

We Are All Beginners

by Judy Bridges

After twenty years of coaching writers and leading workshops – and writing myself – I've come to one conclusion: We are all beginners.

I'm often asked if a class is for beginners or pros, and I can feel people wondering when I say it's for both. I love having a mix of people of different ages, genders, interests, and best of all, levels of experience. The person who has never put pen to paper sits next to one who is extremely well published. High school dropouts sit with college professors, and factory workers with attorneys. Unless someone happens to mention it, no one can tell the difference. When we start writing, we all look alike.

We all bring something to the party; and we are all lacking. We write well one day and badly the next. We blow the grammar one day and correct it the next. We think we've nailed it when we haven't, and sometimes we have it when we think we don't.

The truth is, writing is like life. It goes up and down. When we're young, we think we're going to get smarter with experience and live on an upward curve, with our days getting brighter and happier all the time. Eventually we figure out it doesn't work that way. The happiness curve is jagged. Life is good at times, and not so good at others.

As writers, we begin anew every time we face a blank page. All the words are in our heads, waiting to get sorted into proper order. But often, instead of flowing easily, ideas jumble, phrases bubble up in our brains and slip away. This happens to the pros as well as the beginners.

Way back when we first started writing, we were sure it was all about inspiration, that lightning would strike with la grande idea. If we were to get out of the way, the right words would flow through our fingers to the page. All we'd have to do is let it happen.

Then we realize writing isn't that easy. Work is involved. Even those first "inspired" drafts need a lot of fixing.

Enter: Craft. We take classes. Read books. Learn everything we can about the practical matters of structure, plot, character reveal, show and tell, point-of-view, dialog, etc. etc. etc. Surely, now, we are on the ascending curve to professionalism. We paid our dues and the rest is going to be easy.

Ha! – says everyone who's been at this for awhile. The blank page is still a blank page. You still struggle to fill it with worthwhile things, and you still need to do the fixing. With experience, you spot the mistakes more quickly and are more adept at fixing them. But the path is the same.

If you work in a single genre, you learn some shortcuts, patterns you can follow. You can begin with the murder, have X number of characters of one type or another, and XX number of plot points to cover. This makes it easier, but there's still that blank page.

When you approach the page knowing you have work to do, when you realize you are like every other writer on the planet who has to work to get it right, you quit staring at the sky, waiting for inspiration. You quit looking at other writers thinking they're the pros and that if only you knew what they know, writing would be easy.

Scary as that is, it's the good news. You write and re-write because your standards are high, you want it to be good. If you didn't care you would write any old dumb thing on the page and let it go. The fact that you wrestle with it, that instead of getting cocky you admit to feeling like a beginner, is one of the best things you can say about yourself as a writer.

If you are lucky, you'll be a beginner all your life.
