

# TOPICS FOR WRITERS' CONFERENCES

by Cecil Murphey

[Note: those with \* usually require more than one session]

## 1. Becoming a Writer

**\*Can I Be a Writer?** This exploratory course helps inquirers answer that question for themselves. They'll also consider their ability, opportunity, time, and the process of learning the writing craft.

**From Idea to Finished Manuscript.** What are the steps writers have to go through to get their ideas finished, accepted, and published?

**\*How Do I Get Started?** Cec Murphey's 13 Great Commandments for those who are just starting to write. Learn the tips on getting the professional edge to your writing.

**You Can Get Creative!** Creativity is something some people "have"—a gift—right? Maybe. This workshop shows you fun ways to get in touch with and develop your creativity.

**Writers' Block and How to Win over It.** Whether temporary or chronic, most writers face this internal resistance. What causes it? How do you get over it? Five positive things you can do to cure writer's block.

**Self-discipline.** How does individual personality affect self-discipline? How do you get more disciplined? Most important, how to link self-discipline with your personality type.

**Looking Professional and Acting Professional Leads to Being Professional.** Neatness counts. So do grammar and punctuation. Make your attitude about your writing professional. Learn the little things that separate the pros from the novices.

**See It—Feel It—on Paper.** The cardinal rule of good writing and the most difficult to grasp is showing and not telling. (Students do exercises of *showing*.)

**It's Okay to Tell—Sometimes.** Telling is intellectual and distant, while showing is emotional and intimate. Yet we also need to learn to tell, and here are five times to "tell, not show."

**Get the Most—Be the Most.** You can make this a rich experience and get the most out of the conference. You can also "become the most" through

following professional protocol (or etiquette). You'll also pick up tips on networking and pitching your manuscript to editors and agents.

## **2. Learning and Improving the Craft**

**Let's Write an Article.** Most writers start out writing articles to learn the craft. This session answers questions, such as: What's a good idea? How do you avoid the fuzzy focus? What's your point?

**\*Editing Yourself.** Before you send out that manuscript, here are 25 simple things you can do to fine-tune your prose. Turn your all-right prose into clever, readable manuscripts.

**Getting Happily Edited:** What is an editing group? How does it differ from a critique group? Can such groups help you? Answer: Maybe. Do you need one? Answer: Probably—the right kind of group. How do you start one? Why is a group not the best way to critique?

**But That Title's Gotta Go!** Turn on your readers (and an editor!) with grab-me titles. Learn the eight functions of good titles.

**Fateful First Words.** The first paragraph may not sell your material, but it can throw it into the rejection pile. What makes a good start? Learn five ways to write the powerful beginnings so you grab an editor's attention.

**All's Well if It Ends Well.** Too many writers ruin their material because they don't know how to stop. What makes a good ending? Looking at words such as denouement, climax, afterward, and conclusion. Know the six bad endings and how to avoid them.

**Six Professional Secrets.** These six factors mark the difference between want-to-publish and those who become professional writers. Follow them and move out of the amateur level.

**\*Three Vital ingredients: Beginning, Middle and Ending.** Each has a significant function. This class shows writers how to move seamlessly forward and incorporate the essential elements of all three ingredients.

**Transitions and Movement.** Two common weaknesses of beginning writers and a lot of ways to overcome them.

**Write it. Sell it.** Don't waste energy writing articles that won't sell. Learn the five secrets of writing an article that editors can't pass up.

**A Writer's Seven Deadly Sins.** Learn the seven most common failures of writers. You'll also learn about four minor sins as well. Overcome them and you become a better writer and move closer toward being a pro.

**I Want to Taste Chocolate and Smell Burning Leaves.** Through our senses we perceive the world, and we need to use them to involve readers into our writing. The use of the senses makes writing exciting and alive.

**Keep Your Writing Simple.** Say what you mean in simple, Anglo-Saxon language and avoid the literary sound. Cut the flab words. Make your ideas "portable."

**Where Do You Get All Those Ideas?** A lot of writers get stuck because they don't know what to write about. Learn 24 sources to get the ideas germinating inside you.

**Research It Right.** We've all read books where we've known the information is incorrect. Sometimes it's lazy research and other times merely inaccurate. Murphey presents 13 workable places to check to get the facts straight and maintain credibility as a writer.

