

**15 LESSONS FROM A YOUNG WRITER**

**MAGGIE SMART**

## LESSON 1

### DEAR WRITER, TELL YOUR STORY

Everybody that have achieved success or are on their way to achieving success today all have a story to tell. It could be the story of their little beginnings, it could be the story of their modest earnings when they started, it could be the story about the many failures and disappointments along the way, it could be the story about the lessons learnt along the way; the bottom line is everybody has something to say about their journey to success.

I have a story too. I am still in my humble beginnings but that doesn't make my story less vital or less important. In this my short journey into what destiny has to offer me, I have learnt, I have failed, and I have been disappointed.

Let me share a little of it with you.

Many people ask me questions like: how did you discover you could write? When did you start writing? How do you find it so easy to write these compelling stories? I just smile because I know it didn't start today. It is a result of many years of putting something down even when I know nobody was likely to read it.

Let me start at the very beginning. I have always been an avid reader. I love reading so much that sometimes I don't sleep at night just so I could finish a novel or a particular book. It got so bad that I put novels inside my textbooks and pretended I was reading the textbook. Meanwhile, it's the open novel within the textbook that got me so focused. My dad didn't know any better but my mum suspected. She once told me she adopted the same method to deceive her own parents (I guess the apple (me) didn't fall far from the tree (my mum)...lol).

*“Your story can be the platform you build on”*

I discovered I could write at a pretty young age (in secondary school). I remember I wrote poems and articles and posted them on our bulletin board in school then. I was a pro in writing love letters too (aftereffects of reading too much romance novels) and my friends came to me sometimes to help them craft letters to their *ololufes*; I didn't even think of charging them, maybe I would have made a ton of money from that venture (lol).

I continued that way all through the university. I joined the editorial unit of my fellowship and then went ahead to write different articles and poems for the board. All the while, I didn't

take my writing serious; I was just doing it for the fun of it, until I met someone that really changed my perspective.

It was after graduation, that gap between graduation and waiting for youth service. I decided to get a job instead of staying home, and I was lucky enough to get a job at a jewelry company in Ibadan, Nigeria. It was the manager of this company that opened my eyes to the possibility of earning from my writing. He encouraged me to write a novel (which I had never done; I hadn't even written a short story/novella).

I went ahead and started the novel and surprisingly, I enjoyed the process. When I was done writing the book, I got in touch with a publisher. She read through the story, said it was a really good one, but they were not looking for those kind of stories at that time; those of us who have ever gotten rejection letters from publishers will relate with this.

So, I decided to go ahead and publish on my own with the help of some invaluable friends back then. They helped me get in touch with a printer, and then work began. I launched, and got back my expenses and some change after launching. It was a win-win situation for me.

Few weeks later, that same publisher got back to me. She said she was interested in publishing my story with her personal publishing outfit. You see, the story was good enough, but publishers are businessmen and sometimes that's why they send those rejection letters.

I told her it was too late as the book was published already. She then asked if I could write another one for her. Of course, I jumped on the offer and wrote another book in two weeks, more than 100 pages on Microsoft Word (I don't know how I did it). I titled the book 'In His Arms'.

Fast forward to four years later, and the book was not yet published. What happened? What did I do?

I withdrew from writing. I remember my sister asking me one time why I've not written another story. I replied that after I write another book, then what happens? Will I have to go through the stress of trying to pitch it to a publisher only to end up disappointed? Or do I just keep writing with no hope of when it will get published?

*“Fail, but fail very fast, learn from your failures and move on”*

For about two years, I didn't write a thing. Within that time I got married and gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. I had many ideas for stories, but I never picked up a pen to write. I started a blog late 2013 but I still didn't put anything up on it.

2015, a turnaround came. I decided to be more intentional with my writing, I determined to explore my gift and see how it would work out, and then I really started churning out content. I started posting short stories on my blog twice a week, started managing my social media around my talent, and outlined my goals.

Early last year, I resigned from my job and focused all my energy on my gifting. There's been tremendous improvements ever since. Now, I have a thriving website, I have a following; people who look forward to reading my stories every week, and I have an online bookstore (<http://maggiesmartscribes.com/bookstore/>) where my books are up for sale.

