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[ALTERNATIVE THURSDAYS](#)

[FOR WRITERS](#)

[AUTHOR WRITING ROOMS](#)

Tuesday, 11 March 2014

Polly James's Top Five Writing Tips

1. Read, read and then read some more – and as widely as you can. I'm convinced it's better to read widely than to stick to reading just one genre of fiction, especially if that's the type of writing you hope to do yourself. I've noticed that some writers who read narrowly often seem to end up copying the style of an author they admire, instead of developing a distinctive style and voice of their own.

2. Read everything you write out loud, not just the dialogue: it helps an awful lot with the rhythm and flow of your sentences, as well as showing you when dialogue needs to be made to flow more naturally. It's vital for comic timing, too.

3. Don't be precious about what you write: invite and welcome criticism from readers, and listen to their opinions. Sometimes, they may be wrong but, in my experience, they're usually right and can really help to show you where parts of your manuscript are confusing, or where the narrative slows down a bit. If someone has taken the time to read your work carefully, and then even more of their time to give you thoughtful feedback, then that's a compliment in itself!

4. Find everyone interesting, and listen to what they say and how they say it. Even the office bore can be interesting to a writer, whether as an example of how one of your characters could be made to speak or behave, or in terms of his (or her) psychology. (Maybe the bore only brags so much because he's overcompensating for a lack of self-esteem because his mother always preferred his sister? That's the start of a story, right there.) I find people are always more interesting once you look at them a little more closely, and I also think that the wider you stretch your net in terms of who you interact with and pay attention to, the more convincing and diverse you are then able to make your characters. Some writers seem to struggle to write convincingly about anyone significantly different from themselves, and maybe that's because they only pay close attention to their own friends, family and colleagues: i.e. people who are most like them.

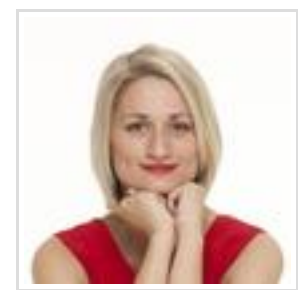
5. Don't believe in writer's block: I'm pretty sure that it's a myth. (When I had to deliver a blog post every



day of the week, I learned you can always write something if you have no choice.) I do believe in creative block, though, so when I'm struggling to come up with an idea for a story and panicking because I can't, I try to remind myself that it's not a waste of time to keep my ideas "bank" topped up. That's when the fun starts, because then I can justify not even attempting to write for a while, and can instead spend hours surfing the Internet and reading about anything that takes my fancy; hanging out with other people instead of staying in and staring hopelessly at my screen; going to the library or an art exhibition, or sitting in a cafe eavesdropping on strangers. When I've spent some time doing that sort of thing, I usually feel refreshed and then my ideas start to flow again – thank God!

Polly's debut novel, [Diary of an Unsmug Married](#), is out now.

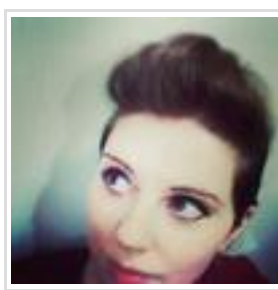
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Susan Buchanan said...

I particularly agreed with 1-3 on this list - great post!

[Reply Saturday, 15 March 2014 at 22:19](#)



[Polly James](#) said in reply to Susan Buchanan...

Thanks so much - so glad you enjoyed it! (Now if I could just take my own advice...)

[Reply Friday, 26 June 2015 at 22:15](#)

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