

Career story: Building a career with creativity and resilience

This career story comes from an internationally known author. The account is a great resource for understanding the complex paths that many careers take. When reading the career story, reflect on what you have learned in your degree and how this might equip you to build a career with creativity and resilience.

At the back of the resource, you will find more information as well as sample questions on learning from biographies and career stories.

Liz's story

“How do I write a novel? I find a theme that inspires me, then hope the characters ‘show up’.”

Internationally acclaimed author Liz Byrski grew up in England and wanted to become a writer; however, her parents advised her to get “a real job”. The result was a secretarial course followed by employment as a secretary, during which she made her way into professional journalism by writing stories and selling them to newspapers and magazines.

Arriving in Western Australia in 1981, Liz established herself as a freelance writer and then became a broadcaster with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). She then spent time in government, where she wrote speeches and media releases, and later she returned to the ABC as a broadcaster and executive producer.

Concurrent with her journalistic work, Liz wrote ten non-fiction books and developed her skills and reputation as a teacher. From 1984 to 1988, she worked as a sessional (hourly paid) tutor in print journalism at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT), which became Curtin University in 1967.

A decade later, Liz returned to Curtin as an adjunct teaching fellow and once again taught as a sessional tutor. She was initially reluctant to take a full-time academic position because of the time it would take away from her writing practice, but in 2001 she accepted a position as coordinator of the professional writing and research major and began to balance her time between teaching, research, and writing.

Family responsibilities and the need to earn a living had prevented Liz from completing an undergraduate degree. With the move into academia she enrolled in a doctoral program and obtained her PhD in only two years.

Without any formal training in writing, Liz recalls that she had always wanted to write fiction but she didn't know how to start. Having decided to "just have a go", her first novel [Gang of Four](#) was published in 2004 when Liz was aged 60. Since then she has published three non-fiction books and many novels, as well as academic articles and book reviews.

Liz retired from Curtin University in 2017, she had taught in the Professional Writing and Publishing program, co-ordinated the Creative Practice HDR Students' Network and the Curtin Writing Network and Directed the Australia China Writing Centre. She also supervises many PhD students. Liz explains that the social contact with staff and students was a wonderful contrast to the isolation of work as a writer. The routine of her university work also adds "structure" to her life.

Careers in writing

After 50 years as a writer and broadcaster, and 13 in higher education, Liz has a wealth of connections in government, business and industry, including many graduates who work as professional writers in a range of roles and sectors. She reflects that careers in writing have changed significantly over that time. The internet, for example, has revolutionised the production, marketing, and consumption of fiction. This has both advantages and disadvantages for writers:

"It is a place where work can be seen and get noticed, but unfortunately often without being paid."

Publishers watch writers' blogs and this can sometimes lead to the recognition of new talent that they can develop. Whilst it is harder than ever for emerging writers to be published in print, e-books provide new and exciting possibilities for publication. Today, many new books that appear in print have first proved successful online. These might otherwise not have made it to publication due to the increasingly high costs of print publishing. Some genres such as science fiction are now primarily published in e-book form.

The biggest uptake of e-books is among women over 45, and many much older readers like e-books because they are lighter to hold and because the font size can be changed. Being cheaper to produce, e-books can be used to gauge demand before committing to print. For example, Liz's short book [Getting On: Some Thoughts on Women and Ageing](#) was first published online before coming out in print with Momentum (2012).

The print run for most published literary novels by new authors is 2000 - 5000 copies. Royalties are most often 10% of the cover price and it may take five years to sell the print run, so there is little money to be made. To maximize their income from different formats and publishers, many successful authors write in multiple styles and genres under different names. Commercial mass market/genre fiction can sell in tens of thousands - a dramatic comparison to literary fiction.

In general, publishers are always looking for something fresh and different with something new to say or a new angle on an old story. Fashions change, but publishers look for really good writing appropriate to the genre, well informed, and soundly researched. Book publishers look for books that suit their various lists and categories, and magazine editors look for material written in the style of the publication, to the usual length for the publication, and of relevance to the magazine's profile.

Building and sustaining a career in writing

We asked Liz to respond to a number of questions about building and sustaining a career in writing. She told us that “it is very hard to make a living writing fiction or poetry!” and that many creative writing students graduate with no idea how to make a living from writing. This was one of the factors that influenced the [development of a program in professional writing and publishing](#), which delivers skills that enable graduates to make a living from writing while still developing their creative work.

Liz explained that there are many ways of being prepared for the workforce, and she shared six strategies for students to consider. Be realistic; open up options for work by acquiring marketable skills; read widely across a range of publications; be professional; be persistent; and get experience. In the following section we expand on each of these.