What if I had given up? What if I allowed myself to wallow in self-pity forever? Then I would not have grown. Instead, I summoned up courage, despite the odds, despite the economy, I decided to forge ahead. I am far from where I want to be, but I am also far from where I used to be.

Every day had proven to be more exciting than the previous since I made that decision because I love what I do and I have fun doing it. I made up my mind to be consistent, to do things intentionally and to keep looking forward to the best life has to offer me.

You see, everybody has a story, and it is these stories that shape our lives, influence our decisions and continually propel us on the path towards success.

What is your story?

## LESSON 2

### DEAR WRITER, START SMALL

Would you love to write epic and bestselling novels effortlessly? Would you like to be able to write 1000 pages of engaging and interesting prose that will satisfy your readers extremely? Would you love to have raving fans waiting for the next sequel of your novel? Well, we all have big dreams as writers, but then for these big dreams to become realities, you have to start from somewhere. You have to **start small**.

When I first started writing, I started with poems and short length articles. My poems were not 100% but I progressed as time went by. My articles were also not all that but I improved with time. Although I was writing just for the fun of it then until I was introduced to the possibilities of earning from my writings, I still improved even though I was not consciously aiming for improvement. Imagine if I had consciously written with the express aim of improving my craft? I would have been much better and improved much faster than I did.

The point I am trying to make here is you have to start first. There is no progress in just dreaming. You never achieve anything by just thinking of what you want to do and not take action. Does anyone write standing up, crouching, or kneeling? Of course not. The position you assume when you want to do any serious writing is sitting up. So sit your butt down!

You can't get anything accomplished by dreaming of how much you want to write or thinking of the beautiful words you want to put down for readers, it doesn't mean anything talking or thinking about it; what matters is sitting down and actually putting your thoughts down into words. Get a chair, get your writing material and start now!

From writing these poems and articles, I graduated to writing a whole novel within a short while. It doesn't have to take you years to get where you want to be, it's all about how consistent you are with what you do.

*“Sit your butt down, and get writing!”*

By starting with poems and short articles, you start to stretch your imagination; you take your imagination to places where it wouldn't go otherwise. From there, you can advance to writing super short stories (novellas) and then advance to a full blown novel. Before you know it, you are well on your way to writing bestsellers.

So my friend, I'll like to challenge you to start today. Sit down, pick up that pen and paper, or any writing material you want to use and let your imaginations fly. Think far and wide,

nothing is too sacred or too safe. Your characters are shaped by you and you can do whatever you want with them. You have complete and absolute control over your creativity. No one can stop you but you.

## LESSON 3

### DEAR WRITER, FEAR WILL SPUR YOU TO GREATNESS

Scared? Do it anyway, start writing, put those thoughts burning in your heart down. Fear is an integral part of human life, it is what makes you determined to do what you will not do under normal circumstances. Don't let it worry you. Fear means the stakes are high enough to reward your incredible work. Imagine if you were not scared, then it will be just the norm for you.

Sometimes I get scared too. There is a particular book I've been meaning to write for years now and it is only my fear that is keeping me back. I get scared at the enormity of work I have to do. It is a bible story and I know I have to be deeply connected with God to write a meaningful story and to write it as He wants it to be written. Everyone is scared of something. It is those who go above that fear that really make a difference in their lives.

*“Fear is an integral part of human life”*

What will bring out the extraordinary in your work is the fact that you are able to reach beyond that fear to the gold you have inside of you, reaching to that precious jewel that you have to give the whole world. So whatever makes you afraid, just take a deep breath, smile, and do it anyway. That is when you become proud of what you've achieved.

## LESSON 4

### DEAR WRITER, YOUR WRITING VOICE IS MAGIC

When you think of your favorite writer, what do you remember? What is that thing that registered in your heart and kept you going back for more of this particular writer's books? What hooked you to the writer?

It is the writers' voice.