### **3. The Writer the Person**

**\*Who I Am Tells Me What to Write.** We self-disclose whether we know it or not. These sessions suggest different ways to look at yourself (e.g. using Myers-Briggs; left brain/right brain; Enneagrams).

**The Fear of Writing.** Writing is scary, and it takes courage to write. But fear is also common among published writers. Maybe you can't overcome the fear, but you can diminish its power.

**Failure: a Necessary Step Toward Success.** How to deal with rejection. Learn about non-acceptance. What to do with rejected material. Almost every writer gets rejected—and some regularly. What does rejection really mean? Learn 12 benefits from failing.

**Writing for Success.** What is success? How do I reach it? How do I recognize it? If I become successful, can I enjoy my success?

**Calming the Inner Critic.** We all have inner voices that criticize our writing. Instead of trying to silence those voices, learn to embrace them. Learn how to direct and nurture those critical voices.

**Isolation as a Writer.** Few professions are as lonely as that of writer. Find out what you can do for yourself, how you network, and how you can learn to embrace your isolation to enhance your writing.

**Writing with Authority.** Pros have developed a voice and a style that makes them sound like authorities. All good writing exudes that tone, and it's something easily learned.

**Writing from Your Strengths.** The best writing comes out of self-discovery and moves on to self-disclosure. Assess your strengths as a writer, build on them, and become more successful in your manuscript sales.

**Self-Care for Writers.** Writers need to take care of themselves to be productive writers. Here are tips for self-renewal, idea-gathering, and generally caring for yourself in an isolated world. Here are 10 tips to care for yourself, grow, and avoid burnout.

**\*Nurturing the Writers' Soul.** If we act out of our needs and our desire for wholeness, what is lacking in me that I satisfy through the written word? How do I feed myself in ways that are more than rote and ritual? How do I capitalize on my natural bent—whether I'm an introvert or an extrovert, a feeler or a thinker?

#### **4. The Business of Writing**

**\*The Business of Writing—and It Is a Business.** Treat writing as a business or the government can classify it as a hobby. That affects the amount of expenses you can deduct. Receive help on keeping good records for tax purpose. Learn a simple method to track your submissions. Pick up four negotiating techniques. What rights should you sell? Get the facts about copyright, fair use, and permission to quote. Should you sign with a literary agent? How do you find one and what kind of contract do you sign? How do you fire an agent? What rights do book publishers keep and which are negotiable? What are the major things to look for in a contract? Do you need an editorial service? If you're responsible to promote your book, how do you go about it? How can you make your web site work for you? Is it worth hiring a publicist? Is a full-time writing career for you?

**Writing the Pitch Letter.** Don't call it a query—it's your one-shot sales pitch to an editor or agent. Make the most of it by thinking of this as a sales tool.

**Basic Business Procedures.** Writing is a business. No matter how creative we are, we need to track our manuscripts and keep accurate records.

**Six (or Seven) Ways to Figure out a Publisher.** "Know your market" is the common advice, but how do you do that? How do you find the right market for a magazine article? How do you know where your material will fit?

**Don't Sign the Contract Yet.** Work for hire vs. royalty; negotiating contracts. What rights do you sell? How do you negotiate, especially if you are a new writer? Don't be afraid that they will steal your material. Walk through a standard contract. Avoid the "slave clause."

**Signing with a Literary Agent:** Do you need one? How do you get one if you do? What does the growing importance of agents in the Christian writing field mean? How do you fire an agent?

**Agents, Editorial/Critique Services, PR Firms—and Scams.** These are all part of the business of writing. Know the legitimate from the scam. When do you use such services? How much do you pay? Are they worth the money?

**Getting Along with Editors.** Explore the relationship between writers and editors by understanding the connection. Six things to know about how to cultivate give-and-take relationships.

**Secrets to Writing a Best Seller.** Cec Murphey has had four best sellers (so far)—books that sold more than 100,000 copies. Learn the seven vital elements that enable books to climb the best-seller charts.

**Full-time Writing: Is It in Your Future?** Ministry vs. vocation/avocation. Part-time ministry or full-time ministry? Less than 5 percent of writers earn a living at the craft. Do you have the full-time writer's personality? When will you be ready? How do you take the plunge without heavy risks? Can you make it as a full-time writer? Ponder the eight characteristics of a full-time writer.

