At PocketMFA, we all work together to build a professional community of learners, and I lean heavily on the natural critical learning environment developed by Ken Bain in his research into pedagogy. This means, as writers working alongside each other, during and after the 12 week cohort, we (and so should your own writing groups):

- Focus on our own beautiful and meaningful writing projects
- Create regular opportunities for collaboration
- Give regular access to expert advice and feedback
- Have shared values of grit, fairness, and honesty
- Consistently and sincerely communicate the setbacks and the successes
- Forge and encourage authentic creative relationships that can last a lifetime

But communities like ours can be built wherever you are, if you can manage to find great partners and stay energetic and enthusiastic about building a lasting partnership.

Other Places Serious Writers Gather:



Local Opportunities:

- Library writing groups
- Community college classes
- Independent bookstore events
- Regional writing and art centers (non-profits)
- Coworking spaces for creatives



Professional Events:

- Local writers' conferences
- AWP (Association of Writers & Writing Programs)
- Genre-specific conferences
- Literary magazine readings
- Book launch events

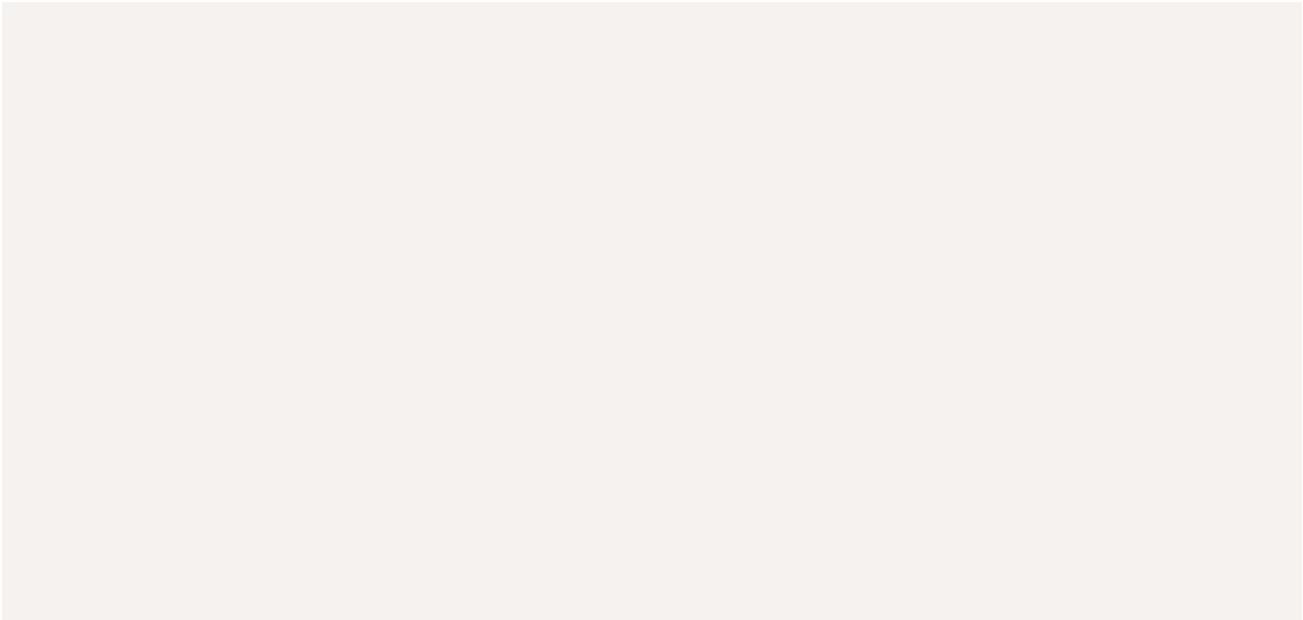


Online Communities:

