

Writing Reliable New Year's Resolutions for Writing

January rarely passes without talk of New Year's resolutions. Someone often claims this year is "their year" to run thirty marathons and learn two new languages... all goals which conveniently disappear by February. If you're a writer too, you've likely had similar experiences – I know my to-read and to-write piles usually end the year bigger than they started it. This is probably because my resolution is often just to 'learn to write better', and then I hope by some "New Year Magic" that my writing actually improves.

But what if there was a method which gives you the best chance of meeting your resolutions for your writing? A way to make that "New Year Magic" yourself? How, as writers, do we write New Year's Resolutions to improve our writing? I'm going to share a method I'm using this year, which I learnt at university to stay productive, and it's what I call building ladders.

Don't worry – all will be explained, and there's no carpentry involved.

Now, if you aren't a writer, don't leave yet – I'll be applying these tips to writing in order to demonstrate how they work, but these tips could arguably apply to anything! Sound good? Okay. This framework always starts with dreaming *big*. I know, I know. Everyone says specifically *not* to do this. You'll give yourself too much, and end up burning yourself out. And that's true – don't expect masses from a single year.

But I also find it exciting to try something seemingly impossible. Drafting a novel, producing an epic poem, creating gripping characters, *doing something that terrifies you with how impossible it feels*, this idea can spur you into proving to yourself that you can do it, if you let it.

But isn't this a mentality that often creates burnout? Yes, and that's where my ladders come in. These ladders are something you likely have heard of before, in some form. It's simply setting yourself small, relatively easy goals that build up to your big dream. That way, you don't get overwhelmed. Hardly original, I know. But it works.

If you're wanting to do something big like novel drafting, dividing that task up will help. Let's say you break the process down into brainstorming, researching, planning, and then drafting sections. These examples are oversimplified and need further dissection, but hopefully you can see how this breakdown makes novel drafting appear more manageable and provides direction. It also gives you more goals to tick off of your list!

I like to think of these breakdowns as ladders, because their sections – or 'rungs' – need to be comfortably spaced. Too big, and you can't reach the next rung. Too small, and it becomes exhausting to climb. Let's say you're still novel drafting, and want to finalise your protagonist's voice. To me, too big of a step is immediately writing the first few chapters and hoping you can wing it. Your tone likely won't be consistent, even if you've already written a character breakdown for your protagonist.

Alternatively, drafting all of your planned scenes in this character's perspective is excessive. I would instead write a piece in the character's perspective, around one to two thousand words long, and reference it during the first draft. That way, you have a foundation for this character's voice without effectively drafting an entire extra novel. Of course, it's a subjective suggestion, but hopefully you see how the analogy works.

Before your ladders, though, you must define your terms. If your dream is big enough, you probably don't know where to point your ladder. And if you don't know that, you'll struggle to climb. Defining your terms here is exactly like what you do during any essays you write: you must explain what your key phrases mean.

If you plan to draft your latest work, what *exactly* is a draft to you? A first draft? An edited draft? A final manuscript? Or if it's "better poetry" you want to write, what constitutes "better" to you? More intricate rhyming schemes? More haunting imagery? What do those terms mean? Complex couplet systems? Gory metaphors? And what are these concepts? Couplets that alternate every third stanza with a unique variation for each pair of penultimate lines? Likening blood at a crime scene to paint splatters on a canvas?

Tear your big dream into the smallest ideas you possibly can, and pinpoint everything that forms your overarching goal. That way, you'll know that practicing gory imagery and couplets will make your poetry "better" to you. Congratulations! Now you know exactly where your goal is, and you know exactly what smaller tasks you'll use to create the ladder rungs that will get you there.

But if you're not the kind of person to continually work task after task like that, don't worry! Neither am I. I know I'm not alone with my piles of unfinished stories that I got bored of. Luckily, I have a tip for people like us that can't stay on one thing constantly. Two, actually: Build more than one ladder, and be sure to let yourself get off them altogether. The metaphor is not perfect, but trust me.

Imagine you're working on dialogue. For your main ladder, you're writing out new stories to practice your dialogue with. You've begun by writing a 1000-word story focused on dialogue. Once you do that, you'll gather feedback, which you'll use to write longer dialogue-focused pieces that will steadily improve, theoretically. But one day, you just cannot write another word. So don't: switch ladders instead.

As you plan your ladder rungs, think about other ways you could reach your goal – other ladders you could jump on to and keep climbing, if you will. If its dialogue you're working on, consider also planning to read books, watch films, and consume other dialogue-heavy media. Maybe read some writing technique books. Search out panels, podcasts, workshops, discussions and festivals (like this one!) on how to write dialogue. More than just practice can make you perfect.

But where do you find these other resources? Well, there are countless books, festivals, networks, and guides waiting to be found online and beyond – Google can introduce you to most of them, and your local libraries and bookshops can show you the rest (when it's safe to visit them). If you study Creative Writing at the University of Surrey, though, chances are you've been recommended some technique books already.

But if not, Will Storr's *The Science of Storytelling*, Stephen King's *On Writing*, and Ted Hughes' *Poetry in the Making* are my recommendations to start with. These books even helpfully contain their own suggested reading lists and often straddle disciplines, so even books on other forms will be useful!

Surrey students will also be familiar with departmental events, like the renowned annual Morag Morris poetry lecture (where leading contemporary poets lecture on the Guildford campus), monthly staff and student lunchtime readings, and workshops with the respective poet- and writer-in-residence Robert Kiely and Iain Sinclair. These are great places to exchange work with other writers, make connections, and experience writing that you wouldn't encounter otherwise.

Such events aren't restricted to Surrey students, or even students alone. Festivals like our own allow all writers and writing enthusiasts to experience exciting contemporary creators, and network with likeminded individuals. Of course, writing events aren't just physical. Our festival will be online this year due to the pandemic, but it isn't the only resource to be. For example, The Writers' Guild of Great Britain have been providing online resources to writers for a while now, including holding online panels with prominent writers.

These places are only suggestions that I have found helpful over my time writing, and I'd be happy to share more examples with you! What I hope they'll show you more than anything is that writing support outside of practice is everywhere, and exploring this can easily be one of your ladders.

Above all, the most important tip I can give is to not always feel like you must be productive. Forcing yourself to work beyond a reasonable point will just make you hate what you're doing. This really breaks my ladder metaphor, but sometimes you just need to get off of all your ladders, sit back, and do something completely different – even if you usually enjoy what you're doing.

If you find you've hit a block on every ladder you try, time without the pressure of trying to get better at something will often bring you unexpected motivation to continue your climbs. It sounds silly, but I ask that you try it. You may be surprised.

So, now you know about building ladders, I hope you feel that your big goal(s) feels just a little more attainable in the coming year. I wish you the best of luck in climbing up toward your big dreams, one rung at a time, and I look forward to (virtually) seeing you at the festival this year!