**Copyrights, Laws and Liabilities.** What is a copyright? Who gets it? Can you get it back? What does "fair use" mean? What can you copyright? What's the difference between "common law copyright" and "statutory copyright"?

**Selling Your Rights.** What's the difference between First North American Serial Rights and First World Rights? When do you sell all rights? What about reprint rights?

**Self-publishing? Subsidy Publishing? Maybe It's for You.** The market is wide-open for self-published books—and some have become best sellers. It can be expensive and risky—but it can also be rewarding.

**Networking Time.** Make the writers' conference more than a time for learning about the craft. Make the right kind of contacts—in a professional

manner—to gain the most business value for your money. Learn what to do and what to avoid.

## **5. Advanced Writing**

**\*Getting Ready for Prime Time.** What does it take to become a “professional” writer? How do we break into full-time writing? How do we package and brand ourselves? How do we attract an agent? How do we dissolve the agent-writer relationship? Learn the six major factors of a good writer/editor relationship. What can our editors teach us? How do we co-operate with our publishers in promoting our work?

**Branding Ourselves.** Once we publish regularly, we become branded. How do we find our brand? Explore the field of biography, how-to, health and fitness. How do you find your area of specialization? How do you break in? How do you specialize and yet stay fresh? How do we break out of our brand?

**Sell the Truth—Write Nonfiction.** Nonfiction books outsell fiction and usually have a longer shelf life. You’ll learn the two absolutes of good nonfiction, how to incorporate fiction techniques, where to get ideas, how to grab readers’ attention, help on outlining your manuscript. Murphey offers inside information on editors, agents, and the publishing industry today. You’ll learn how to sell your book and what you need to do to promote your book.

**Writing Devotionals.** A book? One? A series? What does “devotional” mean? Cec Murphey says this is one of the best forms of discipline for Christian writers and an easy field to break into.

**The Interview: Asking and Active Listening.** How do you prepare for the interview? How do you start an interview? What is active listening? What are the three crucial questions to ask? How important is empathy? What’s the one question not to ask?

**Helping Yourself in the Self-help Market.** Self-help articles and books sell. You don’t have to be famous or have an extensive education. Learn the major ingredients to make you a top self-help writer.

**Telling True Stories: Biographies and Memoirs.** People like to read about people—and not just celebrities. Murphey’s best-selling books have been biographies, so learn the secrets from a pro.

**First Person Singular:** People identify with people—especially with their struggles and failures. Look for and incorporate the two key factors in what makes a good personal experience story.

**\*The Hidden Secrets of Ghostwriting:** What is ghostwriting? Trends in the field. How do writers get into this field? Learn the six personality requirements for ghostwriters.

**From Sermon to Article and Article to Sermon.** Pastors and preachers can get double mileage from research if they understand the difference between the spoken message and the printed. Turn sermons into books and articles—it's done all the time by the pros.

**Before you Collaborate.** Working with another writer can be exciting or difficult. Learn the pitfalls and answer 10 questions before you begin.

**Improving Every Day.** Professionals keep learning. You can continue to improve your craft and find ways to grow professionally. Tips for those already selling—and who want to sell more.

**\*Me? Write a Book? Why Not!** Do you have enough material for a full book, or do you have an article? How do you get started? How do you plan the book? Who is your target audience? Can you stay with one project for a year? two years? A step-by-step approach from idea to outline. How do you sell the book? Learn the basics of looking professional, writing a proposal, sending queries, submitting for publications, and contacting agents.

**\*Book Proposals.** Why you need to write, how you write them, and what they do for you. Master the eight key ingredients as sales tools—and learn how to write the all-powerful tag line.

**\* Write. Sell. Promote.** To move into the status of professional writer, we need to follow all three steps. We learn the craft—and professionals keep on learning. After we sell our writing, we need to promote. Too many minimize the first step and focus too much on the third. As we study the craft and improve our writing, we'll receive thumbs up from editors and agents. Murphey shares ideas and concepts for published writers to promote their books.

**No Platform? Big Problem.** Publishers expect writers to promote their own books through their "platform." Without an established platform, it's becoming more difficult to sell books. You have to invest your time and money because publishers put money on the sure winners. What can you do? How do you get started? Do you hire a publicist, a marketing agent, or a booking agent?

## **6. Writing Fiction**

**Readers' Eight Expectations.** These are the essentials of a novel—the elements that the pros include. Too many beginning fiction writers don't know or forget these basics.

