

# 8 Ways Through Publisher's Block



Build a  
Publishing  
Career  
That  
Lasts

Caitlin Jans

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Build a Publishing  
Career that Lasts

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Authors Publish

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# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
Chapter 1: Feedback.....	9
Chapter 2: Revising and Editing.....	20
Chapter 3: Submitting to Literary Journals.....	24
Chapter 4: Author Platform.....	27
Chapter 5: The Local Writing Community.....	36
Chapter 6: The Writing Community at Large.....	41
Chapter 7: Self-Publishing.....	48
Chapter 8: Submitting Your Manuscript.....	52
Conclusion.....	55
About the Author.....	58

## Introduction

Many writers talk about writer's block, but for me that has never been an issue. What I have struggled with for the last 8 years is something I have started to call "publishing block."

What I mean by publishing block is not an inability to write, but an inability to get published or a feeling of stagnation in terms of publication. For example, during my first year of submitting my work to literary journals, it was very hard for me to get any of my work published. There was a big learning curve, and I felt frustrated much of the time with how many more rejections I received than acceptances. I still had a strong daily writing habit and my creativity remained unblocked, but it became harder and harder to bring myself to submit my work for publication to literary journals. After a year of always having 40 submissions out, I stopped submitting for long enough that my number of pending submissions dwindled to fewer than 20.

No acceptance snapped me out of this. Instead, I forced myself to start submitting again and to try new strategies, ones that did not just involve submitting to literary journals. I started to do more

readings locally, and I attended my first writers conference. Within a few months I saw results and felt unblocked in terms of publishing.

That is far from the only time I went through a period of publishing block. I still feel that way intermittently, and I probably always will. Each time I reach a new stage in publishing, there seems to be a new period of stagnation, and sometimes this can last for years.

This book contains the eight different tools or steps I use to get myself out of publishing block. Some tools I utilize more than others, and while some steps I do almost automatically, others I do more reluctantly. But all are important and essential ways to combat publishing block.

If you are new to trying to get your work published, this might all seem a little overwhelming. But it doesn't have to be – just pick one way to start combating publishing block. For example, you could begin by submitting to literary journals or getting involved (or more involved) in your local literary community, and go from there, slowly working on it over time.

These are not things that happen overnight. I have been writing for almost twenty years now and combating publishing block for eight.

The great thing about this kind of work is that it is naturally incremental. It isn't about committing a bunch of time and energy over one sustained period; rather, it is about regularly committing small periods of time, as short as five minutes, to one of these ways of combatting publishing block. Looking at it this way makes it a lot more manageable to fit into a busy life.

The other good news is the more you combat publishing block, the easier it gets and the more organically it happens. So, over time some of these tools will seem like just a natural part of your everyday life.

For the first decade of my life as a writer, I did not do much to combat publishing block. I just wrote for myself and was part of various writing groups, and that was the right thing for that period of my life. Slowly, without even thinking about it, by going to grad school and becoming more involved in the literary community, I started to fight publishing block. And as I did my life as a writer started to change into one of an author.

This book started out as an article, but I found that no matter how much I edited and tweaked the article it could not possibly contain all the details, nuances, and resources I wanted it to include not even with a dozen links to other articles. The article kept feeling unfinished, even at well over 2,000 words.

So, I set out to write this eBook, taking the principles listed in the article and expanding on them. I also included three more ways to combat publishing block that were only mentioned in passing in the original article.

Maybe you already do most of these steps, or maybe you don't do any currently. But either way, I find it helpful to return to and go over the ways of combating publishing block regularly. In fact, writing this book and setting down the steps in such a formal and detailed way helped me get unblocked. It is very different to keep something in your head than to keep it on paper. I know that for my own purposes, I will be returning to this book, and the notes I took in the course of writing it, in the future.



## Chapter 1: Feedback

I regularly get feedback through writing groups, both online and off, as well as occasional feedback from paid editors. Some of the feedback I receive focuses on copy editing and minor typos and mistakes, and other feedback focuses on the content of the writing: the style, structure, specific characters, and elements of craft. Both kinds of feedback are helpful.

For the most part, I can copy edit my own poems at this point, but copy editing anything as lengthy as a manuscript leads to many errors and typos. I don't think I am alone in this. Copy editing something as short and as focused as a poem is much easier than spotting all of one's own mistakes in a manuscript-length work. This eBook for example, was copy edited, and I am sure typos still exist in it.

That said, feedback of either kind—copy or content—leads to better, more polished writing, and that leads naturally to better publishing opportunities.

Feedback is one of the most important parts of revising, but it can also encourage you to generate new work. There is one simple fact that I am starting to acknowledge as a writer: on my own with no feedback, my writing can only be so good. With feedback from others, I am challenged in new ways, and my writing becomes stronger and more publishable.

For example, when I first joined a writing workshop as an undergraduate, I had never before received feedback on my work outside of my family. Hearing what others had to say convinced me to go outside of my comfort zone and write different work. It was actually the first time I realized that writing doesn't just come out as horrible or wonderful and stay that way; but rather, it is intended to be edited into something better. By the time I had been in that workshop a while, I had actually received a number of offers from other members of the workshop to publish my work.

Even if you don't think the feedback itself is that helpful (and trying other writing groups doesn't help), the connections you make in writing groups and with professional editors can be invaluable. Many of my early publishing opportunities came from these connections.

