SOFTWARE & TECH

Lorrie Moore How To Become A Writer

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The Enduring Wisdom of Lorrie Moore: How to Become a Writer with Grit and Grace

For anyone who has ever stared at a blank page with a mixture of hope and dread, the question is inevitable: how does one actually become a writer? While countless guides and workshops offer formulaic advice, few answers are as honest, darkly humorous, and profoundly insightful as the one found in Lorrie Moore's iconic short story, "How to Become a Writer." First published in her 1985 debut collection *Self-Help*, this piece has become a touchstone for aspiring authors. It is less a manual and more a masterclass in the emotional reality of a writer's life. This article explores the lessons embedded in Moore's story, unpacking the practical and psychological journey of becoming a writer in a way that feels both timeless and urgently relevant.

Understanding Lorrie Moore's "How to Become a Writer"

Lorrie Moore's story is a masterpiece of second-person narration. It speaks directly to "you," the protagonist, who is named Francie. The story does not offer a step-by-step guide to publication. Instead, it documents the messy, often painful process of a young woman who finds herself becoming a writer almost despite herself. The narrative follows Francie from her childhood, through college and a disastrous romance, to her first attempts at writing stories and facing the literary world. The genius of the story lies in its tone—wry, self-deprecating, and devastatingly accurate. It captures the loneliness, the ridiculous moments of inspiration, and the constant thread of anxiety that runs through the creative life. To understand how to become a writer, one must first understand the truth that Moore so elegantly lays bare: that writing is not a career choice chosen from a brochure, but an identity that creeps up on you and refuses to let go.

The First Lesson: Writing as a Default Setting

One of the most resonant themes in "How to Become a Writer" is that the protagonist does not make a conscious decision to become a writer; she simply finds that writing is the only thing that makes sense of her world. Moore writes, "First, try to be something, anything, else. Then you will be a writer." This is the foundational irony of the craft. Writing is often a fallback, a place of refuge when other paths feel hollow. For Francie, it begins with a terrible poem and a college class where a professor tells her she has talent. The lesson here is that becoming a writer often starts with a failure at something else or a deep, unshakable restlessness. It is not about ambition in the traditional sense, but about a compulsion to take the mess of life and shape it into a narrative. The best writers are not the most confident people; they are the ones who feel things too intensely and must do something with that feeling.

Navigating the Creative Process: It's Not Pretty

Moore's story is brutally honest about the creative process itself. It does not romanticize the act of writing. Instead, it shows Francie sitting in her room, struggling to capture a voice, worrying about plot, and feeling uncertain. The story includes a famous line that perfectly encapsulates this struggle: "Writing is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand." This is a profound truth for anyone learning how to become a writer. The romantic image of the inspired artist is a myth. The real work is done in the mundane hours of doubt, rewriting, and staring out the window. It requires a tolerance for discomfort and ambiguity. The aspiring writer must

accept that the process will often feel like a failure until it suddenly, miraculously, doesn't.

The Role of Education and Mentorship

In the story, Francie enrolls in a creative writing class. This was a relatively new concept in the 1980s, and Moore captures the peculiar dynamic of the workshop environment. There is the professor who offers cryptic praise, the classmates who offer well-meaning but useless criticism, and the pressure to produce work that is "literary." The lessons from this section are twofold. First, a good teacher can identify a spark of talent, but they cannot give you the talent itself. Second, the workshop is a place to test your skin. You will be misunderstood. You will receive feedback that stings. This is all part of the training. The key is to learn to filter advice without losing your voice. Moore's story suggests that the best education a writer can get is to read voraciously and to write without the constant need for validation. The workshop is a tool, not a destination. To truly become a writer, you must eventually leave the classroom and write for yourself.

Dealing with Rejection and the Literary World

No discussion of how to become a writer is complete without addressing rejection. Francie sends her stories to magazines and receives form rejections. She attends a party and feels like an outsider. She tries to talk about her work and is met with blank stares. Moore's depiction of the literary world is not glamorous; it is a world of small magazines, low pay, and fragile egos. This is a vital lesson for the modern writer. The rejection is not personal, but it feels deeply personal. The trick, as Moore implies, is to keep going. The story does not end with Francie getting a lucrative book deal or becoming famous. It ends with her writing another story. This is the ultimate truth: becoming a writer is a practice, not a pastime. The goal is not publication, but the writing itself. Publication is a wonderful side effect, but it is not the engine of the work. The engine is the need to make sense of your own experience through language.

