



# On the write side of history



**VICKY BEECHING**  
ON WHY  
WRITING IS A  
FEMINIST ACT

The act of writing can change minds, hearts and human history. It can create a more beautiful, equal and free world, or a more blinkered, cruel and divisive one. Like any tool, we pick it up and use it for our desired outcome.

The theme of this month's DIVA magazine is feminism. As I pondered what to write about, I kept return-

"Words can be like X-rays if you use them properly – they'll go through anything." So said Aldous Huxley, author of *Brave New World*. He's right; words are powerful.

Of course, that power can be used for good or harm.

ing to this thought: Writing is a feminist act. Women's voices need to be heard. Our stories, our lived experience, our political and social opinions carry weight and can make a huge difference to the status quo when we express them.

Since I started this column last year, many of you have messaged me saying that you are writers too. Fantastic! In your emails, you asked for tips on how to improve, and to know whether you were alone in finding writing an uphill struggle. So, I thought I'd respond to that in this article. I'll also bring in the wisdom of two other DIVA columnists – Heather Peace and Eleanor Margolis – to share their advice.

Currently, most of my work-life is spent at my laptop, typing. I'm in the middle of finishing a book for Harper Collins; a memoir about my journey of coming out. I also write here at DIVA monthly and for a few

newspapers and websites. I'm learning a lot (mostly the hard way, via mistakes!) so am glad to pass on any advice that has helped me.

Firstly, I think it's crucial to dispel the myth that writers have an easy life sitting in coffee shops, chewing on pencils and drinking endless lattes. In my experience, and for 99% of the professional writers I know, it's damn hard work. Immensely rewarding and life-giving too, but requiring serious elbow-grease.

Knowing that it's tough for everyone can help. That way, when you find it immensely frustrating, you know you're not the only one. Writing is a labour of love. Go into it with your eyes wide-open fully expecting this and you're more likely to stick it out long-term. It's definitely a marathon not a sprint.

The scariest part can be the blank page or blank screen; when you need to blog, or write a book

chapter, or pitch to a newspaper, but the ideas have all dried up. Heather Peace says: "Coming up with the initial idea is my least favourite bit. And sitting down to start is hard. But once I'm in the flow and my idea becomes more solid, I really enjoy writing the article."

It's the same for Eleanor Margolis: "I find starting anything new quite daunting. So I'd say that's my least favourite part. But when I get into it, I usually find it extremely fun." Personally, this resonates with me too. Beginning a new piece can feel like starting an old car: you keep trying the key in the engine unsuccessfully, then suddenly something works, creativity kicks in, and it starts to fall into place.

So, when and where is it best to write? Lots of famous authors argue you should treat it like a desk-job and show up at the same place and time every day. While this is a valuable habit, most people seem to get struck with inspiration at random moments – I know I do.

Eleanor says: "I mostly write from home – specifically in bed at about 3am because I'm a bit of an insomniac and my mind becomes very active at night. Apparently, Winston Churchill used to do all his writing in bed. I think that's where the similarities between Churchill and me begin and end..."

For Heather, now that being a mum is part of her life, she takes advantage of when the house is peaceful: "I usually write my articles at home when Annie is at nursery and I've got space and quiet. Although it depends on what the article is about."

Some columns require her to be out researching the story: "For my IVF article" Heather says, "I went over to the Agora Clinic in Brighton to speak to the doctors and nurses.

For my history of women's football article last month, I chatted on the phone to my good friend Kelly Simmons who's with the FA." Every piece requires a slightly different approach.

For me, inspiration strikes at weird moments. Watching a film at the cinema is a reoccurring one, so I always have a notebook and pen in my bag. This can annoy people, and I'm probably a rubbish person to go to the movies with, especially if it's a date! But I can't help needing to jot down ideas when they hit me.

Eleanor agrees that it's best to write down flashes of creativity, saying: "I have a lot of notes on my phone." Although she adds, "Because my ideas usually come at night, many of the notes are retrospectively nonsensical".

Personally, I've found this too: I've often looked back at scribbles in my "cinema notebook" and not been able to understand a word; probably because cinemas are pitch black! Much of it looks like hieroglyphics, and I'm left scratching my head as I try to interpret them.

Inspiration can also hit during the most mundane tasks. Heather says one of her DIVA columns was the result of a simple errand she ran in Brighton: "My kindness article was the easiest to write. It was a stream of thoughts I had when I got home after witnessing kindness on a trip out to my local shops." She saw a person behave in a beautiful, selfless way, and the idea was sparked. Coming home, she opened her laptop and the whole piece poured out.

Editing can be the least enjoyable and glamorous part of writing. So, what's the secret to doing it well? Heather says: "I'll write an article and then leave it a day or so; to come back to when I've had a bit of time away from it." Distance can

definitely help you see the stronger and weaker parts – all becomes clearer when you step away then look with fresh eyes.

I've found a couple of digital tools that help me immensely with both writing and editing. Music seems to help, as long as it is a soundtrack or something instrumental without vocals. Recently, I discovered a site called Focus At Will that plays music in the style and tempo of your choice. It's designed to have no vocals and help you stay "in the zone" with no distractions. I use it every day.

Another great tool is Grammarly. It's a piece of software that edits spelling and grammar far better than typical word processors. It even tells you if you're overusing certain terms and suggests better ones. You can download a desktop version of Grammarly and use it instead of Word; I do and find it much more user-friendly. A permanently visible word count is extremely helpful, and spelling or grammar mistakes can be fixed with just one click in the sidebar.

Hopefully these tips, and sneak-peeks into DIVA columnists' heads, have been useful. If you dream of being a writer, I hope you'll pursue that goal. And that you'll refuse to let nerves, busyness or setbacks get in the way. Your voice matters because no one else can tell your story.

The novelist Isabel Allende once said: "Write what should not be forgotten." That's a powerful vision – and hopefully, one that helps us all find the courage to put pen to paper. So go ahead: write what you believe should not be forgotten. Share your unique perspective with the world because writing is a feminist act. **D**

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