



# The Writer's Compass

## Turning the Next Page

### Write First Work Later: Living Your Writing While Making a Living Jennifer Williams

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#### About the author

JL Williams' poetry has been published in journals including *Poetry Wales*, *The Wolf*, *Northwords Now*, *Stand* and *Fulcrum*. Her first collection of poetry, *Condition of Fire*, was published in February 2011 by Shearsman Books. She performs in the band Opul and writes a blog about perfume and art called Jus. She started her new job as Programme Manager at the Scottish Poetry Library in May 2012. [www.jlwilliamspoetry.co.uk](http://www.jlwilliamspoetry.co.uk) Twitter: jlwpoetry

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Writing seems always to have been at the core of how I express myself and feels essential to life. That said, I found out pretty quickly that it was unlikely to be my sole source of income. So I've spent years thinking of ways to write while making a living, and I'd like to share some of what seems to have worked best for me in the hope that it might help you as well.

Completing a part-time MLitt at the University of Glasgow in my late 20s was a great way to make contacts in the literary world and to reaffirm my commitment to being a professional poet, but I had to work hard and pay my way through the course. When I graduated, I was lucky enough to get a full-time job as Literary Officer at the Traverse Theatre. It was amazing to find myself working so closely with extraordinary writers, and I've spent the past two years immersed in playwriting and learning many skills that have helped my poetry. It has also been demanding employment that has required a huge amount of time and creative energy. I've had to be creative as well in terms of finding time and support to concentrate on my other very important work: writing poems.

My screensaver at the Traverse said, **Write First Work Later** – a little reminder that I didn't always remember or have time to follow, but I did my best. And before I mention some of what I've found to be helpful, I think the key first step for any writer who is trying to balance their creative work with other work, whether it be typing in an office, raising children, building houses or anything else, is always to ensure that the writing remains a major priority in your head if you want to have any chance of fighting for the time and energy it requires.



This means drawing on deep reserves of confidence and believing in yourself and in the fact that, whether or not you're ever going to be famous or award-winning or even published, you ARE A WRITER and your life would be, if not unliveable, then at least painfully poorer without the act of writing at its heart.

So, if you're sure that writing is essential for you, and if you're not independently wealthy or willing to actually starve to be an artist, then here are some suggestions for writing while working:

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### **1) Join a Writing Group or Start Your Own Writing Workshop**

Finding other writers to share your work with and having regular workshop meetings that you produce new work for are excellent ways of developing your writing when you've graduated from your Creative Writing course or especially if you've never been on one. Local libraries, specialist libraries like the Scottish Poetry Library, or even a quick internet search, should lead to workshops in your area, and if you're having trouble finding one then seek out other writers (ones you know, or ones you meet at local literary salons or events – check out [www.cityofliterature.com](http://www.cityofliterature.com) if you live in Edinburgh) and suggest starting up a workshop group. I've started one with four other poets and it's been one of the happiest and most productive enterprises I've undertaken in the name of my own writing since the MLitt.

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### **2) Perform**

Open mics and poetry slams are wonderful places to share your work in front of others and to make contacts, and they're also confidence-building exercises. When I first arrived in Edinburgh from Boston about 10 years ago, I didn't know anyone in the Edinburgh literary world and had no idea where to start – but I went to an open mic, got up on stage, read some poems, and immediately afterwards had something to talk about with the other writers who spoke to me that night. Even if they hadn't come up to me or if I hadn't read my own poems, this would have been an excellent chance to hear other poets read and to talk to them about their work; always a terrific way to make writer friends! Slams are similarly social events and have the added frisson of competition added to them to spice things up. That might be right up your street, or very much not, but I've been seeing more differentiation between slams lately; some that are more rowdy, some that are more delicate, some that are more serious and so on, so you will probably be able to find one that suits.

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### **3) Attend Readings and Festivals**

Like open mics and slams, attending poetry readings and hanging about at poetry and book festivals are some of the best ways to be inspired by other stupendous writers and to meet like-minded people who may be able to work with you or help you now or in the future. Don't be afraid to get cards printed up with your name and email address on them, your social media contact details, your website if you have one (I would recommend having one, even if it's a simple holding page with your bio on it), then give these cards out at the end of successful conversations with other writers. Talk to people even if they seem to be intimidating in some way – famous, well-published, brilliant etc. I think of myself as being terribly shy and have always had to swallow a big lump in my throat to talk to just about anyone, especially anyone I am in awe of, but in my experience almost everyone likes being approached in the right time and place by friendly people with nice things to say, and you never know who might become your friend or be able to give you a leg up when you need it.

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#### **4) Set Deadlines**

Set deadlines or tasks for yourself. If you're anything like me and most people I know, you'll need a deadline or some sort of habit-forming rule to keep yourself working steadily. Use competitions as deadlines to complete work by. Even if you don't win the competition, you've finished something that you can then send out to other publishers and magazines. Use performances like open mics or workshop meetings as deadlines for finishing new work. Sometimes I make myself write a poem a day for a certain period of time in order to produce reams of work that I can later edit into a collection. This kind of task can be usefully habit-forming; no harm in writing a poem a day forever. Make a list of the magazines and publishers you want to submit work to and set your own deadlines. For instance, choose nine magazines and submit to three each once every three months, or whatever works best for you. Submissions should be going out on a regular basis if you want to build up your publishing CV. More magazines and publishers are accepting online submissions nowadays, which I find makes this often administratively-tedious task a lot easier and makes me tell myself I have no excuses for not sending out more work, though I always seem to be able to come up with them.