Feedback isn't just helpful in terms of polishing work and getting it published; feedback helps authors feel less alone. When you are

writing, it is just you and your work. While that can be great, sometimes it can feel like you are just writing for yourself, or as my younger self referred to it: “writing into the abyss.” Publishing your work is one of the ways to prevent that feeling, and some authors can get addicted to it. They send out work that isn't ready or polished to lesser publications instead of focusing on polishing their work and having it appear in their favorite journals. Getting feedback helps prevent that feeling and gives you the time (as well as the resources) to really get your work in the best shape possible for potential publication.

The rest of this chapter is going to focus on how to find a writing group and how to maintain healthy a writing group. There are also sections on sifting through feedback, working with professional paid editors, and exploring the options of beta readers.

## How to find a Writing Group

A writing group is a group of writers who get together, sometimes in person and sometimes online, in order to provide feedback for each other's writing. Most writing groups that I have been a part of operate as a workshop where one author's work is critiqued at a time while the author remains relatively quiet and takes notes.

Online writing groups sometimes involve more typing than talking and that too can be beneficial because it can keep the participants

more focused on the work, and less likely to go off on personal tangents.

The primary way I get feedback is through writing groups. I have found most of my writing groups through friends or former classmates from graduate school and other writing programs. All of the groups started out in person, meeting up at a coffee shop or someone's house, but all of them eventually drifted online as people moved away.

I also get feedback by trading individual poems with friends, back and forth. I provide feedback on their poems and vice-versa. I have also traded whole poetry manuscripts and fiction manuscripts with consistently good results.

If you don't already know a lot of writers to form a writing group with, there are still lots of ways to find them. Many independent bookstores host writing groups. Our local bookstore hosts almost ten a week. All of these are free and open to new writers. Each one has a different focus: from new writers, to haiku, to general poetry, to literature, to novels. This is in addition to the paid workshops the bookstore offers with more established authors from time to time.

Libraries also commonly host writing groups that are open to the public. Not all of these writing groups are always listed on the library's website, so it is best to go in person and talk to a librarian to figure out your options. Sometimes libraries specialize. For example, our new local library has a regular mystery writers group that is open to anyone but includes a number of rather established writers. At the same time, other libraries within easy traveling distance have groups focused on other genres and forms.

Look at community notice boards, local newspapers, and websites for writers group listings. Lots of other writers are looking for community and feedback too.

I touched on this lightly before, but I feel like I have to bring it up more formally – there are a lot of paid workshops led by more established writers all over the world. Joining one of those, even if you don't particularly like or know of the writer leading it, can be well worth your time and money. It is also worth pointing out that three of the writing groups I belonged to that were self-organized and free came out of being a part of these paid workshops. You can find out about paid workshops and classes at bookstores, in community college class listings, in continuing education listings, on bulletin boards, at libraries, and in your local paper.

Getting involved in your local literary community can lead to finding great writing groups run by your peers. There is a whole chapter on getting involved in your literary community later on, so I am not going to focus much on it here. But I am going to say that if you are participating in a library or bookstore writing group, you are already involved in your local literary community.

Another option, one many writers turn to, is to go online and look. I really encourage you, if you are looking online and thinking of starting your own writing group, to get involved in the community first. For example, if you find a writer's forum, don't just join and ask people in your first or second post to join your writing group. That is rude. Instead, join a few different forums, groups for writers on Facebook or on Goodreads, and then once you get a feel for them, approach individuals you like or admire about becoming part of a group.

## How to Maintain a Healthy Writing Group

Creating or joining a writing group in and of itself is not enough. When I joined my first writing group I stayed there for years. In that writing group I learned things and made connections, but aspects of the environment were toxic and not good for my writing or mental health in the long term.

If you suspect that a writing group is not benefiting you – leave it. Be polite about it, but leave. The right group is out there, you just have to find it. Joining a writing group is not a permanent thing, although some writing groups do continue for thirty years or more.

I am usually part of more than one writing group at a time because that way I don't feel trapped or dependent on one group being a healthy and good environment for my writing.

That said, there are things you can do to help maintain a healthy writing group. Of course your role in the group depends on when you joined, or if you are leading it. Still, some of the advice in this section is relevant regardless of your role in the group.

One of the most important elements of having a healthy writing group is having consistent, regular meetings (usually with a summer break) that are scheduled at a time that works for most of the writers involved.

It is important to have someone in charge, not just of scheduling meetings and reminding people, but of making sure all of the poems or short stories are workshopped during the time you have. This person generally keeps everything on track and can stop the whole writing group from getting lost down a tangent. This person is usually unofficially in charge, but that makes their role no less

important. If no one is filling this role, you may have to fill it. If you put the writing group together, you should automatically assume that it is your responsibility, unless someone else wants it.

Clear, outlined parameters of what the group does and doesn't do are important. In some groups the rules are loose: people can bring friends and work of any genre and form, and that is ok. Other groups desire a stricter structure or focus. It is important to sort out details about things like: Do you workshop just some of the members per meeting, or is everyone workshopped every meeting? Does everyone email their work and review each other's writing in advance, or do the authors bring in printed copies for the other members? Basic logistical stuff, but it is important to figure out what works for you and your group.

Regularly adding new members can also help the health of a group. Usually new members are referred in, and that keeps the group from getting too small or losing focus.

