

**The Writing Career**  
**Gencon 2006 - Mike Stackpole**  
**<http://www.michaelastackpole.com/>**

Mike is a full-time author. All he does is write. For many of us, this is our dream. Mike is happy to give as much information as possible to people who want to write as a career. Mind you, it might cost you a few bucks (either in the form of a workshop such as this one or by subscribing to his newsletter *The Secrets*) but the cost is nominal. You'll spend more on a Starbucks than you will to stop in Mike's workshop. It will be worth it.

First and foremost, Mike is all about telling people to be realistic. You will not get rich quick writing. Very few authors are going to coast along with huge blockbuster sales. For every Stephen King, Tom Clancy, and J. K. Rowling there are thousands of folks out there throwing stories at the wall and waiting to see if they stick. While he goes out of his way to make this point, he also has this to say: you can't win if you don't play. Not only that, but the more you play the more chance you have to win. You will always find an excuse for failure. If you really want to write, do so. Just have a healthy dose of realism.

In short, he doesn't discourage people from trying to become authors. Far from it. He does, however, want people to understand that writing is a JOB just like any other. You must work at it every day just like any other job. It has a lot of little tedious busy work like any other job. You will get rejections. You will be broke. You will be told you suck. You will go for months and months after you finally get published before you start seeing royalty checks.

So, once you finally sell something, do not quit your day job.

That out of the way, Mike addressed how to get into writing as a for-pay enterprise. It used to be that there were lots of periodicals. You focused on writing short stories, sent them out to things like *Amazing Stories*, *Asimov's SF*, and *whatnot*. You sent things in and sent things in and sent things in. After a while, people would publish you. You would then get a buzz or a rep. Someone would put your shorts in an anthology and you could get an agent or an editor might approach you about a novel.

Mike says this is no longer the typical model in the industry.

These days, the anthologies are mostly by invitation and periodicals are slowly going away. Now, novels are more popular. You are more likely now to get a novel published because there are many houses and imprints trying to get a "franchise" and looking for the next big thing. Because of this, Mike suggests that if you want to write novels that you skip the whole short story bit and write the damn novel.

Novels for first time authors should run between 90,000 and 120,000 words. Shorter than this and they don't look hefty enough on the shelf and, therefore, don't seem to the reader to be a value for the money. Longer than 120,000 words and they become a hard sell. Don't get mired in trying to make it perfect. Blast through the first draft and just get it done. If things mutate or

change or deviate from the plan, that's fine. Keep going. FINISH! Once you are done, on the second draft, add, take away, and restructure as necessary to ensure plot continuity. At this point, hand copies of the novel out to friends and family. Five or six people are all you need. Let them give you feedback. Things that one person says you can effectively ignore. Things that EVERYONE comments about are important. Incorporate any feedback into changes then do a full third draft runthrough. This should include your wordsmithing, polishing, and grammar nitpicks.

Now you are ready to start getting rejection slips!

One of the things Mike suggests (not only for "selling" your novel but for your own information) is to ask the people who read your novel to write a short paragraph about the book as if they are writing something for the back cover. Have them include the phrase: (insert name of novel or author) writes in the tradition of (another novel and or author). The idea being that you should be able to compare the style or plot structure or genre of the novel to something that already exists and SELLS. Jan writes in the tradition of Jane Austin. "Another Fine Mess" takes up the gauntlet thrown down by Robert Jordan (or Anne Rice or Stephen R. Donaldson or...)

Now that you have your novel and your sales pitch, do your homework. Look at which imprints are publishing the authors to whom your work is compared. Look up those publishers and try to get names of editors. Often an author will mention the name of their editor or their agent in notes. You can also find out which editors are working with which publisher via Publishers Weekly. Send your novel to the houses that publish the same kind of work. Send to editors who edit that kind of work.

Instead of waiting around for rejections, get out there. Go to conventions and meet people. If you do this you can get business cards. Editors will remember your name. In particular, for the fantasy genre, Mike suggests going to the World Fantasy Convention. It is not for fans. It is for business people. You go there to meet editors and get cards. You can also find out who is hot and who is not in the industry at this convention.