Every writer should have a voice of their own, something to distinguish you from every other writer out there. Your writing style is your voice. It is the unique way you string your words together in your stories. It is the way you write the dialogues in your stories. It is that unique quality that makes anyone recognize your work just by reading a few lines. It is what makes you special.

*"I labor day by day to sharpen my writing voice  
and to make it uniquely mine"*

Every great writer has a unique writing voice. Jane Austen, Nicholas Sparks, Sidney Sheldon, J.K. Rowling, Chimamanda Adichie; each of these writers has a unique voice. Their styles are distinctive and that's why we love to read their books. They have a way of weaving words, scenes and content together to draw their readers into their stories, awakening a very fertile imagination in the mind of their readers.

This is the height to which I want to get to as a writer. I want my words to command presence, I want my stories to change lives, and I want my books to change worlds, change ideologies and recreate thought processes. That is who I want to be as a writer.

When I read other people's works (writers I admire), I am always challenged to do better, be better, imagine and think better, and consequently write better. I labor day by day to sharpen my writing voice, and to make it uniquely mine.

If you want to be a great writer, you have to start thinking today on how to make your books unique to you. Writing can be fun to those who enjoy it, but it can be a lot of work to those who want to be exceptional in this writing business.

You need to continually experiment till you get it right. Practice well and keep writing. Try different ways until you find that which you feel most comfortable with. Find your voice today.



## LESSON 5

### DEAR WRITER, START BEING CONSISTENT

I strongly believe that consistency can turn you from an amateur into a pro. Consistency is the key to growth. Whatever you do again and again becomes part of you and you definitely become a lot better at it. There's a saying that goes; 'what you do over and over becomes a habit'. Habits form our way of life, it is the sub-total of what makes us who we are. This rule applies to every area of life and circumstance. Whatever you do consistently breeds good results eventually.

As a writer, I have discovered that when you write consistently and frequently, before long you'll notice a significant improvement in your writing. The key to improving is to keep writing. As you keep writing, your words become more refined, your imagination is used more often and your thoughts become much more articulate than before.

*“Consistency is the harbinger of success”*

In the previous pages, I shared how I went on a long break from writing for some years. I really started being consistent with my writing late 2015 and my editor told me she could see a remarkable difference in my writing. I gave her a novel I wrote many years ago to edit for me and she mentioned that a lot has changed in that period. There is some definite improvement in my writing style now compared to how it was some four, five years ago.

This just shows the power of consistency. Keep penning those words down and don't mind how they look to you right now, you can only improve with constant practice, you can never get worse.

Always have a small jotter or journal at hand to pen your thoughts whenever ideas hit. When in the bus, compose a poem, in the traffic; write a short dialogue, while waiting on the queue in the bank, string words together. These small acts will go a long way in helping you hone your writing skills.

Like I always say, Write! Write!! Write!!!

## LESSON 6

### DEAR WRITER, DON'T GET RUSTY

I bought a set of pots some years back. I discovered that the biggest one was too big for cooking for one so I decided to keep it till I had more mouths to feed. Years go by and the pot remained unused, and then one day I pulled it out and found it rusted. I couldn't use it anymore and the purpose for which I bought it was defeated. Even after washing thoroughly, I couldn't get all the rust out. I decided to cook with it anyway but the food came out tasting funny and unlike something I would cook.

*"The key to improvement is to keep writing"*

This experience taught me one thing when I related it to writing; when we don't write often and consistently, our writing gets rusty and our words come out crooked and we won't sound like our usual self. We lose our voice, that special something that distinguishes us, we become the norm.

Another example busted in my mind. Years ago I went for French tutoring in the city of Ibadan. Few months ago, I posted something on Whatsapp and my French tutor wrote some words in French in reply to my post. It took me a good five minutes to grasp the meaning of what he wrote and to reply him. In fact, I had to seek help from Google. I discovered I had become rusty because I had not been speaking French as I should.

When we write without fail, we consistently hone our skills, develop ourselves and we eventually become better. Failure to do this leads to rust and decay of our writing abilities. As writers, we must constantly birth new words so as to remain relevant and on top of our game. This is essential to our development and growth.

Find an avenue, write consistently and grow!