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#### **5) Read**

Subscribe to poetry magazines, go to the Scottish Poetry Library (or any library or bookshop with a poetry section) and read poems. Try to read at least a poem a day. Download the Poetry Foundation's marvellous 'spin for a poem' app and read a poem whenever you check your iPhone or iPad. Read a poem every night before you go to bed, or every day when you wake up... they're just wee! Listen to poetry podcasts and recordings of poets reading out their own poems. I'm addicted to the New Yorker Fiction Podcast and to the Scottish Poetry Library podcast (<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/connect/>).

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#### **6) Write In Between**

I'm often exhausted by the end of the working day and don't feel I have the energy to write, so if at all possible I try to squeeze a little in during the day at some point. If you're working full-time, use part of your lunch break or one of your tea breaks to write a quick poem, even a haiku, or to scribble down a thought or an observation that could become a poem. If you're working part-time, try to dedicate at least part of your week, a half day or a day, more if possible, to writing, editing and sending your work out.

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#### **7) Find Space to Write**

Look out for writing retreats where you can get away in a supportive environment to concentrate on your writing work. If you can't afford the money or get funding to physically go away, or if you have commitments that mean you can't sail off to a sunny writing desk in the south of France for a month, dedicate a weekend or take some time off and concentrate on writing at home, or spend your days in a nice cafe or library where you feel you can write. I wrote my first collection while on an island for three weeks thanks to the Edwin Morgan Travel Bursary, and more recently I edited two and wrote one new collection in my living room in Edinburgh while off for three weeks over Christmas.

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## 8) Get the Right Job

If possible, find a day job that complements the way you want to write. Some people might find that having a job that has nothing at all to do with writing or creativity means they have that energy when they get home to put towards their writing. Some people might want to concentrate on working very hard at a job where they can make a lot of money, and then be able to afford to take long periods of time off to concentrate on writing. Others, and I think I probably fall into this category, benefit from working in creative or literary fields, as this can be inspiring and stimulating for your own writing as long as it's not too draining. I do have a friend in publishing who said that as soon as he started working in publishing he stopped writing. So be careful; make sure that whatever you're doing isn't directly in opposition to your ability or motivation to write, and if you find yourself in that situation, think about how you might be able to change your job in order to have more room for your writing. That might mean going part-time or moving to another job or even field – easier said than done, but if your goal is really to be able to work and to write, you need to find a job that pays the bills and leaves you able to produce creative work.

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## 9) Jump!

That leads to my next suggestion – take risks, be passionate and don't give up. I wouldn't encourage anyone to endanger their own or their loved ones' well-being, but I would say that it's always worth taking that extra step to get closer to your goals. Go for that seemingly out-of-reach job, ask your boss for one day a month off to write, rent a cabin for yourself to write in for a week, send your work out to that magazine that you adore and go up and talk to that poet who just gave an astonishing reading. It's this kind of risk-taking that opens splendid doors. And if you write poems, try a story. If you write novels, try a play, and experiment with collaborating. There's a lot to be learned by exploring other genres and art forms. Even if you go back to the one you favour in the end; you'll go back with a greater sense of what is possible.

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## 10) Smell the Flowers

Be interested in the world around you. Seek out lectures at universities and visit art galleries. Check out your local listings magazines for interesting events going on in your area. Go for walks in the city and in the countryside, and write down what you see. Take pictures of what you see when you're walking around so you can use them for inspiration later. Figure out what aspects of your work place and job would be fascinating for others to read about and write this down. Keep a journal or write a blog about topics that inspire you and might inspire others. Watch films. Read the news. Smell flowers. Smell everything – smell is an underrated sense! (See my blog [www.jusperfume.com](http://www.jusperfume.com) for more on this subject).

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## 11) Recycle

When you're editing your work, keep the lines you're cutting out. Put a file on your desktop called 'stuff that doesn't fit' or some such, and chuck in all the material that gets chopped off the pieces you're working on. Sometimes this is just junk, but more often than not there are seeds of other poems and stories there. When you're feeling stuck for a new idea, have a look at this 'garbage' and see if any of it is really gold. This can save you time when you've got a tiny window and need to get started quickly.

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## 12) Help Other Writers

It's important not to feel alone as a writer, and one of the best ways to build up your own support network is to support others. I found out early on that if I put on poetry events, I met people who invited me to theirs. Talk about the work of your peers, publish them on your blog and make magazines to feature their work. Take the time to be a good listener and a good editor for others, and you'll find that you always have someone to help you. Making art and supporting art are acts of beauty and goodness, and gestures of peace in an all-too-often disquiet world, and always worthwhile.

On that note, and to conclude, my first weeks as Programme Manager at the Scottish Poetry Library have been some of the most fulfilling of my career; both as an arts administrator and a writer. The chance to combine my love of poetry with my desire to programme events that support other poets and audiences of poetry is so precious, and I've been writing more since I started than I have in ages, even though I've been more busy than I can remember. I hope that I will have the opportunity to host many events that interest you, and I welcome suggestions for events and contact from anyone who wants to talk about poetry and their writing life. So please come along or get in touch and say hello, this is who and I am and this is why love writing. You can contact me on [jennifer.williams@spl.org.uk](mailto:jennifer.williams@spl.org.uk).

"For poems are not words, after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry." Mary Oliver

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**Turning the Next Page** is a programme of work being undertaken by literature organisations in Scotland with investment from Creative Scotland to support writers living and working in Scotland, especially those who are at an early stage of their careers.