**Make People Sound Real: The Secrets of Writing Good Dialogue.** Understand the 8 purposes of good dialogue. Learn how and when to use “beats” and how to avoid adverb-heavy attributions.

**Action! Action! Action! Just Get on with It!** Plot is what happens; action is how it happens. Ways to avoid static scenes and talking heads. Action makes fiction come alive. Learn six secrets to keep the story moving and the readers involved.

**Just Tell Me a Good Story.** That's called plotting, and good writing actually does follow a formula. The one rule of a good story is that readers become emotionally involved and care about the characters in the story. Learn the 10 rules of plot complications.

**Make 'em Real.** Real characters make fiction live. They have to be believable. Learn the five important traits for lead characters

**Pitfalls in Fiction.** These are basic pitfalls or writing mistakes. These point your work in the wrong direction, undermine your intent, and even alienate your readers. Learn the 12 to avoid.

**Flashbacks, Foreshadows, and Dreams.** Learn how and when to use these three techniques that can ruin or enhance a novel.

**Secrets of Playing Fair in Writing Mysteries.** Mysteries—although a kind of intellectual game—must follow certain rules or the writers have committed a crime. No tricks allowed and no deceptions, but they must outwit readers and hold their attention.

**Background and Setting—Making the difference.** Today's readers are too sophisticated for writers to fake the background. How do you make backgrounds and settings authentic? How do you give your writing (even fiction) factual credibility?

**Nine Rules for Writing Suspense.** Call them thrillers, novels of suspense or adventure, their key ingredients are mystery, romance, and action. Good suspense keeps readers on edge as they flip pages to find out what happens next. Murphey gives the characteristics of good suspense elements that make writing believable.

**Get that Scene Right.** What is each scene supposed to do? How do you know when to make a scene longer? shorter? Does the scene build tension? Can you cut it?

**POV.** Too many would-be novelists fail because they don't know how to develop a point-of-view character. Learn the various points of view and which works best in your fiction.

**Giving Information.** The pros sneak factual information in so cleverly that readers absorb it without realizing it. Too many fiction writers throw in blocks of information—and stop the story's forward movement. You can learn to do it like a pro!

## **7. Keynote Addresses and Devotional Messages**

**Authentic Voices.** If we choose to write and to become the best we're capable of, it means we must recognize that we have authentic voices—and this isn't something that others can teach us. We need to learn to respect our distinctive voice and to accept the inner probing that puts us in touch with the inner voice.

**After the Conference—What?** You've spent two days at a conference and you're excited and psyched up. Now what? Learn 5 secrets to making the most of the conference during the next six months to a year.

**The Day I Gave up Writing.** No matter how successful, most writers have at least one point in their lives where they gave up writing—or threatened to. Murphey shows how to turn the experience into a creative leap forward.

**Follow Your Bliss.** We all choose our own paths. One path leads sensibly down the predictable road. But why not take the “road less traveled by”? That's where you discover the bliss in life.

**Great Expectations.** What do you want to get out of writing? career or hobby? Three guidelines will help you evaluate your self-expectations. Learn one thing God wants you to remember.

**Beyond Mediocrity.** For too long, Christian writers have produced mediocre manuscripts and many editors didn't know the difference between “all right” and “excellent.” If God is working in our lives, do we dare settle to produce “all right” manuscripts?

**The Other Side of Success.** Too many of us worship success but detest the successful. Most of us can weep with those who fail. Learn helpful methods to rejoice (sincerely) with those who succeed.

**Who We Are Determines What We Write.** As we discover more about ourselves—and write from our discoveries—we become more authentic writers. Becoming authentic is the most important quality in becoming first-class writers.

**Dare to Publish.** Who makes you think you have anything to sell? Why would anyone want to read your material? Tough questions, but necessary ones to ask if you dare to risk writing for publication.

Anyone who considers writing for publication needs to ask themselves questions, such as: Who are you to think you know enough to tell others something they'll buy?

**Types of Writers.** Writers differ in approach and personality. Part of being successful is to discover who you are and how to enhance your ability.

**Failure as a Positive Step Toward Success.** Rejected manuscripts don't have to close doors. Five things you can learn from failure to move you toward publishing success and to accept non-acceptances. What to do with rejected material. Almost every writer gets rejected—and some regularly. What does rejection really mean?