Make sure that you are getting some valuable feedback from the writing group. If several meetings pass and you don't receive good feedback or learn anything from critiquing and hearing the critiques of other works, it might be time to either change something about the writing group or to leave it and find a new one.



## How to Sort Through Feedback

It doesn't matter if a professional editor, an agent, a publisher, or fellow members of your writing group gives you the feedback, it can be hard to look at it objectively, and it can be hard to know what to take seriously and what to ignore.

The first thing I do in a writing group (some of them provide written notes, some don't) is take notes when people are talking about my writing. I only write down things that I think are important, but I always end up with some notes in the margins. This in and of itself is a sorting process.

When I receive feedback from anyone, regardless of the source, I take the feedback in, then wait a day or two before editing the piece itself. When I edit the piece itself I always refer to any written feedback they have given me, but because I've had a day or two to sort it out in my head, it is clearer what is good advice and what is not.

I often save older drafts, just in case I change my mind later about a particularly dramatic edit. Although, I have discovered over the

years that I rarely return to this previous draft, which must mean my sorting process is working.

## Working with Professional Editors

For a long time I was opposed to paying for editorial feedback, or when I did it was just the copy editing variety.

However, particularly in the poetry community but also in the literary fiction community, it is not that difficult to get feedback on a manuscript from an established, respected author or poet with a track record of book publication.

Many have a section of their website devoted to it, or are open to it when you contact them through email. Payment for manuscript feedback usually ranges from \$200 to \$800, but one time I did it, the feedback was well worth the cost.

## Beta Readers

Beta readers are usually unpaid volunteer readers that provide feedback, mostly for novels (they don't really exist in the poetry world). Sometimes beta readers can just be friends you recruit for that purpose. Sometimes they can be strangers who are avid readers.

They can help provide great feedback particularly in terms of content (they are not editors), and an enthusiastic beta reading group can really encourage the long term success of your book after it is published. [This article](#), is helpful in terms in terms of learning more about beta readers.

## Chapter 2: Revising and Editing

There is overlap between chapter one and two because revising and editing often happen after having received feedback. Although, for serious writers revising and editing are ongoing parts of writing even when they are not getting feedback. It is so important to always work on improving your work. As someone who writes in multiples genres, largely fiction and poetry, this is something I find myself doing in different ways on a daily basis.

Often, if a poem has been rejected by twenty journals, I revise it. Or, if a manuscript has been rejected by six publishers, I revise it. But these are not hard and fast rules. There are always exceptions.

When I am submitting my manuscript for publication, I make sure I revise my cover/query letter and synopsis as well as the work itself. Because most publishers and agents just want the first twenty pages, that is usually where my focus is. I always think of those pages as the most important ones I write and rewrite.

Usually, I revise a novel whenever I hit a certain number of rejections or if I get specific feedback from an agent or editor that I

think is valid and helpful. Some of these revisions are relatively minor, but revising a manuscript takes a lot longer than revising a poem, which is part of why I am less consistent than I would like to be in submitting my manuscript. With a small child at home, not to mention my job, it is hard to find that kind of concentrated time.

Sometimes if the revision is drastic enough, I will get feedback on the new version, usually from beta readers but occasionally from paid editors.

Revising a poem is very different than revising a novel, and I think it is a lot more personal. Everyone has different techniques, but for novel writing I think more people follow the same steps because they are working with something much larger. With a poem, every line should be as close to perfect as possible; with a novel that is unlikely to ever happen.

For me, revising a poem is much more efficient because even though it should be as close to perfect as possible, it is self-contained. A change you make on one page won't mean you have to make a change on fifteen other pages. Usually when revising a poem, I look at the order of the poem, the line breaks, and the stanza breaks. I also keep an eye out for any section that seems overly verbose. I often remove non-essential words. The beginning

and ending of a poem (and a short story) tend to be the problem areas, so I focus most of my attention there.

Below is my basic advice for editing and revising.

**Always correct a mistake when you see it.** You might think that you will remember it later, but that is often not the case.

**Read your work out loud.** Reading out loud can help you catch mistakes that you would not otherwise. It is even better if you listen while someone else reads it out loud. You can also get a free app to read it out loud for you. NaturalReader Text to Speech works well for me. This can be difficult to do with a novel-length work, so you could just do this with the first twenty pages or so.

**Focus on different aspects of your novel in different drafts.** By focusing on one aspect of the story, setting, characters, or plot with each draft, you can do a much better job and spend far less time.

**Don't copyedit at the same time you revise.** That doesn't mean you can't fix a glaring mistake you see. I already told you to do that. But really focus on the content when editing the content, and don't get too distracted by the grammar and the spelling.

**Don't rush it.** Take time off between drafts. If the editing process does not seem to be going anywhere, take a break for a couple days. It is important to come back stronger and avoid getting so frustrated that you just quit.

**Change major things.** The longer you are working on a manuscript, or a poem, or anything, the harder it becomes to change the big things. I had been working on a novel for four years, had revised it three times, and only then did I figure out what major changes I had to make for it to work. It was a lot of extra effort to implement that change, but it paid off. Just because something has existed on your laptop in one particular form for a long time doesn't mean it is sacred.

**Don't overwork it.** Once your manuscript has been professionally copyedited, start submitting it. If you get a round of rejections (at least ten) consider reworking it at that point (particularly if you get feedback in that direction).

