

## WRITING: ART OR CRAFT?

By Dr. Lin Stepp

A lot of articles and discussions in the writing field focus on whether writing is more an art or a craft. Opinions differ widely on the subject. My view is that the “craft” of writing is the learning or apprentice stage of writing and that the “art” of writing is the more freed and advanced stage of expression. In this sense, creative writing – in its higher or optimal state – is an art.

Let’s think about this in a progressive sense. First, writing or creative writing, like any of the arts, must begin in the crafting stage. The crafting stage is the stage in which the budding artisan learns the tools of the trade. In the apprentice stage, one studies and gains the skills, abilities, and devices needed in the area of artistry. For example, in the early craft stages, a young painter first masters skills of drawing, shading, and perspective. Next, studies in color begin. The artist experiments with colored chalks and paints, working with different mediums, learning to mix and use color effectively. As artists progress in their craft, they continue to work and create, often trying their hand at different styles and types of art. They also begin to study other art extensively; they visit galleries, take art history classes, and absorb books from the library about admired artists. As artistic skills continue to bloom and grow, developing artists are drawn - by practice, observation, personality, and preference - to certain types or styles of art. Gradually, their own individual style begins to emerge.

In writing, a similar process occurs. Some elementary aspects of writing are learned in school. The basics of grammar, composition, and, often, the earliest experiences in writing are cultivated in these years. However, the writer-to-be is often going a step further from his or her peers from the early school years on – fascinated with words and print, taking an especial pleasure in writing and expression. Also, in reading the biographies and autobiographies of famous writers, it is a rare author who has not been – and continues to be – an avid reader. Reading is another of the primary ways in which the writer studies craft. As writers read extensively, they absorb many of the techniques of craft, long before they have terminology to describe those techniques.

As the desire to write and express continues to develop, the learning writer, like the learning artist, hones and develops the craft of the art. Writers may take classes to further develop their craft. They may also learn techniques of good writing through instructional books and articles on the subject. They extensively read and study admired authors. Zinsser, in his classic book titled *On Writing Well*, claimed that writing is learned by imitation, somewhat in the same way painters often learn by studying and copying the works of the master painters. Zinsser claimed that he learned to write well by extensively reading the works of writers who were doing the kind of writing he wanted to do and by trying to figure out how they did it. Every writing guide I’ve ever found similarly urges novice writers to read extensively, especially in the field they hope to write and publish in. Good readers make good writers.

Just as the artist learns the craft and techniques of art, the writer learns the craft and techniques of writing. The most important point here for both is continual application. The artist is continually visualizing, sketching, painting, and developing his or her art. The writer is continually visualizing, plotting, outlining, and writing.

Madeleine L'Engle wrote: "You learn to write by doing." Artistic skills are developed by doing, not by wishing and dreaming.

In the development stages of any artistic gift, there is a crossover stage between craft and art. It may happen gradually; it may happen suddenly. Artists of all kinds have described this bridging, awakening, or crossover stage differently – but I see it in all the descriptive biographies of successful artisans. They come into their own. They find their own avenue or style. They realize who they are. They move from learning craft into confident artistic expression. The artist passes from the craft stage to the "art" stage.

This new stage has a new creative aspect. Creativity implies producing a product that is unique and new and that has never been created before. When the true art stage of writing occurs, newness and uniqueness occur. The artist has begun to find their "style" or "voice". Oh, there will always be the perpetual crafters, the emulators and copiers, who stay in the valley producing modicum works that are just duplicates of other art. But when the true art stage is achieved, there is a change in the art produced and a change in the artist. The conscious, imitative, unsure stages are left behind. Writing as art versus writing as craft begins. This is not to say that the artist-writer who emerges will not continue to study and learn. Good artists are always life-long learners. A great example of this is the well-known Canadian artist Robert Genn. He has a weekly online newsletter that documents his continual journey of learning and his continual ongoing artistic discoveries as a painter.

It is in this stage, where writing moves from being craft to art, that individual style and voice emerge. An artist's work begins to become more distinctive, less formulated and emulative. This is usually a more confident, productive, and focused stage for an artist. It is also a decidedly nonconformist stage. Individuality emerges. For example, if you are familiar with Smokies artists, you can probably pick out a Jim Gray or a Robert Tino print from among hundreds of Smokies paintings, even without seeing the artist's signature. Among writers in a genre that you love, you can recognize their voice and style in every work. This is true artistry, when uniqueness and individuality emerge. As Robert Genn wrote, innovation becomes its own satisfaction. A quote by Mason says: "When artists don't care if their work sells, that's when they start making stuff that people really want to buy." Writers at this stage are no longer as concerned about the approval of others. They are no longer as tense or vulnerable or unsure about their work as they might have been in the craft stage. They write what they like, they write what comes naturally, and they write with confidence.

Louis Rubin wrote a beautiful book called *Artistry in Teaching* that has many transferable ideas about the characteristics of true artistry. Rubin claimed that individual style always has its roots in personality and belief. He said that true artistry consists of master craftsmanship through which works are conceived, planned, and executed with unusual imagination and brilliance. When writing becomes art, it shifts up a notch – from conventional and ordinary to nonconventional and extraordinary. Rubin described the true artisan as having four primary characteristics: (1) they make decisions intuitively; (2) they have a strong grasp of their subject; (3) they are secure in their competence and expect to be successful; and (4) they are extremely imaginative.

Stephen King wrote that writing, at its best, is a kind of inspired play for the writer. When the art stage of writing truly swings in, there is a new joy and playfulness that comes into being. In part, this is because the awkwardness of the crafting, courtship

stage is behind. The writer is now into the full-blown marriage stage; they are enmeshed and committed into a lasting love affair with their art. Writing has now become a part of being, and the writer is no longer content with dabbling, attending conferences, reading about writing, and considering writing as a potential activity any longer. When writing becomes art, it becomes serious. The writer no longer views his or her writing as an occasional hobby or pastime. It has become a part of the self and the identity that must be expressed. It has also now become a profession. Disciplined time is made for writing once the art stage emerges. As Zinsser said, you work committedly every day like you do at any other full or part-time job. If you study articles by well-known writers who are in the art stage of their writing careers, these kinds of quotes constantly emerge.

Another glorious thing that happens in artistry as it advances from the craft to the art stage is the optimal experiences that begin to occur during the creative hours. Genuine happiness, contentment, and satisfaction accompany the writing process. As Rubin said, true artists have a love affair with their arts. The writer loves what he or she is doing; they get caught up in their art. Writers in the art stage often get caught up in “flow”. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in his bestseller *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, defined this as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.” Getting into “flow” is one of the best of times for a writer. As Chopra wrote: “When you are in the field of creativity you lose track of time. Only the flow exists.” The writer and the writing merge, and it is one of the best of times in the art stage of writing.

All stages in a writer’s development are important, and there is no stage in which a person ever knows all there is to know about any artistic endeavor. However, in my view, writers do pass through developmental stages – yearning and dreaming about creating, gaining basic knowledge, learning skills and techniques, practicing and gaining expertise, and finally beginning to emerge as individual artisans. Writing – like other arts – includes both craft and art, but writing, in its highest and most optimal stage, is pure, individual, beautiful art.