

## **FAQs For Your Book Report or School Project** **by Cinda Williams Chima**

You're probably here because your teacher has asked you to write to an author and ask questions about writing as a career, about personal history, career planning, or the genesis of a particular book.

I love students—I'm a former teacher. But, as it says on my contact page, I'm no longer able to respond to those personally. It's a matter of meeting my deadlines and obligations!

All is not lost, however. I tend to answer the same questions over and over. Below you will see answers to questions frequently asked by students. There is a bio posted on my website as well. Information about individual books can be found under that book's listing on my website, including details about characters, the world, awards and honors for each book. Information about writing technique can be found on my Writing Resources page.

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

#### **When did you know you wanted to be a writer?**

I've been a writer since third grade, but it was just a few years ago that I began writing publishable work, and even more recently that I've been a full time writer. A writer is one who writes, and I've been doing that nearly all my life.

#### **What's the first thing you ever wrote?**

The first thing I remember writing, e.g. my first public success, was a poem about science I wrote in the third grade. My teacher framed it and posted it at the science fair. It was one of the first positive experiences I'd had at school.

#### **Do you have any full time or part time jobs?**

I've been a full time writer for three years now. I've been working for someone else since I was sixteen years old. I've worked in advertising for a newspaper, as a clinical dietitian, a health care administrator, and most recently as a college professor. I loved teaching, but it got to the point where I couldn't do both, and so I'm enjoying focusing on writing.

#### **What college majors do you recommend for someone who wants to be a writer?**

The long and the short of it is--there's no one right path to becoming a writer. In college, some writers focus on literature, others on content areas that might help them, e.g. there are many many lawyers turned writers. There is lots of material in the legal and medical professions. Some would say that a broad liberal arts education is best, and certainly, the more you know, the more you will have to draw from.

Most writers don't make a living from writing, at least not at first. So I think it's worthwhile to think about what you would like to do as a day job, whether it is

raising children or working in a field related to books, such as being a librarian or teaching English or being a technical writer. Some choose a field totally different from writing, one that will not suck all the creative juices and allow time and energy for writing after hours.

My first degree is in philosophy, which is great training for thinking and decision-making. I went back in dietetics, and have a master's degree in Nutrition from Case Western Reserve University.

I left my day job three years ago, when I had three books published and three more under contract.

Here's a blog post on day jobs for writers.

<http://cindachima.blogspot.com/2009/12/on-day-jobs-for-writers.html>

### **What advice do you have for someone who wants to be a writer?**

Writing is like any other skill—it requires study and practice to get any good at it. You would not expect to play in a symphony orchestra without study and practice, right? If you want to be a writer, then start writing. Now. And keep at it.

If you want to be a writer, read. Someone once said that reading is to writing as breathing in is to breathing out.

If you want to be a professional writer, e.g. a published writer, then you need to learn about the industry also. Read widely in the genre you hope to publish in. Keep an eye on the markets. Attend conferences, subscribe to industry blogs, network with others who have similar goals. Join a writing workshop or critique group. There is so much information out there these days, there is no excuse for not educating yourself.

Notice I didn't say, get an MFA in creative writing. That may be very helpful, depending on what you want to write, but it is not required. Your degrees have more to do with what you do for a day job than in getting your foot in the door in publishing.

Even if you want to be a professional writer, consider what you want to do for a day job. Choose something that won't suck the spirit out of you.

<http://cindachima.blogspot.com/2009/12/on-day-jobs-for-writers.html>

### **What inspired you to become a writer?**

A lifetime of reading wonderful books. Reading changed my life—from marginal student to first generation college graduate to college professor to full time writer.

I've been a writer nearly all my life--since 3rd grade. Keep in mind that a writer is one who writes, not necessarily one who publishes.

### **What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a writer?**

The biggest advantage in being a writer is that I finally feel totally in context. I've always been a daydreamer—now I get paid to put my daydreams on the page. Plus I get to hang out with other people who love books, like librarians, English teachers, bookstore owners, agents, editors, and especially readers.