**Use technology to your advantage.** Particularly for copy editing. These two apps both really reduce time spent copy editing:

**Hemingway App.** This app is a great tool that will help identify long sentences, passive voice, overly complex words, and

opportunities for adverb reduction. It helps tighten up your writing.

<http://www.hemingwayapp.com/>

**ProWritingAid.** This app can find everything that Hemingway App didn't. It focuses in on clichés, sticky sentences, and overused words. <https://prowritingaid.com/>



## Chapter 3: Submitting to Literary Journals

Publication in literary journals is most important to authors who primarily write short stories, and to poets. Both have little chance of getting manuscripts published with traditional publishers without a strong publication history in literary journals.

Even if short fiction, flash fiction, short creative non-fiction, or poetry is not your forte, literary journals are a great way to create a publication history without publishing a whole book.

Novice writers often complain that agents and publishers expect pre-existing publications. They tell me about how complicated it makes getting their first book published. But, if they started to submit short stories and excerpts of their novels to journals for publication, they would have a solid stepping stone towards getting their first book published.

Practicing other forms of creative writing can also help boost your creativity and encourage a healthy writing practice as a whole. Still, there are journals that [accept excerpts from novels](#). So no

matter what you write, there are places out there seeking it. And, publishing shorter work regularly can help build a readership and make your platform seem more viable and relevant.

Most of the famous and established authors I know started out in literary journals, even if they went on to focus on other things. But publishing in literary journals can continue to boost your exposure over the long term. One of the authors I know already had books with major publishers but wasn't a best seller, when his career transformed because *The New Yorker* published one of his short stories. This was twenty odd years into his writing career.

In the age of the internet, poems going viral is also really changing things. Sometimes this is true of literary poems, such as when Maggie Smith's poem "Good Bones" had such a broad appeal and was so easy to share when it was published in *Waxwing* that three non-poets sent it to me.

[Emily Harstone](#) has written about the benefits and details of submitting to literary journals so many times, I don't really have to go into the details here, but I will link to her two most relevant articles: [Why You Should Submit Your Work to Literary Journals](#) and [How to Start Getting Your Work Published in Literary Journals](#).

Personally, I am a little addicted to submitting to literary journals. It is the easiest way for me to combat publishing block. I have a lot of base knowledge about literary journals, and it often takes me just a few minutes to submit. That makes it an easy thing to do even when I am busy and overwhelmed by my job and my life.

Submitting a manuscript takes hours, and often requires revising, not to mention it frequently costs money. Submitting poems is generally free and takes a few minutes. I sometimes have to stop myself from submitting to too many literary journals. I cap myself at having 40 submissions out at all times.

This has really helped me combat the feeling of publishing block and the publications I have had have led to more readings, more feedback, and in the past when I was not self-employed, they helped me get jobs.

## Chapter 4: Author Platform

An author platform is essentially your 'brand' or what makes you visible as an author. A lot of articles focus on the online aspects of this, but offline ones are important too. A social media presence is usually considered the key to this brand, but I don't think that this has to be the case.

I should note right at the start here that this way of combating publishing block has a lot of overlap with the two that follow it. Building a strong author platform relies in part on building connections with the literary community as whole, both on a local level and on a national and international level.

Many of the authors I know that have become established have done so by focusing on in-person connections in the local and regional communities that they are part of.

If you are not keen on going online and creating an author's Facebook account, or some other social media account, don't worry. They are not an essential part of furthering your chances of

publication. That said, if you are not going to have a social media presence, a strong, up to date website is even more essential.

I am going to devote the rest of this chapter to different factors contributing to an author platform, including websites, social media accounts, blogs, and non-fiction articles contributed to other publications. Although I am covering many aspects of building an author platform in this chapter, two of the most important components, involvement in your local and global writing community are addressed in the two chapters following this one.

## A Website

A website is important no matter what, but it is particularly important if you do not have a social media presence.

A strong website should have a good biography, at least 500 words in length accompanied by a photograph. It should include a list of your most important publications, possibly readings, and links to any news coverage you may have received that is relevant. It should also be up to date, regularly list and link to new publications (which is part of why it is so important to submit to literary journals), and possibly have a blog element (but it doesn't have to).

Again, there should be a photo of you on the website. It helps provide the reader with a visual context.

A website should also be easy to navigate and visually pleasing. It should list some way to contact you. It should reflect who you are as a writer in some way. It should also, and I know that this should go without saying, be error free.

## Social Media

If social media is something you are comfortable with, it is important to be active on it. The traditional wisdom when it comes to social media is to create as many pages on as many platforms, from Facebook to Twitter to Instagram to Pinterest, as possible and post and cross post as much as possible on all of them.

I don't actually subscribe to that method. I think that I can connect with people and use certain platforms much better than others. I feel like each platform operates in a very different way, and cross posting does not always translate well. There are exceptions, but generally I focus on the one I understand the best. I have been running Authors Publish and most of Freedom with Writing's Facebook pages for around five years now. Combined they have around 450,000 likes, which means I must know something about

what I am doing. When I decided to have an author presence on social media, I chose the platform I know best.

But if I had an idea for a different platform that seemed platform specific, say photo driven original content for Instagram, I would focus more on that platform for a bit. However, so far I haven't. But if I do have an idea, I am already familiar with the platform from personal use, so I am far less likely to make newbie mistakes.