Finding Your Voice and Subject Matter

One of the most subtle lessons in Lorrie Moore's "How to Become a Writer" is about finding your voice. Francie's early attempts are derivative, influenced by the writers she is reading. But over time, her own voice emerges—wry, observant, and full of unexpected, painful insight. She writes about her family, her terrible boyfriend, her job. In other words, she writes about what she knows, but she writes about it with a slant. She does not try to write about grand historical events. She writes about the small horrors and small joys of daily life. This is a crucial piece of advice for anyone who wants to become a writer. Do not try to sound like anyone else. Do not try to write the novel you think the market wants. Write the story that only you can tell. Your voice is not something you invent; it is something you uncover by being relentlessly honest about your own perceptions and experiences.

The Psychological Toll: Loneliness and Identity

Moore is unflinching in her portrayal of the writer's psychology. Francie is lonely. She struggles to connect with people because she is always observing, always taking notes for a future story. Her boyfriend breaks up with her, in part because he cannot understand her intensity. Her friends don't really "get" why she spends so much time alone. This is a real consideration for anyone learning how to become a writer. The life requires a degree of solitude that can feel isolating. It asks you to spend a significant portion of your time inside your own head. This can be exhilarating, but it can also be painful. The writer must learn to live with that tension. They must find ways to balance the inward life with outward connections. Moore's story does not offer a solution to this loneliness, but it validates it. It tells the aspiring writer: you are not alone in your loneliness.

Practical Takeaways from Moore's Story

While "How to Become a Writer" is a work of fiction, it contains a wealth of practical wisdom that can be applied to

any writing career. Here are some key takeaways extracted from the narrative, presented as actionable advice for the modern writer:

- Embrace failure. Write a terrible poem. Let it be terrible. The early drafts are for you alone. Perfectionism is the enemy of productivity.
- Read everything. Francie is a reader, and that is her primary education. You cannot write well if you do not read widely and critically.
- Ignore the market. When you try to write what you think will sell, you will write soulless prose. Write the story that is burning inside you.
- Learn from criticism, but don't be ruled by it. Every piece of feedback is a data point, not a verdict on your worth as a human being.
- Be willing to be misunderstood. Your work will not be for everyone. That is a sign you are doing something right.
- Protect your writing time. Francie writes in the cracks of her life. You must fight for the time to write, because no one will hand it to you.

How to Become a Writer in the Modern Age

Lorrie Moore’s story was written in the mid-1980s, before the internet, before social media, before the gig economy. So how does its wisdom apply to the writer of today? The answer is: more than ever. The modern writer faces new distractions: the constant ping of notifications, the pressure to build a "personal brand," the glut of online content. But the fundamentals remain the same. You still have to sit down and write the words one after another. You still have to deal with rejection, though it now comes in the form of cold emails and silent submission portals. You still have to find your voice in a noisy world. Moore’s story reminds us that the inner life of the writer has not changed. We still struggle with doubt, with joy, with the strange compulsion to turn life into language. The medium might change, but the message endures.

The Wisdom of Not Giving Up

Perhaps the most powerful lesson in "How to Become a Writer" is simply this: you must not give up. Francie faces a series of defeats. Her stories are rejected. Her love life is a mess. She wonders if she is wasting her life. But she keeps writing. The story ends with her in the act of writing a story, and that is the only ending that matters. Becoming a writer is not a destination; it is a continuous act of becoming. It is a choice you make every day, often in the face of evidence that suggests you should do something more practical. Moore’s story is a permission slip for the aspiring writer. It gives you permission to be uncertain, to be messy, to be obsessed. It tells you that the struggle is not a sign you are on the wrong path; it is a sign you are on the right one.

Conclusion: The Only Real Advice

In the end, the question of how to become a writer cannot be answered by a list of rules. It can only be shown, through a mirror held up to the experience itself. Lorrie Moore’s story is that mirror. It shows you the grit, the grace, the stupid jokes, the late nights, and the quiet satisfaction of getting a sentence exactly right. If you want to become a writer, read this story. Then, like Francie, ignore the noise, ignore the rejection, and write your truth. You don't need permission from anyone but yourself. The path is hard, but it is also beautiful. And it is the only one, for some of us, that makes any sense at all. So, sit down, start writing, and let the struggle begin. That is how you become a writer.

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