## LESSON 7

### DEAR WRITER, FIND AN AVENUE

It's all well and good to make up your mind to be consistent but then you have to put measures in place that ensure you stick to your plans. If there are deadlines you have to meet and schedules to keep, then you will definitely find it easier to be consistent with your writing.

There are avenues you can adopt that will help you in staying true to your commitment to write consistently. Such avenues can include a Facebook post or tweet every day, a short article on LinkedIn and even a poem on Instagram. If you decide to write a post on Facebook every day, you know you have to meet up with that demand and it helps you write, no matter how short or little. A tweet could also achieve the same purpose. The most important thing is deciding on an avenue to show what you've got and then be consistent with delivering value to said avenue.

*"There is no progress in just dreaming"*

The avenues I adopted are my blog, Facebook, twitter and Instagram. I use my blog for my short stories; this helps me hone my writing skills as a fiction writer. Every Tuesday and Friday, I post new stories on my blog come hell or high water. My readers look forward to these stories and eagerly await them so I have no choice but to deliver whether I want to or not. This helps me stay consistent.

I use Facebook for the business side of my writing. I write of my experiences as a writer, as a woman, as a mother and as a wife, and I relate all these with life in general. This avenue helps me hone my non-fiction writing skills. It is also a great way to connect with existing and prospective clients. I post on Facebook every day; no excuses.

I use Instagram for poems. I write super short poems and post them on Instagram every other day. My followers look forward to these poems and I know I have to deliver. Consequently, I write. I post super short stories on twitter every Saturday morning. This way, I connect with readers outside of Facebook, Instagram, and my website.

All these avenues have helped me and keep helping me in one way or the other. Bottom line is whether I like it or not, if I want to or not, if I feel like or not, I have to write. The people who follow me on all these platforms expect something from me and I have to deliver. It's not a matter of choice but a matter of necessity.

Today, determine to create an avenue that will ensure you write every day. Choose whatever media you are most

comfortable with and get to work. You'll be surprised how easily your craft will improve and get a lot better.

Start today! There's no better time like right now!

## LESSON 8

### DEAR WRITER, READ TO LEARN

As writers, whether we like it or not, we have to read voraciously and extensively.

At the beginning of last year, one of my New Year resolutions was to have read a hundred books by the end of the year. I didn't do my calculations well as I later discovered that to read a hundred books in a year I have to read an average of two books per week. Two books don't seem that much but with all my other obligations, it will require a certain amount of effort on my part. Despite the challenge I might face, I decided to go ahead with the plan and I even wrote it on this blog so as to be accountable. By the end of the year, I had succeeded in reading one hundred and two books.

### “I have travelled the world in books”

I learnt a lot from these one hundred and two books. I travelled the world in them, visited places I have never been, viewed sights I have never before glimpsed and experienced new things. I ate diverse cuisine, experienced different cultures and mingled with interesting minds. I stretched my imagination, and I increased my repertoire of knowledge. That is the power of reading.

As a writer, we must cultivate the habit of reading, and we shouldn't read just for the sake of reading, but rather read to learn. Read to experience far more than we can in our little neighborhoods and expand our thought scope in the process. It is by reading other people's works that we get challenged to be more and to do more.

There's a lot of information out there that can help us in our quests to be world renowned writers. We just have to tap into the reservoir of knowledge and drink from the well of information available to us. Through reading, we enhance our own works and it becomes better and more refined.

This year, I have not determined the number of books I'll read but it's definitely going to be more than the hundred I read last year, I'll probably add twenty more to those and see where I can get to. Wish me luck, will you? If you wish to join me too, please let me know via a private message so we can rock on together! I'm starting with the Harry Potter series. I've read it before but I don't mind reading it all over again, that's how much I love it! I look forward to hearing from you about reading together.

## LESSON 9

### DEAR WRITER, IT WILL DEFINITELY PAY OFF

Grrrr, Grrrr, Grrrr, my phone rang. I checked the caller ID and saw it was one of my clients. She is a friend and we work together from time to time. I was not expecting the call to be a business call though.