It is also important to know how your particular community of writers works online. For example, poets don't generally have author's pages on Facebook and instead use their own personal pages to build communities and to interact. Author's pages for poets are generally looked down on, even for famous, well-established poets. Also, there are many secret and closed groups on Facebook that can be helpful to building community and your platform (more on this in Chapter 6), so how you interact with other authors and readers is key.

One of the most common mistakes I see on social media, outside of not understanding how the platform works, is that authors focus more on recruiting fellow authors as followers than on gaining readers. Particularly when it comes to self/indie publishing, where authors often rely on other authors, they forget that the base of the

readership for their page should actually be readers, in terms of long term success and fan base building.

One of the ways to get more readers in your fan base is to post quotes, images, articles, and questions that pertain to readers first and foremost.

But it is not just the general reader you want to appeal to, but your “ideal reader.” What I mean by that is that if you wrote a book for young adults, you should ideally be connecting with a young adult readership base. If you wrote a fictional book about living with Parkinson's, you should be connecting with that community—not just with people who have had the disease, but also their families and support teams. That is your ideal reader base, and you can build out from there.

So it is important to tailor at least some of the content towards people within or related to your ideal reading community. For example, most middle grade readers are not active on Facebook, but connecting with their parents, educators, and librarians is valuable.

Most author Facebook pages post multiple times a day, sometimes up to twenty different posts. I don't think there is anything wrong with that, necessarily, as long as each of those posts deliver in



terms of quality, which I think is incredibly difficult to do. When you are dealing with that many posts, errors creep in, mistakes happen, and things are more likely to be said that you don't actually fully believe in. I would rather post one thing a day and have it be quality than post more. Facebook's newer Newsfeed policy seems to be encouraging that as well. For example they often even promote older content if it has received a lot of likes or comments.

It is important to know your limits and what you are comfortable with. Use your judgment when sharing personal information, particularly pertaining to children and your location.

In person and online, focus on conveying your personality. Readers who have not actually read your book will want to connect with who you are as a person.

## Blogs

Creating a blog, long seen as essential, is still a good idea. Although, I think you can have more success by publishing articles on the blogs of other writers and established reading or writing focused websites. It might be more work to place pieces about writing on these sites, but since these places already have an audience, it can really pay off in terms of fans for your social

media page and visitors for your website. Not to mention many of these publications pay. Moreover, it does not require regular posting.

If you enjoy writing a blog, go for it. Make sure you link it to your social media accounts so that anything you write there gets cross posted elsewhere. If you set up a Google Analytics account, then you can monitor how many views your writing is receiving and which posts are the most popular. If you post a lot, setting up an email based subscriber list might be worth it to you.

Write a minimum of once a week to reward returning readers and people trying to follow your journey. What you write about on the blog might not always be directly related to writing or the book you are working on, but it should have some sort of consistency to hook readers. For example it could be a personal blog about your journey as a new mother and what keeps readers coming back is your personality. Because they feel connected to you they are more likely to buy a book by you, even if the content of the book is very different than the content of your blog.

I would caution against creating an overtly political blog, unless your writing is overtly political and that is what readers are seeking from you.

## Contributing Articles

If having and maintaining a blog feels like a chore, I would suggest crafting longer, more detail oriented pieces for other publications. That way, you can build a relationship with other writers and editors, and if the publication is established it can lend your piece and your reputation more legitimacy.

Target places that have bios listed after articles because that can help you greatly increase your readership. The process of submitting articles has much lower consequences than the process of submitting books. For example, if a journal picks up a poem of yours and then goes under a year later, it is not so much of a concern as if the publisher of your book goes under a year after publication. It is also much easier, cover letters are much shorter and not as important. However submitting to literary journals can help you improve your ability to craft a cover letter and converse with editors in an appropriate manner (generally via email).

## In Conclusion

I have a hard time seeing an author platform in isolation. Instead it is easier for me to see it as part of a larger life. I think people who

try too hard to curate their author platform often miss the point: it should reflect you, and your writing.

In both online and offline platform building it is important to be professional or at least polite to a certain degree—even when your personality is on display. Online this usually comes down to not making too many mistakes in spelling and grammar, not to mention the frustrating error of referring to all literary journal editors as “Sir” (most are, in fact, female). Offline that comes down to being polite and treating other people well.

## **Chapter 5: The Local Writing Community**

First off, I have to say that being involved in your local writing community is something everyone should do, period. Forget publishing block, or anything like that. In my experience being involved in your local writing community is rewarding in and of itself.

That said, it can seem a little intimidating if you are not involved. For a long time, most of my friends were non-writers, and at least as an undergraduate I was only involved in my local writing community in a limited way.

Going to graduate school for creative writing forced me to become involved in the literary community in an immersive way. It wasn't enough to just attend writing classes and graded workshops, in your free time you were expected to be involved in the literary journal, the yearly poetry festival organization, and additional friend based writing groups. You were expected to attend if not all then most of the regular author, agent, and publisher panels on campus, not to mention the readings. That doesn't even cover the

volunteer opportunities. Both years in graduate school I held two volunteer positions off campus that related directly to writing and teaching. There were other off campus writing related conferences and panels you were expected to attend as well.

It was all a little overwhelming for me at first, but it taught me a lesson I carry with me today – the importance of involvement in the literary community. Even now that I am no longer in graduate school and I don't have as much time to be involved, I still find ways to be. This is in spite of a series of moves, not to mention a two year old daughter who no longer likes attending poetry readings (poetry parties, on the other hand, she is still up for).