I enjoy working at home, being able to immerse myself and not come up for air for hours.

The biggest disadvantage in being a writer is that it's a crazy, unpredictable, incomprehensible business. Talent and hard work are necessary but not always sufficient. It's difficult to predict income, and we pay very high rates of self-employment taxes. It can be difficult to access health insurance. It's solitary work—it's important to have discipline and time management skills in order to succeed.

It's also difficult to set limits. Even though I've given up my day job, I can't seem to get out of the habit of working all the time. There is always something I could be doing—one more revision on that near-perfect manuscript, another email answered, another blog post, another book on craft to read, another promotional event.

### **If you were not a writer, what job would you want to have?**

I've already had them.

### **What kind of research does a writer have to do?**

That depends entirely on what you write—but there's nearly always something. Some people think fantasy writers don't have to do research, because we just make stuff up. It's even more important in fantasy to get things right, so the reader begins to believe in your world and supernatural events.

For example, in the Seven Realms series, which is high fantasy, I had to research such things as how far a horse can go in a day, elements of medieval weaponry, aspects of castle architecture, medieval warfare techniques, thieves' culture and slang, etc.

My Heir Chronicles series is set in Ohio, where I live, so there was somewhat less research to be done. But some of the action takes place in London, and in the Lake District of England. Although I've been there, I had to consult some online resources in order to make sure I had it right.

Writers who write nonfiction and historical fiction will have considerable research to do before they begin to write.

### **Where do you get the inspiration for your characters? Are your characters based on real people?**

Of course they are—based on real people. That's all I have to work with. But it's not a one-to-one matchup. I use elements of my experiences with people to create unique, three-dimensional characters. I believe it's a mistake to model a fictional character too closely after a specific real person. You can't know another person as well as you need to know your characters. Your fictional character is likely to turn out flat.

### **Do you have a writing routine?**

I think it's important for any writer to identify her best writing time and spend it writing if she possibly can. Those of us who have a day job can't always manage that. For me, my best writing time is the morning. So on normal days, of which there aren't many, I get up, work out, and then sit down at my computer and work until mid-afternoon. Then I have lunch and answer emails and work on the business of writing. In the evening, I might come back to writing again—maybe revision this time.

Some writers set word goals, others write for a specific time period each day.

**What's the most important thing for me to do if I want to have a career in writing.**

Write.

Sounds obvious, but it's amazing how many would-be writers do everything but write. Don't be building that online platform or looking for that agent or learning to write a query letter until you get yourself some skills.

**What qualifications do you have for being a writer?**

I write. And I read. And I constantly work to improve my craft, even now, with six books published. There's no particular degree required, although I think writers benefit from having a wide range of experiences and a depth and breadth of knowledge. Less research required that way.

Writing is really a trade rather than a profession—it's a matter of skills more than credentials.

**Okay, what skills do I need to be a writer?**

Language skills are extremely important. I don't mean that you can never make a grammatical or spelling mistake, but submissions that are full of grammatical and spelling errors will tell your prospective agent or editor that you don't take your craft very seriously.

Know the generally accepted rules of writing, and know when to break them. Be resilient—a career in writing is studded with disappointments, rejection, and setbacks. Be confident enough to keep going, and humble enough to accept direction. Set priorities, and manage your time well, especially if you are among the legions of writers with a day job.

**What is the salary of a writer? How much can I expect to earn?**

There are some writing-related jobs that are salaried, e.g. copywriting, journalism, business writing. But novelists are not salaried, and the range of compensation in this field is so broad as to render any data meaningless. Writing income ranges from nothing to millions of dollars a year.

See this post for information on how authors get paid.

<http://cindachima.blogspot.com/2011/04/how-authors-get-paid.html>

If you have questions about craft, see my FAQs for Writers Page.

[http://www.cindachima.com/Resources/FAQ\\_Writers.htm](http://www.cindachima.com/Resources/FAQ_Writers.htm)