“Hello, aunty I.” I said into the receiver

“Hello ma.” She replied

“It has been a while. Hope everything’s good?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Okay.” I replied, waiting for her to state the reason for the call.

“I saw a post you shared a while ago.” She began. “You said you can write for someone if they just give you their idea and what they want to do?”

“Yes I can. It’s divided into two parts. Ghostwriting and transcription.” I then went ahead to explain to her what each of them meant.

By the end of the call, we had ironed out all the details and the deal was done.

I want to focus on a particular sentence she made... “I saw a post you shared a while ago.” This is the crux of this discussion. She saw a post I did on my blog a few months ago and she kept that information for a long time until she was ready to act on it.

Any information you share about yourself and what you are about does not go to waste. People are reading and they are taking note. As you consistently add value and share your experiences, you are opening doors to yourself.

Whatever you are doing now that seem not to be working, trust me, it is working. Just keep at it, keep adding value and one day, it will all pay off.

## LESSON 10

### DEAR WRITER, THERE IS NO FAILURE, ONLY FEEDBACK

“So, how was the competition? Were you one of the winners?” my sister asked

I paused for a while because I was reluctant to tell her I had failed. With all the *wahala* I gave her because of this competition, it was difficult for me to tell her it was all for naught.

“Ehm....I was not one of the winners” I responded quietly

“Haba, what happened now? Don’t worry, next time will be better.”

“Yes it will.”

That was the conversation I had with my big sister sometime last year. I was in a competition for female writers in Nigeria and I wrote a good story. At the end of the competition though, I was not one of the winners. Does that mean my story wasn’t good enough? Or that I can’t write well enough? No. I chose to see it as a way to develop myself and get better at my game.

### *“There is no failure, only feedback”*

As creative writers, we live for the accolades we get from our readers. Those likes and comments on our stories are everything to us. We want to see that people enjoy what we do and appreciate us for it. That is what makes the sleepless nights and the constant ‘tap tap tap’ of our keyboards worth it.

It doesn’t always pan out that way though. Sometimes disappointments come that discourage us thoroughly but we have to fix our eyes on the goal and keep keeping on. Sometimes, the likes and comments don’t flow as such, and, other times, we get ‘negative’ responses.

There is no failure, only feedback. Take every feedback you get as a reminder that you are not where you want to be yet. It means you need to work a little harder at what you do so as to get better results.

Disappointments will surely come but it is the way we handle them and grow through them that make the difference. As we keep the pen rolling and the words coming, soonest we’ll get to that peak we’ve always imagined.

## LESSON 11

### DEAR WRITER, YOU CAN WRITE EVEN WHEN BUSY

Writing is a job. It is time consuming, all-encompassing and energy draining. It may fit into different categories like therapy, art, hobby, career, but at the end of the day, it's a job because it takes your whole concentration. Only the very lucky and blessed get to have writing as their only occupation, but some of us still keep a day job and hope to write. Is that possible since writing is a full time job on its own?

The first part is learning to write anywhere. Be it a salon making your hair, at lunch hour at the restaurant near your office or while travelling; learn to write anywhere. Holding down a job and making your writing dream come true could be challenging but if you set your mind to it, it can be achieved.

*“The level of success you allow yourself is as far as you will get”*

Another way you can write while keeping your day job is to fix yourself a daily target. You know when you write best, be it very early in the morning, late at night or during the day, you know your peak hour. Tell yourself when you wake up in the morning, ‘I want to write three pages today no matter what happens’. Giving yourself such target makes you get your priorities right and the time you would have otherwise spent doing frivolous things would be put to good use.

You can also decide to wake up very early in the morning or sleep late into the night. The goal is to write three pages per day and come hell or high water that goal has to be reached. It takes determination and perseverance.

While I was still working, I had a routine for my writing. I have a blog that I upload twice in a week, I have a young son and a husband whom I have to take care of, and I still held down a job. How did I do it? I decided to write a number of pages per day. If I want to write three pages, I think of the way to make it happen.

Sometimes, I wake up very early, earlier than I normally would, and I do the work. Other times, I sleep late into the night. And there were times when I sleep late, and still had to wake up early, just to meet those deadlines. It's not going to be easy, but it can be done. You just have to determine to make it work.

