



## The Best Advice I Received as a Writer

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I CAN'T REMEMBER WHO FIRST told me this, or whether it was a general principle that I developed over time. But, having worked at the metaphorical coal face for thirty years, and taught Creative Writing at degree level and studied for an MA myself...the best piece of advice I ever received as a writer is that there is no best piece of advice, no one tip that's going to be with you for the rest of your life. So you might as well stop worrying about it.

I've always loved listening to other writers talk, especially when they detail the minutiae of their working habits. Do they have a set pattern, or can they work anywhere, any time? Longhand, or type straight into a computer? (Do they have a favoured pen or type of paper? Do they default to Microsoft Word, or do they prefer the excellent editor built into Scrivener?) The *Guardian* used to have a weekly photograph of a writer's working room and I remember compulsively cutting out each one. I wanted to see if there was a common thread, a hidden principle that unites life, the universe and writing.

Of course, the studies and attics and public libraries were incredibly diverse. There was no common thread, no one-size-fits-all solution. But that shouldn't stop us looking. I've recently been reading Paul Magrs's memoir-cum-guide to creative writing, *The Novel Inside You*. I've learned so much, and it's chock-full of sensible advice and encouraging suggestions. But am I now following everything contained within? No — and neither would Paul, I think, expect you to follow slavishly in his wake. As *The Life of Brian* reminds us, we're all individuals.



This shouldn't be surprising. The one thing agents and editors, producers and commissioners, say they are looking for is the original writing voice. And if the voice is to be original, surely the process behind it has to be just as unique? I don't even have one set way of doing things: scripts I've generally pinned down in advance, whereas with more literary writing I've been able to follow my instincts without having a plan. Sometimes I've written on holiday, gazing out over this or that vista, but usually I work at my PC in the office at home, with only a plain wall to look at. Over the years I've read all manner of creative writing and scriptwriting books, and my simple approach is to follow those insights that (a) I can remember and (b) seem to work for me.

So I'm not against seeking advice from writers. In fact, in my piece for the RLF called *How I Write*, I discuss three tips, chosen almost at random. But the point is, they might not work for you. I'll go further than that: they might not even work for me in another six months. But as long as you don't get obsessed with finding one piece of advice to rule them all, I don't think there's any harm in looking.