



# The Writer's Compass

## Turning the Next Page

### The Theory and the Reality: Writing While Making a Living Elspeth Murray

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#### About the author

Poet and wordsmith Elspeth Murray works with Puppet State Theatre Company on their award-winning touring production *The Man Who Planted Trees*. As a writer, she enjoys creative collaborations, multi-disciplinary partnerships, educational projects and writing to commission. She has a background in health promotion and health policy and has been a poet in residence at national and international health conferences, a hospice, Glasgow Fort shopping park, Scottish Widows, Great Circle PR agency and Glendronach distillery. Her workplace residencies were featured in BBC Radio 4's 2008 documentary *Blood, Sweat, Tears and Poetry*. Elspeth has worked closely on educational projects in Scotland with local authorities, the Scottish Book Trust, the Scottish Poetry Library, the Edinburgh International Book Festival and in New York with the Lincoln Center Institute for aesthetic education. She took part in the Scotland Chicago Teaching Artists Exchange in 2009 and was part of the *Arts Across the Curriculum* pilot project that led to the Curriculum for Excellence. She is a non-executive director of Shared Care Scotland and, from February 2013, Chair of Puppet Animation Scotland.

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How can I pretend this is easy? Here's the theory: Doing the Writing takes priority within my working life of many threads and projects. Ha! Here's the reality: some of my work projects are related to being a writer but more are to do with running a small theatre company. There's rarely a sense that the job is done and much of my social – and family – life is knitted in with the arts. Doing the Writing is very often the thing that gets squeezed out and left till last in the whirlwind that is: workshop preparation and delivery, gearing up for poetry performances, sending out high res photos of



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puppets, filling in applications for travel grants, taking part in discussions about the future of puppetry or theatre, investing social media capital in nudging forward worthwhile events and initiatives (here a like, there a tweet, everywhere a link link), not to mention the logistics of food, travel, clean clothing and all those bloody bits of paper. Oh and the where and when and how of people – and I’m not even bringing up a family.

This is one version of my narrative of impossible busyness, perhaps you have your own. My spells of almost chaos, however, are interspersed with periods of purposeful planning, and over the years I have used a range of different strategies to shape creative spaces within the swirl of everyday stuff. In the hope that something from my self-styled self-help toolkit might suit your situation, here’s a few of the things that I’ve found useful in maintaining some sense of myself as a writer while dealing with the challenges of crust-earning work.

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## 1) The Challenge of Routine

**Theory:** I dedicate my first waking hour each day to exercises, voice work, freshly-juiced juice and a bright-eyed encounter with a blank page.

**Reality:** This does sometimes happen when I’m at home for a decent spell between touring with Puppet State Theatre Company, but life on the road is not very routine. I try to accept this tension and instead use the place I’m in as the lens through which I look at life and write about it. In Des Moines, Iowa, the bread-basket of the USA, I ended up thinking and writing about food production. In Austin, Texas, each day I walked past an exhibition called ‘Art from the Ashes’ from a nearby area hit hard by forest fires which led me to reflect on resilience. Other times, it’s service stations and suitcases that provide the inspiration.

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## 2) The Challenge of Time

**Theory:** I prioritise effectively and always focus on completing important tasks before moving on to other activities.

**Reality:** Dwelling on my failings is a time-wasting activity, so I’m only going to write about the positives here, the key tactics I know work for me. I use Mindjet’s mindmap software to sort and connect projects and ideas. The stopwatch on my phone is handy to time how long it *really* takes to do that thing I’ve been putting off (very often it’s around 12 minutes). I set the pinger (actually it goes BOING!) to 15 or 20 minutes to help me tackle a task in un-scary chunks and find that any resistance usually evaporates within the first ten minutes. And a good old-fashioned list to cross things off is just one of the most brilliant inventions ever. Early to bed, early to rise ... that’s a canny trick too, apparently, and I’m working on it – at least it’s on my list.

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### 3) The Challenge of Income

**Theory:** My skill as a writer is a valued and I attract work where my talents are appreciated and rewarded.

**Reality:** When it comes to the projects that pay, it's a lot more than good writing that people want, it's a whole bunch of other stuff too. Residencies and teaching work require flexibility and decisiveness, friendliness and boundaries, willingness to generate ideas and the ability to let many of them go. It's about under-promising, over-delivering, leaving a good impression and to some extent it's about who you know or the modern version of who-you-know which is being trusted and easily findable online. I didn't have a mentor to tell me this kind of thing when I started working with poetry years ago but I would have loved to have had more personal guidance along the way. Once or twice, I did pick up the phone and ask for advice or the opportunity to accompany another writer in their schools work but normally it has been about learning by being in at the deep end. Having taken part in the Scottish Book Trust's mentoring scheme as a mentor a few years ago, I am now enjoying informally both having a mentor and being a mentor. It's something that I've been recommending to all sorts of people – not just writers. As well as the chance to talk about the big picture and the nuts and bolts, it's also a great way to expand your network, learning about and passing on information about interesting opportunities for writers.

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### 4) The Challenge of The Garret

**Theory:** With a room of my own, I can focus on writing and apply myself to creating my best work yet.

**Reality:** While I am lucky to have privacy and a special desk to write at with a view of trees and flitting blue-tits, I still suffer from studio envy. My workspace is not as streamlined as it could be. My stationery is not wonderful enough. If only I had my old notebooks within reach, arranged and indexed so I could retrieve all the brilliant ideas I've written down. What begins as resolve to sit alone and write something half decent can turn into a lonely battle with an idealised notion of the writer I'd rather be. More organised, more productive, more ... poetic. Getting outside to be among trees or hopping on a bus to spend time with friends – these things can be casualties of too dogged a fixation on lonely lonely writing writing writing. But I know very well that there's times when it's all going marvelously and quality meets quantity at the keyboard due to dedicated arse-on-seat time. The ideal balance of solitude and company is probably related to my temperament, time of the year, month, day and God knows what else but I don't think I've got my balance on this one right yet!

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## 5) The Challenge of Publication

**Theory:** I have stuck like glue to the commitment I made ten years ago to pursue publication in quality print publications and have reaped rich rewards – and acclaim and awards.

**Reality:** I really haven't done that. I have had a few things published in print but more of my work has been made-available-to-the-public (which feels to me what 'publishing' technically means) through performance, online text or sometimes (though I barely dare watch myself) video. I've also enjoyed getting words 'out there' through installation art, non-booklike or ephemeral forms: poetic text inscribed on plastic, tracing paper, hessian or tape designed for labelling lighting desks. I genuinely can't figure out whether I'm just not that into seeking the thrill of being in print or whether I'm in deep denial of the importance of The Book as a time-honoured part of the writing process. But I do know that putting a poem online can lead to it reaching a wide audience; my poem *This is Bad Enough* has been used in Tasmania's health literacy policy, on the Harvard School of Public Health website and by the US Centers for Disease Control. I know that Twitter can be a brilliant way to share words, images and ideas, as well as finding encouragement and collaborators. And with mobile devices providing an intriguing new medium for words, sounds and pictures, I'm truly curious about the next episodes of that unfolding multimedia story. I might even get to be part of that story – if I get my 'routine', 'time', 'income' and 'garret' settings properly optimised.

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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.