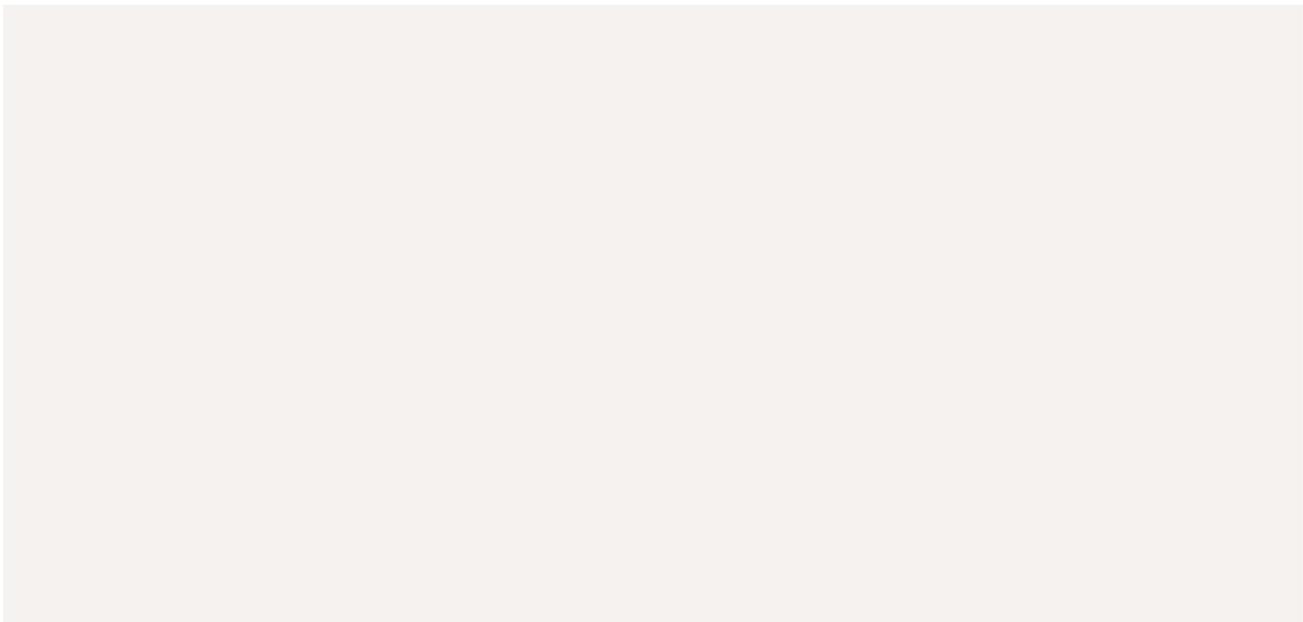
- Reddit writing communities (r/writing, r/writers)
- Discord writing servers
- Facebook writing groups
- Social media etc.

Research 2 writing events/communities you could attend in the next 10 weeks:

- *Event and date*



- *Event and date*



Building Your Professional Network

Authentic Relationship Building:

- Focus on genuine connection over transactional networking
- Offer help before asking for it
- Show interest in others' work and journeys
- Maintain relationships consistently over time

Social Media Strategy for Writers:

- Choose 1-2 platforms to focus on rather than trying to be everywhere
- Share your learning process, not just your achievements
- Engage meaningfully with other writers' content
- Be generous with likes, shares, and genuine comments

Contract Part 3 Drafting: How Will I Build Community?

Who will I reach out to potentially receive my Work Packets?