The best way I've found to get involved in a new community (and I have moved a lot) is to go to readings, particularly in the genre or area you are interested in.

Local libraries often host readings and so do local bookstores and coffee shops. Libraries and independent bookstores often host free writing groups as well, so look into those. Usually the best way to find out about these things is to go to the librarian or the bookseller and talk to them, but browsing community bulletin boards can be helpful too.

If you go to a reading or a reading series, make sure you add your name to any email list; that is usually how you find out about other readings and events. Talk to people at readings. Most of the people there are writers or readers. They are part of your community. Local free weekly papers usually have event listings that can be helpful as well.

Don't go to one event and call it a day. It takes a while to become part of a community. Take the time to get to know people. Don't presume that they want to hear all about you and your writing. Learn about them.

It is also important to try different readings and groups. Where we used to live there were three or four lively literary communities that had some overlap but clear divisions. We could have gotten involved in a casual way with all of them, but instead focused on getting more involved with the one we had the most in common with. We only found our core group by attending a surprising number of events, but once we found and clicked with them, most things happened organically.

Attending book clubs is also important. There you are more likely to meet readers than writers. Most bookstores and libraries host various book clubs, but many are informal and organized by friends. Either way, you can get a lot out of being a part of a book

club. Not only did I make close friends with a number of members of my last book club, every member of the book club would regularly attend the readings I gave, which was great support. Ruth O'Neil wrote a great article on the many ways being part of a book club can benefit you as a writer called [Why Every Writer Should Belong to a Book Club](#).

The other thing is that you can start to support the literary community by buying local authors' books, attending their workshops, and supporting their events in other ways. It could be as simple as hanging up posters in advance of the event or helping set up chairs. Also, at some point you can start hosting or co-hosting literary events yourself. I recently co-ran a weekend poetry workshop, which brought together poets from all over the country and from across the border. That opportunity arose from being part of my writing community.

Being involved in my local writing community has led to local readings, regional readings, local publications, regional publications, articles in the local paper, the sales of a number of chapbooks, and lots of wonderful lasting friendships.

Whenever I feel publishing block, drawing on the support of my community helps me. Writing can be a lonely practice, but it doesn't have to be part of a lonely life.





## **Chapter 6: The Writing Community at Large**

Making connections within your local community can lead to making connections with the writing community at large. After all, local reading series and bookstores often bring in authors and readers from other parts of the country and world. I have made long lasting friends and connections this way.

The most common way of connecting with other writers at large is online. Many writers connect with each other through Facebook groups, Goodreads groups, and forums. But remember that it takes time. Don't assume automatic friendship or connection. And just because one forum or group doesn't connect with you, or visa versa, don't give up. Keep trying. I am part of at least twenty writers groups on Facebook and am only really active on two of them because those two make the most sense for me. However, if I had given up joining groups earlier, I would not know that. I really had to try a lot of options first.

One of the great things about connecting online is that you can make it fit in a busy schedule. I know from personal experience

that you can nurse a baby and post a thoughtful comment at the same time (although the number of typos generally increases).

Another plus about connecting with and being part of an online group is that it is easy to share information about contests, publications, and other opportunities in a way that is a lot more natural than in general conversations. It is also easier to stay focused and not go off on tangents not related to writing. A lot can be learned online from other people who are further in their career than you.

Often through Facebook groups (it is easier than through forums, where names are often hidden), I have made friendships that have managed to survive the transition to outside of the internet. So what starts online does not always have to stay that way.

I have met most of my online connections and friends through editing Authors Publish and through running [The Poetry Marathon](#). Some of these connections are just tangential, but others have formed into firm, ongoing friendships. So running something, even just a writing related blog, will definitely help you make connections. Many of the participants in The Poetry Marathon go on to form writing groups and long friendships with each other because they meet in a unique situation and have something in common. The same goes for many [NaNoWriMO participants](#).

That said, most of my best connections and friendships with the writing community at large have been made through attending writing conferences and week-long workshops as well as writing residencies.

The great thing about conferences and week-long workshops is that you often get to re-connect or connect offline with writers you know that don't live near you. The more you go to conferences and workshops the more connections, tangential and otherwise you will have. At conferences, you meet publishers and agents face to face; at week-long workshops you can develop lasting relationships with established authors. All of these things can help you get out of the slush pile. Many of the publications I have had have come out of connections to the writing community at large, not in a deliberate or planned way, but in a surprising way.

The rest of this chapter focuses on the pros and cons of writing retreats/short term residencies, conferences, and week-long workshops in terms of publishing block, and also your writing life in general.

## **Writing Retreats/Short Term Residencies**

Writing retreats are a wonderful opportunity to write, often in a beautiful natural setting, but there are other options as well. Some

places are full time retreats, dedicated just to writers and artists. There are famous writing retreats like Yaddo and Hedgebrook, and less established ones like The Mineral School. National parks, famous artist homes, and other places often have retreat opportunities. There are a lot of variables involved here, but most retreats cover your meals so that you can focus mostly on writing.

Often at the retreat there will be a group of other writers and artists there at the same time, so there will be opportunities to build community. But, you can also focus on solitude and your writing if you choose to do so. Retreats at places other than retreat centers tend to be more focused on having one writer and artist at a time. Retreats can be as short as a week or as long as a year, but most are between two weeks and one month in length. You can always just try to arrange your own writing retreat if you find a cheap place to stay.

