



Publisher's Note: We are delighted to introduce you to Nicole M. Bouchard, who shares her extensive experience as a writer and editor in Part One of this dynamic two-part series.



The Written Ripple Effect

by Nicole M. Bouchard

Developing a professional portfolio of written work is, or should be, a fairly complex and deliberate process full of fine-tuning, choice, analysis and brand-management techniques. Writers, similar to artists, have distinct themes, styles and approaches that recur throughout their body of work.

Determining your voice, setting particular career goals and establishing certain standards that apply across the different mediums of your writing are pivotal points in the process of assembling a portfolio that represents an accurate, poignant sampling of the brand you are essentially marketing: yourself.

Whether in fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry, journalism, copywriting or business writing, there should be a clearly discernible element that makes your writing unique.

This may seem at odds with the more formalized mediums that require a lack of personal input, but what it really means is that with each piece you write, you have a certain set of standards that showcase your abilities and thus the quality is uniform while also stylistically standing out from the pile in the eyes of employers, editors, and readers.

FINDING YOUR VOICE

While finding your voice and setting career goals often go hand in hand, it is the identification and cultivation of your authentic writer's voice that will help determine what career goals your work is best-suited for.

Although the following exercise might seem counter-intuitive because you're concentrating on finding your unique approach, the stylistic reproduction of a known quantity can be useful in seeing what styles you enjoy, where similarities lie and most importantly where the differences are.

This exercise was given in a journalism course to get students in the habit of learning a publication's voice.

Take a magazine you enjoy reading and select the first few paragraphs of an article. Looking at the title, lead, syntax (word choice and usage), reader level (the grade level to which the reader's comprehension applies) and subject, write a few paragraphs in the same style on a different subject.

I chose a piece from a magazine about an up-and-coming New York City couple devoted to architectural design. My few paragraphs were about my personal experiences in the housing market (buying and selling). Emulating that method of writing so closely gave me an intimate perspective about what I liked and didn't like about using it.

The point is to get thinking about how and why you might do something another way. You start to see your style emerge. Again, similar to artists who study by doing reproductions, you learn what is in line with a certain type of writing for you and pick up on what makes you unique.

I found that though I'd enjoyed reading the article, I wouldn't have opened with clothing and posture because I felt it took time away from the essential core of the story and had been done too many times in journalism.

Your opinion is subjective; it isn't right or wrong- it's simply your view and that is how you get to know yourself as a writer, by forming these opinions.

Reading material that speaks to you is invaluable to cultivating the opinions that will shape your voice. Read examples of "good writing" in your subject areas of interest and even expose yourself to examples of "bad writing." It helps to know what not to do as well as what you should do.

Later, when you approach publications, you will have to conform to their larger voice with which they speak to their readership. To properly distinguish yourself as a writer, keep in mind that just as a chorus is made of sopranos and altos of varying degrees to sing one song, so a publication is made up of different voices that harmonize for a united theme.

LEARNING TO BREAK THE RULES

An additional aspect of finding your voice is learning the rules – and knowing how (and when) to break them.

In a news article, you establish the basic premise of the story in the first paragraph (letting your readers know what the story is that you're going to tell them.) In a novel, you bring the plot over a story arc that has rising action, a climax and falling action. In an essay, the last sentence of your introduction is your thesis statement.

There are some rules that are rather timeless and, for the purposes of writing a professional piece, carved in stone.

There are other generally accepted rules, however, that can and should be broken to present a different perspective. These occur mainly in creative writing. The importance of practicing different forms of writing can't be understated here.

Experimenting with rules and method will further define your style as will experimenting with the closely related category of form. An aspiring poet should try at least four to five different forms of verse. A fiction writer should experiment with length (flash fiction, short stories, novels...), perspective and genre.

A budding writer might wish to go as far as trying the varied mediums of fiction, non-fiction, poetry and journalism. The goal is to try to stretch your skills across different methods, rules, mediums, genres and forms until it feels comfortable.

ACCEPTING FEEDBACK

Once you arrive at a place of confidence in your work, you're ready for a third-party perspective.

A caution at this point: writing is subjective. Be open to constructive feedback but don't allow yourself to be governed by the roller-coaster of responses you'll receive.

In the best cases, you'll be able to see what material/approaches work and which ones do not. In the worst cases, you'll either be flying blind in a snow squall of form letters or be on the receiving end of a personal, not professional, opinion aimed dead-center at your hopes of being published.

Third-party perspectives are great barometers but they are subject to malfunctions and variables. A thick-skin, a desire to be ever-improving, and the knowledge that the true marketplace, your audience of readers, is the real judge, will sustain you along the journey as will a sense of humor.

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As Marge Piercy wrote in the beginning poem of **So You Want to Write: How to Master the Craft of Writing Fiction and Memoir** (co-authored by Ira Wood), "Talent is what they say you have after the novel is published and favorably reviewed. Beforehand what you have is a tedious delusion, a hobby like knitting..."

She goes on to declare that "...work is its own cure. You have to like it better than being loved."

E.E. Cummings had his first book, **The Enormous Room**, rejected by fifteen publishers. He self-published it, it became a huge success and he dedicated it to those fifteen publishers.

Emily Dickinson was told, "[Your poems] are quite as remarkable for defects as for beauties and are generally devoid of true poetical qualities." Even the Beatles were rejected: "We don't like their sound and guitar music is on the way out."

The writers' website www.writersservices.com has a page dedicated to rejection faux-pas outside of the literary world sure to bring comic relief.

Nicole M. Bouchard is the founder and Editor-in-Chief of the online literary magazine, [The Write Place At the Write Time](#), Member CLMP (Council of Literary Magazines and Presses).

For her work on the literary magazine as well as her journalistic and fiction work, she was profiled on the cable television program, Creative Women Today and interviewed by Writers in Business and Book Readers Heaven.

Nicole M. Bouchard is a Letters member of the [National League of American Pen Women](#). She recently served as one of the editors on the Small Press Panel: How Online Journals and Social Media Transform Poetics at the Fourth Annual Mass. Poetry Festival.

Ms. Bouchard was also the creator and instructor of a four week online intensive creative writing course in early 2011 affiliated with The Write Place At the Write Time, entitled, "Passion, Philosophy and Prose: The Power of the Pen".