- **Name:**

- **Contact:**

- **Relationship:**

- **Name:**

- **Contact:**

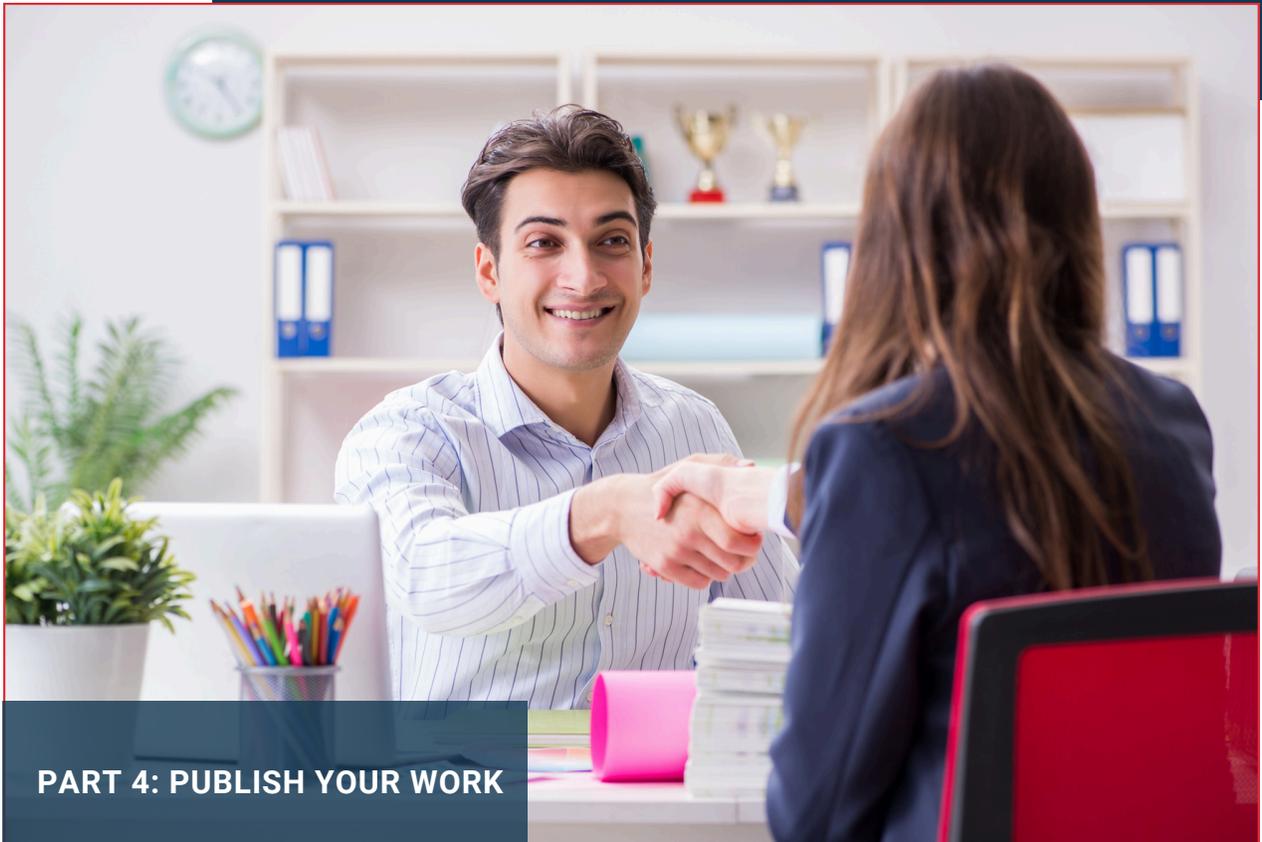
- **Relationship:**

- **What writing community events will I attend either virtually or in person?**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

- **What is my process for generating feedback for other writers?**

- **Signature and date**



PART 4: PUBLISH YOUR WORK

Framing Your Perspective on Publishing

The journey of publishing creative work is fraught, there's no getting around it. A few folks certainly have a relatively smooth entrance and path through the many gatekeepers, and you may be one of them. But the more usual route is one of perseverance through difficulty, rejection, and discouragement.

And it's that perseverance that I find so inspiring and attractive about writers, why I've surrounded my life with them, both with this job I love and my wife I love (she's a screenwriter and proud member of the Writers Guild of America). Perseverance is grand and beautiful because it's earned.

There are many ways to earn that perseverance, mentioned in previous sections of this workbook as well as in many books and many websites and many podcasts. But I'll leave you briefly here with the one that really helps me: reframing my motivations to more authentically connect with my values and true desires as a writer.



A potential Most Important Question might be: Why do I want to publish? What is publishing?

We live in a time and place where our creative work must interact with a market if we would like to use our skills and labor to put food on the table. *But what if we didn't? What if the market were not a concern –how would we think of publishing then? What would publishing look like in such a world?*

My advice to every writer is create a practice where you regularly share your work outside of the market. Experience the meaning and the joy of sharing what you've discovered in your writing with others—without needing payment in return. Free, to some degree and in some small way, your writing from market pressures. Connect to play.