**Pros:** Writing retreats often have an application fee, but most are free once you get in. Some have an additional cost attached, but most are subsidized in one way or another. The retreat experience can be inspiring and can give you lots of time to write and think. If the retreat is at a more established center, it can also really help you build your community and network with other writers.

**Cons:** It can be expensive to apply to some of the retreats, and it can also be time consuming. It can be tricky to find the right one for you as many have geographical, economical, or other criteria that you have to match. Depending on the retreat you apply for it can be very competitive to get in.

## Conferences

There are so many conferences. Some are huge events, such as the AWP conference, while others are much smaller. If you have never attended a conference for writers before, I encourage you to research local options first. Even if they don't seem like the perfect fit, they are a good way to get your foot in the door. At small conferences it can be a lot easier to meet people, and the experience itself can be less exhausting. Librarians tend to know about local conferences, but Googling the name of your town plus the words "authors conference" can also work. If your town is particularly small, try doing this with the name of a nearby city or the name of the county. If you are a specific kind of writer, such as a children's book author or a Christian author, there are conferences that focus on those things.

I have attended local conferences and traveled for large conferences and have found both worthwhile. At conferences there are panels, presentations, and sometimes other opportunities (such

as agent meetings) that can be very educational and engaging. You can learn about writing and publishing from conferences, although I never do any writing at conferences outside of personal notes; too much is going on for that.

[This article](#) is a great one to read for even more information about conferences.

**Pros:** Timely information about how publishing really works. Lots of opportunities to meet other writers as well as publishers and agents. A great place to learn ways to improve your writing and increase your chances of being published.

**Cons:** The experience itself can be exhausting. Conferences can also be expensive, particularly if you have to travel there. Although, many have early bird discounts and/or volunteer opportunities.

## **Weeklong Workshops**

A weeklong workshop is usually taught by a famous author. But when you sign up for that workshop you don't just work with one specific author. You also attend lectures by the other writers who are teaching there, and other things, usually including an evening reading series and sometimes meetings with agents and editors.

It is good to do lots of research to find the right workshop for you. Many colleges host them, such as Sarah Lawrence, and some literary journals have them as well. Tin House has one of the more established ones.

You often get to know fellow students and instructors rather well. Sometimes time to write is built in. Sometimes it is not.

**Pros:** All the benefits you usually get from a workshop, which include peer feedback and instructor feedback. Plus you often get timely writing and publishing advice and meet great people.

**Cons:** You generally have to travel to attend these workshops. The experience can also be very expensive, although there are sometimes scholarships available.



## Chapter 7: Self-Publishing

I went back and forth on including this chapter. I have never self-published creative writing in any formal way (more on that later), and while I don't think of myself as a self-publisher, it is actually something I do on a regular basis.

### Self-Publishing Non-Fiction

I publish a lot of other writer's articles on Authors Publish and I publish eBooks by others as well, but I occasionally publish my own work. This wasn't something I set out to do, but sometimes I am the best author for a particular subject, or I know we need an article on a subject and none of the pitches I receive work. I don't write those pieces for publication elsewhere; I write them to fit my own needs, as I am writing this eBook now.

I like research, I like writing about writing and publishing, and I have written a number of Authors Publish's most successful articles and one of our most successful eBooks this way. I didn't really think of it as self-publishing initially. I just needed writing

that fit a particular niche that no one was filling, and so I created it. Yet self-publishing is exactly what I ended up doing.

It is not like I could not have found other publishers and pitched my articles to them and had success that way, but this way is more efficient. I know what I want when I am effectively pitching to myself, so my success rate is one hundred percent. The articles I write tend to be better than the average article we publish too, because I know our readership well. The eBooks I have written are on topics I think a great deal about.

The other thing is that I make a lot more money by publishing my own work than I would by pitching to another publication. This is not true for most authors because of the lack of built in readers, but it is true in my situation.

This writing has ended up supporting and promoting my creative writing because it has slowly become part of my author platform and because there are often links to my creative work on the Facebook page I run. Now the situation is a little less straightforward than most because I actually publish my poetry under my maiden name and will continue to do so. But if I ever publish my fiction manuscript it will be under my married name, Jans, so that connection is direct and clear.

## Self-Publishing Through Creative Challenges

I have never written something creative offline for personal or publishing purposes and then self-published it online, but I have often set myself creative challenges that involve publishing rough drafts online. Although, usually I remove these drafts pretty soon after publishing them, sometimes within days.

Knowing that I have to publish something creative online, usually a poem, gives me a different sort of energy, and it can help me write outside of my comfort zone. The main writing challenge I set for myself is [The Poetry Marathon](#), an event where writers challenge themselves to write one poem per hour for 12 or 24 hours. Part of the challenge is to post the writing online right away. Usually only other marathon participants read it.

Writing generated during this event has gone on to be published in anthologies and literary journals worldwide, and my own writing from this event has gone on to be nominated for some major literary awards—after a lot of editing, of course. Also, in this situation I always check the literary journals guidelines and I don't submit these poems to any journals that don't allow work to be previously published on personal blogs (most allow that).

In many ways, self-publishing has helped support my career in terms of finances and promotion of my work, as well as feeding my creativity. I am very grateful for that. I think when most writers think of self-publishing they think of novels and the Kindle and all sorts of complicated things that can sometimes mean giving up an easy route towards traditional publishing, but that does not have to be the case at all.

