

# The Six Qualities of a Writer

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For years I considered myself a true writer, right down to my very soul. Writing is not just scripting words or stringing sentences together to sound good. It's not just creating a good story, or a means of getting attention. For me, it comes down to my personality, what makes me tick, my obsessions and habits, good and bad - especially the bad. I was comforted by the fact that these traits have been observed in many other writers. These reflections compelled me to compile a list of these endearing qualities.

"I write for the same reason I breathe - because if I didn't, I would die." Ruth Rendell

## 1) **Neurotic**

Pronunciation [ner-raw-tik]  
-adjective

1. A functional disorder in which feelings of anxiety, obsessive thoughts, compulsive acts, and physical complaints without objective evidence of disease, in various degrees and patterns, dominate the personality.
2. A relatively mild personality disorder typified by excessive anxiety or indecision and a degree of social or interpersonal maladjustment.

Every writer I know (myself included) is anxious, fearful, worrisome, paranoid. I don't know if this is the chicken or the egg. Do you become neurotic from writing, or does being neurotic make you write? I think it's a bit of both. You have enough material about your dysfunctional family to fill the Louvre. You are phobic - fear of heights, spiders, airplanes, elevators, you name it. And the anxiety transcends into your writing. Once you write and let others read, you are baring your tender belly to the hyenas. The modern, media-obsessed world is cruel, brutally honest and greedy, hungry for meaty material to rip apart.

Taking on the profession of writing is scary, not just because of the fear of rejection or job instability, but what will result on the page once you start. Things happen when you write - forgotten memories creep up, a whole new personality can emerge, crazy stories take on their own lives. Your pen or computer keyboard takes over, creating an entity that becomes a part of you. This entity will affect someone, perhaps enrage them, make them laugh, cry or fall asleep. What you think is great prose or an intellectual opinion piece, someone may mock, and can make you want to curl up and hide for awhile. All those things combined would leave even the most left-brained, logical cliff-jumper clinging to the edge.

"Writing is very different to having your photo taken. You are exposing yourself more, not physically but emotionally." Benjamin Disraeli

## 2) Obsessive

This quality goes hand-in-hand with neurotic. You check your emails fifty times a day. You wash your hands fifty times a day. When you drop an envelope in the mail box, you open and close it several times to make sure it dropped. You check and recheck your work for errors. Once you start writing, you become obsessed with every detail and em-dash, each word must be perfect. The number one rule for writing is not to edit while you write, and this is very hard not to do. While you write, you can hear your critics complain, "Too much detail!" or "*Show* me, don't tell me!" The voices go on and on, and you have to push out the one that says you can't write to save your life. Sometimes you write several paragraphs, save it, go to the grocery store, and a certain line keeps popping up in your head, it's not quite right, and then a new word or adjective comes to you. You rush home, open the document, and know the exact spot to insert it. You are awakened at night by the same line, with more words to add, or delete, and your plot continues in your dreams. You are all-consumed by this piece, and can not rest or concentrate on anything else until it is that brilliantly elegant piece of prose the Governor General has been waiting for all her life. Revise, revise, revise, revise. Edit, edit, edit, edit. A new form of obsessive-compulsive disorder is born.

"Obsession led me to write. It's been that way with every book I've ever written. I become completely consumed by a theme, by characters, by a desire to meet a challenge. " Anne Rice

## 3) Procrastinative

If we are all-consumed by writing, why do you come up with so many creative ways to procrastinate? See "Neurotic" above.

"Procrastination is the fear of success. People procrastinate because they are afraid of the success that they know will result if they move ahead now. Because success is heavy, carries a responsibility with it, it is much easier to procrastinate and live on the 'someday I'll' philosophy."

Denis Waitley

## 4) Alcoholic

Every writer I know (myself included) loves the lure of alcohol, or some other form of substance abuse. Why? Again, re-read "Neurotic" and "Obsessive" above. After each writing class, I find myself with my classmates at the local watering hole, drowning ourselves in our favourites, mine being gin and tonic with a twist of lime. We are trying to forget about our mundane lives and shameful pasts. Why did we decide to become writers exactly? The joy, pain and tolerance of writing go hand-in-hand with the numbing-out and false hopes that booze induces. When I read my fellow writers' blogs, they croon the praises of whiskey that sustains them during a research report and comforts them afterwards. Each teacher in each type of writing on the first day of class confessed to the high rate of alcoholism that accompanied their profession. We all felt right at home.

"I work until beer o'clock" - Stephen King

## 5) Insecure

Being insecure could go with any profession, but confidence is something not carried well with writers. I think it's because of the honesty that needs to accompany writing. You must be honest with yourself and your audience. You can not lie or hide. And this honesty breeds insecurity. All confidence that people express is fake, an attempt at deceiving their competition and coworkers into intimidation so they can be on top and look good. When you are writing, you cannot fake confidence, and even though you may express it outwardly to get published, deep down you doubting your abilities and past success. When you get that contract from the publisher, you are sweating bullets as to how exactly you will pull it off. Even successful writers admit that each book was a crap shoot in the beginning. Yet they keep plugging away because they must write, they must change the way the world thinks. They don't do it just to be successful or see their name in print (well, maybe just a little).

"Writing is just having a sheet of paper, a pen and not a shadow of an idea of what you are going to say." Kurt Vonnegut

"It took me fifteen years to discover I had no talent for writing. But I couldn't give it up because by that time I was too famous." Aldous Huxley

## 6) Courageous

As Margaret Atwood said, "You need a certain amount of nerve to be a writer." All the risk-taking, revealing yourself and keeping at it after so many rejection letters takes a lot of courage and persistence. A writer must never give up, and despite all the negative connotations, must never doubt him or herself. Positive affirmations go a long way, restoring the unknown inner strength each writer has.

"The act of writing is an act of optimism. You would not take the trouble to do it if you felt that it didn't matter." Angus Wilson