Because all writing is a playful journey into the unknown, the discovery of characters, phrases, worlds, truths and more.

This non-market publishing can be in swapping writing with friends, reading your work to your loved ones, joining an open mic, being a part of a writing community, starting a substack or sharing your work online. There are so many ways, and you should do them often while you continue to pursue the more treacherous path of the market itself, which we will get into soon.

Publication Mindset Inventory:

- ***Why do you want to publish?***

- ***What audiences do you want to share your work with?***

Now let's approach the market, together. I'll be brief since you can read plenty online from smarter and more experienced authors than me. Here are, however, some quick strategy suggestions for shorter and longer works that can help.

Short Work Submission Strategy

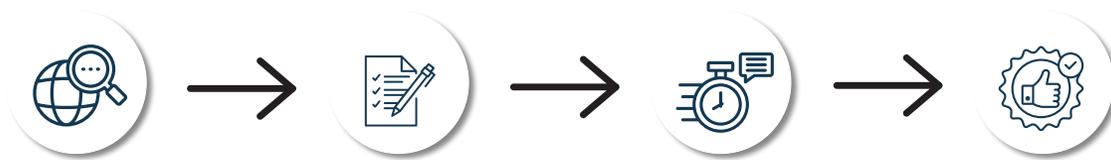
My experience as founding editor of multiple literary magazines taught me to see submissions from both sides—as a writer hoping for acceptance and as an editor looking for work that fits our vision. This dual perspective has proven invaluable in helping PocketMFA writers develop strategic approaches to publication.

Every week in PocketMFA’s online community space, we share new deadlines and opportunities for writers. While the market should not dominate your sense of motivation, it is nonetheless a necessary part of the working writer’s life, and it can be a joyful one when things go right.

Types of Short Work Venues:

- Literary magazines and journals
- Online publications
- Anthology submissions
- Contest submissions
- Genre-specific magazines
- Regional publications

Research Process:



• Browse the website and past issues to understand the aesthetic

• Check submission guidelines carefully

• Note response times and submission windows

• Look for fit between your work and their mission

Databases for Submission Opportunities:

- Submittable’s Discover Feature
- Literistic
- Poets & Writers Database
- Chillsubs.net
- Duotrope

There are many strategic frames for short work publication, but it is important to remember that this is often a numbers game. Many things have to align just right for a piece to land an acceptance, and you’ll achieve the most acceptances if you seek out as many opportunities for that alignment to happen. Submit often and widely.

Market Research Activity:

Research at least 3 potential venues for your short work through one of the databases:

Venue 1

- **Name:**

- **Type:**

- **Word limit:**

- **Submission window:**

- **Response time:**

- **Why it's a good fit:**

Venue 2

- **Name:**

- **Type:**

- **Word limit:**

- **Submission window:**

- **Response time:**

- **Why it's a good fit:**

Venue 3

- **Name:**

- **Type:**

- **Word limit:**

- **Submission window:**

- **Response time:**

- **Why it's a good fit:**

Long Work Publishing Pathways

Traditional Publishing Routes:

- **Literary agents** (for commercial and literary fiction, memoir)
- **University presses** (for literary fiction, poetry, academic work)
- **Independent presses** (for experimental, niche, or regional work)
- **Contest submissions** (for first books, specific genres)

Hybrid and Alternative Routes:

- **Self-publishing** (complete creative control, higher royalties)
- **Assisted publishing** (professional services with author investment)
- **Cooperative publishing** (shared investment and control)

Decision Framework Questions:

- What are your primary goals for this work?
- How important is wide distribution vs. creative control?
- What timeline are you working with?
- What resources (time, money, connections) do you have available?

For the sake of brevity, and because she explains it better than I can, I am going to share this piece by Jane Friedman about how best to find an agent, and a link to her book:

[\(https://janefriedman.com/find-literary-agent/\)](https://janefriedman.com/find-literary-agent/)

<https://bookshop.org/p/books/the-business-of-being-a-writer-second-edition-jane-friedman/21729429>

If you are interested in the industry of publishing, and are not subscribed to Jane's substack, The Bottom Line, I highly recommend you do so.