If you are someone who wants to write as a career, Mike suggests you stay away from "fads" in the publishing industry. If you get known for a subgenre of a genre then you are likely to get labeled for writing only that thing and once it is out of fashion you will have a hard time getting people to look at your stuff. Cyberpunk and supernatural romance are two areas Mike has identified as getting a lot of attention recently and then starting to "fade off." Instead, he suggests keeping yourself to what he terms "evergreen" areas. These are genre books that always sell. Here is his list:

- \* Amateur detective
- \* The hardboiled detective
- \* Alternate History
- \* Epic Fantasy (though this is now tough to break into)
- \* Pet fantasy
- \* Teen and Animal telepathic links

Now, having said this, Mike also points out that you should be true to yourself and write what you would like to read. He cautions that having something predictable doesn't get you much of anywhere. While there are motifs which come up again and again in specific genre fiction, giving it a fresh twist or doing the unexpected is key. Study folklore. Study history. Keep up on science if you want to write hard sci-fi.

Also: be personal. Faceless evil works just fine but personal evil is better.

So, you have written your novel. You managed to get it sold. Now comes the contract.

You will receive an advance against returns/sales. This means they give you the amount they think will sell. (A % of projected sales.) This will be 1-15 for royalties and 1-4 for shared worlds or for-hire contracted work. Do not expect the high marks. King and Grisham can insist on 15. You are going to have to take less.

Your royalties will come to you every six months. They will not start until three months after the accounting period ends. In other words, your novel may be out a year before you see a check.

Like Mike says, don't quit your day job.

(An aside here: my friend Kylie has now signed her second three book deal. Her first trilogy was considered a best seller in Australia. In spite of this she's doing contract IT work. Why? Exactly what Mike mentions here. Kylie's books may be on their fourth printing run, but she's still waiting to see money come in from some of the books. Let this be a warning.)

Mike suggests you don't go crazy and spend your advance money. Hold it against your returns.

Next, once you get published you want to KEEP being published. Look at the audience for your work. Choose your projects based on this. If you are working in Star Wars and your fans are in Star Wars then why move to Star Trek even if you are offered the novel?

I brought up the topic of writing to audience. Back in my university days, the goal was to "sound intellectual." If the average Joe could understand what you wrote, it was pedestrian and you received a failing grade. Passive voice was a good thing. When I got into the "real world" and started doing things like technical writing, it was all active voice all the time. I went to a Society of Professional Journalist workshop and was shocked by the advice of editors there. Write to a 9th grade reading level, they said. SVO only, they said. If a sentence is longer than twelve words, it's too long, they said. Clauses are bad, they said.

I threw this out at Mike. I wanted to know if the "journalistic" style suggestions applied to novels. It seemed to me that telling Mervyn Peake to write to a 9th grade reading level would have gotten you a hearty snort or that suggesting to Frank Herbert that he should use only SVO sentence structure and chop all of his sentences down to less than twelve words would have gotten you, at best, a diatribe. Mike admitted that, in fact, genre editors are looking for even less than this. Not only are they looking for things full of action with short sentences and few clauses but they want an 8th grade reading level. This is not to say that he feels you should specifically

do this. However, if you write something highly challenging and convoluted you're going to have a harder time getting it sold. Those are just the facts.

Being a writer is hard work. It's also a lot of fun. What Mike had to say during this hour only covered a small portion of "the writing life" and only touched on some of the financial and contractual obligations. Once you get to a point where you get paid to write on a regular basis you have to start asking yourself if you can meet deadlines, if you can conform to contract, and (if you are doing the "shared world" shtick) if you can deal with someone else changing parts of your story (or telling you, "you can't do that"). Talking with people like Mike (or Ed Greenwood or Jean Rabe or Tracy Hickman or any of the other Gencon regulars) will be an education in perseverance. While you do need a certain amount of talent, Mike is right. You can't win if you don't play.