It also helps if you have a project you're working on, or an avenue you write on consistently. When there is a need to write, then you won't have a choice but to do so.



## LESSON 12

### DEAR WRITER, CRITICISM CAN HEAL YOUR WORK

Another very important step is learning to take criticisms. As creatives, we find it very difficult to share our works, especially when we are still in the creative process, but sometimes this sharing can give you a fresh perspective of your work. Share with someone who does not have a vested interest in your work, trust me, they will take a critical look and give sound advice.

Join critic groups, give your manuscript to friends you trust and encourage them to give their opinions about what you've written. You'll be amazed at how far you can go and the corrections you can make from their various observations. Do not be closed up about your work, don't hoard it, get it out there for people to read and give opinions, corrections and criticisms.

I have a group on facebook specifically for creative writers. The group is a support/critic group for writers. You join strictly by invitation, but once in, you are free to submit your piece for evaluation. It is a support system for creative writers, meant to help them learn and improve on their journey to become world renowned bestselling authors. If you'll like to join the group, here's the link:  
<http://www.facebook.com/groups/1638899953103832/>

## LESSON 13

### DEAR WRITER, BE ORIGINAL

Originality is the best you can do for yourself. Your originality sells you, it is your brand, and we all know how branding is important to a business.

I'm not trying to write like Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Adichie or Ayo Sogunro. I'm trying to write like Maggie Smart and bring out the best of Maggie Smart to my readers.

The worst thing you can do to yourself is copy another's style. You can never find it easy to do and you can never sustain it. Needless to say, you can never write as well as the person you are trying to copy. You can only write awesomely as you.

*"Your originality will sell you"*

Believe it or not, your readers will see through you if you don't get original. You will produce watered down works that is not befitting. Your works will turn out to be of very low standard if you cannot find what makes you and write from your being. Dig deep into yourself and bring out the very essence of you, which is what you should share with the world.

Don't try to be whom or what you're not. Remain true to yourself and you'll be better for it.

## **LESSON 14**

### **DEAR WRITER, PROTECT YOUR WORK**

As creatives, how do we protect our works? Writers always have the urge to churn out words as they come, and we also have the urge to share our works, this gives us joy, knowing someone reads our works and enjoys them. But then, how do we protect such works? How do we retain the right to our intellectual offerings?

I have had many mishaps concerning this matter. Many times, some users of my website just copy my stories and share them on their own platforms, never acknowledging me as the writer. I don't usually know about this but my readers have pointed out such to me on numerous occasions. There was a particular instance where someone changed just the name of my characters and posted my work on another website verbatim.

What do I do? Do I stop sharing my works? I couldn't, but then I took down all the old stories on my site, compiled them into e-books and started selling them. It still doesn't solve the problem of sharing indiscriminately, but at least they get to pay for it before sharing.

Another thing I did was protect my works on other channels through which I sell them. I clicked on the DRM feature for my books on Amazon and Okada books. That way, anyone who buys cannot share indiscriminately.

Until we get to the point where we can spend hundreds of thousands of naira protecting our works, let's endeavor to put small measures in place that ensure we get a sort of remuneration for our hard work.

## LESSON 15

### DEAR WRITER, SUCCESS IS JUST A DAY AWAY

I believe if you have all the talent in this world, without passion and hard work, you're just joking. Yes, you're gifted in the art of writing, yes, you can sing like the angels; but there is always a place for continuous work and learning for that talent to grow and flourish, and to acquire the skill and wherewithal to stay in the game.

Passion for that talent will make you stay working even when everything points to the advantages of quitting. Passion will keep you in the game even when you're injured, passion will spur you on.

I have a passion for writing, and I am working my damnedest to keep in the game. It's not been easy, I have been injured, but I am determined to keep at it and keep scoring.

*"Success is just a day away"*

Whatever it is you're doing with your writing gift, please don't give up dear, keep playing the game relentlessly, and before long, you'll score that goal you've been working so hard for. Success is just a day away.

I love you and I want the very best for you.

Yours,

Maggie Smart.