Long Work Submission Research:

Research 3 potential venues for your long work:

Option 1:

- **Name:**

- **Type:**

- **Genres they publish:**

- **How to submit:**

- **Why it's a good fit:**

Option 2:

- **Name:**

- **Type:**

- **Genres they publish:**

- **How to submit:**

- **Why it's a good fit:**

Option 3:

- **Name:**

- **Type:**

- **Genres they publish:**

- **How to submit:**

- **Why it's a good fit:**

Alternative Sharing Platforms

Beyond Traditional Publishing:

- Public readings (open mics, literary series, conferences)
- Personal blog or Substack (build direct reader relationships)
- Social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, TikTok for writers)
- Podcast guesting (share expertise and excerpts)
- Writing workshops and classes (teaching shares your knowledge)

Building Reader Relationships:

- Newsletter or email list (direct communication with interested readers)
- Reading series (organize events in your community)
- Writing groups (present work to trusted peers first)
- Beta reader networks (get feedback before submission)

Contract Part 4 Drafting: How Will I Share What I Discover in My Writing?

- What places will I submit my short works?

• *To*

• *By*

• *To*

• *By*

• *To*

• *By*

• **What places will I submit my long works?**

• **To**

• **By**

• **To**

• **By**

• **To**

• **By**

• **What other ways will you share your writing? (Open mics, writing groups, personal blog/Substack, social media, reader friends, etc.)**

• **Signature**

• **Date**

PART 2: WRITE

- *How will you move your current writing project forward? What amount/kind of writing will you accomplish?*

By/...../20..... I will have by following my process plan and sending two Work Packets toand reading:

Work Packet 1 will contain:

- A literary letter: a reflection on where I am as a writer, my process and growth, and how this month has gone
- pages of new work
- written responses to my readings, courses, or events

Work Packet 2 will contain:

- A literary letter: a reflection on where I am as a writer, my process and growth, and how this month has gone
- pages of new work
- written responses to my readings, courses, or events

PART 3: BUILD COMMUNITY

I will attendwriting events and give back to the literary community by

PART 4: PUBLISH

I will submit to short work venues and long work venues, plus share my writing through non-market oriented publishing such as

Signatures

I, , commit to following this Working Writer Contract for the next 10 weeks. I understand that professional growth requires consistent effort, and I'm prepared to invest in my development as a writer.

Signature: Date:

Witness Signature: Date:

Next Steps: Growing Beyond This Contract



This Working Writer Contract represents the beginning of what I hope will be a sustained commitment to your development as a professional writer. The writers I work with who achieve lasting success understand that learning is indeed a lifelong journey and ongoing practice, wherein perseverance is perhaps the most essential element that separates the successful.

PocketMFA: Where This Work Continues

If this contract approach resonates with you—if you found value in the systematic, accountability-based methodology—I invite you to consider the full PocketMFA experience. What you've completed here is essentially a preview of how we approach writer development in our 12-week program.

In PocketMFA, you would receive:

- **Direct mentorship** from me and other award-winning, published authors
- **Graduate-level curriculum** delivered at a fraction of traditional MFA cost (\$3,597 vs. \$59,684)
- **Lifelong community access** to our growing network of 200+ professional writers
- **Bi-annual residencies** for continued growth and professional development
- **Personalized learning contracts** that build on exactly what you've practiced here

The writers who complete PocketMFA consistently report improved writing—but it also transformed professional identities, and built the confidence and clarity that comes from systematic development within a supportive community of serious artists.

Final Reflection

Before you begin implementing this contract, I want you to take a moment to acknowledge what you've accomplished. You've committed time and thought to your growth as a writer. This isn't small work.

- ***What surprised you most about creating this contract?***

- ***What are you most excited to begin?***

- ***What accountability measures will help you succeed?***

- ***What accountability measures will help you succeed?***

This workbook is based on the proven methodology used by PocketMFA, which has helped over hundreds of writers develop sustainable, professional writing practices. For more intensive mentorship and community support, visit PocketMFA.com.