Be realistic

Liz suggests that students' expectations of a writing career can be entirely unrealistic:

“A lot of students who come into creative writing think they will leave and be able to write a novel and be paid a lot of money for it.”

This can happen, she says, but it's rare. “Don't be precious,” is the advice Liz gives to students and graduates. This means being prepared as a graduate to take less glamorous jobs that develop one's writing.

Liz recalls having done plenty of 'boring' writing jobs. These include installation manuals, real estate reviews and, once, a whole edition of a popular lifestyle magazine with each article written under a different pseudonym! She advocates for educators to give students a “clear sense of what they can expect from their degrees.” This includes discussing a range of occupations in which graduates have been successful, also listing some of the employers.

Open up options for work by acquiring marketable skills

Liz's second tip is to acquire a broad range of marketable skills that are related to one's creative goals. This opens up many more options for work:

“It is hard to make a living from creative writing but you can make a living from professional writing.”

This, she explains, is better than 'pouring cappuccinos' for a living because it enables writers to practice their craft and polish their writing skills.

In Liz's experience, students who have studied professional writing and publishing are highly employable:

“Employers are desperate for well-informed staff who can write well across a range of forms and genres and can be relied upon to produce intelligent, error free copy. There are many really interesting jobs in the State and Commonwealth Public Service, local government, the arts, business and industry, in which students can develop high-level careers.”

Liz recommends all creative writing students to add some professional writing knowledge and competency to their skills base:

“If they work in professional writing they are still developing skills that will enhance their creative work.”

Liz advises students to explore the full range of available electives and think about which might help them develop knowledge of professional writing and editing from which they can build a portfolio of written, preferably published, material to show to potential employers. These electives might, for example, focus on feature writing, workplace writing, promotional writing, editing and advanced editing. These are marketable skills with which creative writing graduates can earn their living as writers whilst working on their novels, poetry, or other creative work.

Read widely across a range of publications

In addition to electives and work placements, students should learn to write in a range of different forms and genres so that they are multi-skilled writers. This means reading widely across a range of publications: fiction and non-fiction books; feature articles; reports; travel writing; reviews; essays; short stories; and promotional materials. Students who read across a range of publications learn the elements, tone, language register, and structure of different forms of writing, with a view of being able to move across genres when necessary. A broad approach to critical reading also helps to develop general knowledge, which is vital for writers in every genre.

Be professional

Discipline is just as important as talent! Being professional means: “delivering on time and in the form that you’ve promised it.” Working strenuously to develop knowledge of grammar, syntax, punctuation and sentence structure, enables people to edit their own work and submit it free of errors.

Be persistent

Writers need “staying power and persistence” to deal with the many inevitable rejections. Very few writers are lucky in their first attempt; Liz has been rejected “heaps of times” and she laughs as she says that it doesn’t stop happening. Highly successful authors such as Tim Winton take years to earn anything from their writing. She says, and then the income is often from awards and prize money rather than sales. Liz notes that popular fiction sells far better than other forms of books, but that writers of popular fiction are less likely to reap prize money or to gain the same level of respect.

Get experience

Graduates from the degree programs in which Liz has been involved have an excellent record of gaining employment as writers. Liz attributes this to the practical focus of the programs and to students’ practical placements, which are undertaken within the media, mainstream industry, publishers and non-government organisations.

For more information about Liz Byrski, please visit lizbyrski.com.

Learning from biographies and career stories

What do you see when you meet a professional?

Most of the time, we see only the role someone holds now. It is likely, however, that the person has experienced a career with lots of twists and turns.

Get the most out of reading career stories or biographies by asking yourself some of the questions to the right.

1. What do you expect you will have to learn during your career?
2. What might you need to do in order to keep learning?
3. What differences, common issues, and links can you make to your own career journey?
4. Identify and reflect on key decision points in your personal and professional development, and then consider:
 - a. Who played a significant role at these times?
 - b. To whom did you go to for advice?
 - c. What can you put in place for the next time you face a major decision?
5. Biographical accounts raise a number of challenges and opportunities. These include innovative collaborations, work within other sectors, diverse locations, and different modes of work. Look for examples of these in your discipline and reflect on what might be of interest to you:
 - a. What interests you, and what can you do to make this a reality?
 - b. What challenges do you foresee, and how will you prepare for these?
6. Biographical accounts often tell us something about the interests, passions, and motivations of the people involved. Can you think of ways to combine your interests and your future work?
7. What would you like to achieve as a professional?

This resource was developed by Dawn Bennett.