I also don't want to discourage anyone from taking the self-publishing route. It is the right way to go for many authors. I just think one should go that route because they feel like it will benefit them more, not just out of desperation or frustration with the traditional publishing world. I won't talk more about all the reasons to self-publish or publish traditionally (because that has been covered so many times before by me and other authors).

In the end I think most people should think of self-publishing as a support system for their larger life as a publishing author. This could include a personal blog or even a chapbook (a small book, usually of poems, often hand bound – [this article](#) talks about them more in depth) to sell at readings.

## **Chapter 8: Submitting Your Manuscript**

This chapter is only relevant for authors or poets who are trying to publish manuscripts, which honestly is most poets and authors. But for me this is often the way to combat publishing block that I most often forget about. I submit to journals almost automatically at this point. I am deeply involved in writing communities. I am always part of some sort of feedback loop, but this is different.

It largely comes down to one factor: manuscripts take more time to revise. I am a mother with a full-time job. Editing a poem I can do easily; editing a manuscript can involve far more steps and time than I have. The same goes for researching manuscript publishers and agents and putting together great query letters and synopses. You have to account for submission windows, changing guidelines, and submissions that close with no notice. Also, many publishers and agents' submission guidelines vary widely. I've had to make so many different versions of my query letter and my synopsis, and other additional material, because of that.

I am better at submitting my fiction manuscripts for publication because, through running Authors Publish, I naturally have to keep more up to date on fiction publishers and have learned a lot about agents. But my poetry manuscript often falls by the wayside. This is partially because the most respected poetry publishers charge a reading fee. The fee is generally \$25-\$30, which adds up over time. We have compiled a list of 72 publishers who don't charge [here](#).

It is important that you regularly submit your manuscript(s), and after a round of rejections you revise, both the manuscript(s) and corresponding query letter. That is how manuscript publication happens: with applied work. Keep track of all the submissions in a file so you know how many submissions you have out and who you have heard back from before.

Research is also an important aspect of this. If you are not doing research about the agents and publishers you are submitting to, you are really doing yourself and your manuscript a disservice.

Although, being involved in a writing community can help. I learned of both my ideal publisher and of a number of publishers I would never submit to (even though they are traditional publishers) through being part of the writing community and hearing first-hand accounts of them.

To learn more about all of the practical steps of submitting a manuscript, you should read [How to Submit Your Manuscript for Publication](#) by Emily Harstone. It really breaks the details of submission down in a way we don't have the time to go into here. For even more detailed information about manuscript submission there is [The Authors Publish Guide to Manuscript Submissions](#), which covers everything from researching publishers to the top 26 publishers for new authors.

The key to successful manuscript submissions is to have your manuscript out at five or so places at a time. More than ten places at a time and you probably are not putting your best foot forward by following all of the agent and publisher-specific submission guidelines. I don't know how many query letters I've read that talk about how much research the author did into our company before querying us, when clearly they didn't because we do not publish manuscripts or fiction of any sort! Editors can smell a mass letter a mile off, and while that is not an issue at all for literary journal submissions, it is for manuscript publishers and agents. So spend your time wisely. Make sure your letter reflects the publication in some way. It really increases the chances of your manuscript being taken seriously.

## Conclusion

Whenever I feel "publishing block" I review these eight ways to combat it. I figure out which one or two that I've been neglecting. Has it been a long time since I went to a reading? Have I not been to a conference in a year? Has it been nine months since I have submitted one of my manuscripts, or even longer? Usually the answer is obvious, although often it is more than one tool that I have been neglecting. I then deliberately re-focus on that area. Almost always within a month or two I feel like I have been "un-blocked" and am starting a new level of my writing career.

The only issue is that I often forget to check in on the tools. I have to remind myself to do that more often. That is actually part of why I wrote this book, for my own sake, as a way of creating a clear reference guide.

One of my other thoughts is to create a chart, for personal use, but I think it could help others as well. It would list the months of the year at the top, and then along the side it would list the eight ways to combat publishing block. For each month, there would be a box for each of the eight ways that you could check off when you when



you do something in each category. For example, when you submit your manuscript in May you can check off that box, and when you attend a writing retreat in June the community box can be checked off, etc.

That way at the end of the year you would get a clear, honest picture of what ways you are already combating publishing block and which ways need work.

In any case, it is good to see where those empty boxes are because they show potential areas of growth. I think that is what we have to focus on as publishing authors – our potential areas of growth—because those areas could lead to the most exciting things. So if one or more of the chapters in this book focused on a way to combat publishing block that you have never utilized before, say being a part of your local writing community or submitting to literary journals, I don't want you to be overwhelmed by that fact—I want you to be excited. You have an entirely new avenue to explore, and that should be exciting.

And last but not least, if you have any questions after reading this book, or comments or critiques, please drop me a line at [caitlinelizabethjans@gmail.com](mailto:caitlinelizabethjans@gmail.com). I am always grateful to hear from fellow writers.



## About the Author:

Caitlin Jans is a poet, a novelist, and the founding editor of Authors Publish Magazine. Her writing can be found in literary journals and anthologies including *The Conium Review*, *The Moth*, *Labletter*, *Literary Mama*, *Killer Verse*, and elsewhere. [You can follow her on Facebook.](#)