



What I wish I'd known

READ THE FIRST-PLACE WINNER OF OUR 2019 ESSAY CONTEST.

BY BONNIE HEARN HILL

I wish I'd known a writer can fix anything but a blank page. I wish I'd known the best writing comes from the gut and not from the head.

I wish I'd known that, to find your voice, you have to write every day, read every day, and get out of your comfort zone. Find a different route to the market. Find a different market. Walk a new street. Visit a new city.

I wish I'd known that all those people who say you have to write a million words before you can call yourself a writer are wrong. It's closer to 2 or 3 million words, and I wish I had written them sooner.

I wish I'd known age is an asset for a writer. You aren't pursuing a career in ballet or football.

I wish I'd known that people who write are courageous, possessed, and a little crazy.

So, I said to my friend

Me: I talked to a woman I worked with when I was a copywriter at that rock radio station back in the day. She said I told her I truly believed if I could write a 60-second commercial, I could write a novel.

She: You told her that? What did she say?

Me: That she thought I was crazy.

I wish I'd known it is all right to be crazy. I wish I hadn't tried so hard to fit into the only world that accepted me.

I wish I'd known that a writer needs to get out there onto the thin branches but not far enough out there to break them.

I wish I'd known how to talk back to the demons in my head, the ones that said you never can, you never will, don't even try.

I wish I had known writing is like a love affair, and it's easier to start a new, fresh passion than commit to the one you're trying to maintain. I wish I'd known that real writers are finishers.

I wish I'd known that, if you write a page a day, you'll write a book in a year. Just one page.

I wish I'd known that the grass is always greener on the other side of the deadline. For now, ignore the grass. If it's as green as you think it is, you can check it out after you finish what you're writing now.

I wish I'd known the protagonist must protag.

I wish I'd known that, without conflict, Cinderella would have gone to the ball on page one.

I wish I'd known that scenes in bars, in restaurants, and on the telephone are as boring as they are in real life. I wish I'd known those scenes need a naked clown or its equivalent bursting into them, showing up out of nowhere.

I wish I had known that most adjectives and adverbs are like phony friends who will distract you and then stab you in the back. I wish I had figured out sooner that nouns and power verbs are the rocks stars of language.

I wish I'd known that excessive punctuation only props up weak writing, and that ellipses and exclamation marks travel in packs. Show me one on a page, and I'll show you 10.

I wish I'd known a writer needs to focus on character, not plot. I wish I'd known what a scene is and how important a scene goal is for the protagonist. I wish I'd known how to link scenes with transition. And I wish I'd understood the importance of deep point-of-view, so that you, the writer, don't feel you're watching a movie; you are the movie. If I had known all this, I might have published fiction much sooner than I did. More than likely, though, those rules would have killed my passion, and I would not have written anything.

I wish I'd known how dangerous it is to edit while you write.

I wish I'd kept a journal from the moment I began to understand the importance of reflection.

I wish I'd kept every acceptance letter.

I wish I hadn't dwelled on the rejections.

I wish I'd known that the writers who speak the least in classes and workshops are often the ones with the most to say.

I wish I'd known that writing before you are published for the first time is lonely, exciting, full of equal amounts of self-doubt and hope.

I wish I'd known how much

isolation I would experience when attending a writing conference alone, and then discovering everyone I had wanted to meet had arrived with an entourage. I hope I've never made another writer feel that way.

I wish I'd known to just write the book before you or anyone else decides you can't.

So, I said to my friend

Me: I had to write for a long time before I sold my first novel.

She: You should have written about that rock radio station.

Me: I did. But the book was never published.

She: What was wrong with it?

Me: I was – along with 746 pages of sex and serial killing.

I wish I'd known the first fictional protagonist you ever write is the author, only better looking and with a great sex life.

I wish I'd known every plot problem is really a character problem because the choices a character makes and the way that character reacts to conflict *is* plot.

I wish I'd known if the story doesn't take off until page 142, you'd better start it there.

I wish I'd known dialogue is not conversation, that it is focused to the protagonist's goal and that, "As you know, George, Dad left the ranch to me when he died, and you've hated me ever since," is an information dump, not dialogue. It is exposition, trying to travel incognito.

I wish I'd known that a good idea may not be a novel, a story, or an article. It may be only a good idea.

I wish I'd known how isolated a life of writing is, that you must be out there amongst them, but you must create in solitude. I wish I'd known if you can find one other person who understands you, consider yourself, at that moment, the most blessed human in the world.

So, I said to my friend

Me: If we weren't writers, what would we do?

She: I don't know. Work at Jamba Juice, maybe?

Me: What are you thinking? We hate dealing with the public. We flip off reckless drivers on the way to the gym, and that's only five minutes from our homes.

She: So, I guess Jamba Juice is out of the question?

I wish I'd known that fear has two sides, insecurity and hubris, and I wish I'd been kinder to those who exhibited hubris in the workshops I led, because they were probably the most frightened of all.

I wish I'd known that signing with a literary agent is like committing to a romantic relationship. The first one is probably not forever.

I'm glad that once I found the right one, I made sure to hang on for dear life.

I am glad I knew that, regardless of how many rejections and how many dead ends I encountered, I would continue – because writers write, and everybody else just talks about it.

I'm glad I didn't know how many years would pass before I saw my name on the cover of a book, and I hope I've been able to help others save the time I wasted while trying to learn "the secret."

I'm glad I figured out there is no secret. Writing is an art and a craft. We're born with a certain amount of one, and we can learn everything we need to know about the other. The best way to learn is on our own work.

I'm glad I knew from the start that a strong support group, even one close writer friend, would make me feel less alone.

I'm glad I knew writing is the one thing that will never betray you, the one thing that will give you back everything you put into it. You'll miss sleep. You'll miss the routines and rhythms of your life, maybe even a meal or two or 10. Others may try to sabotage you. You may try to sabotage yourself. I'm glad I knew that and kept writing anyway.

So, I said to my friend

Me: What do you regret?

Take *note*

She: *That I didn't do this sooner, that I didn't believe in myself enough to go for it. What do you regret?*

Me: *Nothing.*

I wish I'd known that all you have to do is show up, and I wish I'd known how difficult showing up can be.

I wish I'd learned how to ignore the doubters and trust the dream.

Now, I know that we don't pick writing. Writing picks us. Those who can quit do, and the rest of us are in it for life. I know I'll never stop because I love everything about writing even when I hate it.

I know we don't do this for money or for fame, although we push ourselves as if we were, harder than we pushed ourselves for any day job, and in some cases, any other relationship in our lives.

We do it because we can't not do it, riding that bicycle up the mountain, calves screaming in pain, the road nipping at our heels, whispering, "I'll get you this time." But we know better because we've done it before, because one way or another, we will get to the top, and that's the reason we do it, one of the reasons, anyway. We do it for that blast of oxygen in our lungs, the certainty of the finish line. We do it for the ride down the hill, that sweet sense of soaring.

Ultimately, we do it – we write – so that more people will love us, and in the process, if we're lucky, we learn how to love ourselves.

So, I said to my friend

Me: *Considering everything we know now, would you really do it all over again?*

She: *In a heartbeat.*

Me: *So would I.*

—Bonnie Hearn Hill's most recent novel, *The River Below*, was published in 2018. A frequent conference speaker, she is based in Fresno, California, where she has discussed books on a monthly television book club segment for 15 years. She can be reached through her website, bonniehill.com.