



# The Writer's Compass

## Turning the Next Page

### Shared Space: Sustaining Your Writing While Making a Living Ken Cockburn

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#### About the author

Ken Cockburn is a poet, translator, editor and writing tutor based in Edinburgh. A former Assistant Director and Fieldworker at the Scottish Poetry Library, he has worked as a poet in many different settings, including public art projects, literacy initiatives, archives and private businesses, as well as schools and colleges. His most recent publications are *Overheard Overlooked: Found Poems* (2011); *Ink* (2011), with artists ~in the fields; and *Snapdragon* (2012), translations of the German poet Arne Rautenberg. [www.kencockburn.co.uk](http://www.kencockburn.co.uk)

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#### Introduction

Thinking about the sub-title, it struck me that much (even most) of what I write these days is part of earning my living, rather than a separate activity. I've worked freelance for nearly eight years now, and have been lucky enough to find work related to poetry, especially running writing workshops. Before, when I had a regular monthly income, I wrote whatever I felt like writing in my spare time, and was pleased to receive the odd small cheque for a poem published in a magazine or anthology. Now I find I'm writing less 'speculatively', and more for particular projects, all of which involve collaborators, so for me the issue of balancing a writing practice with earning a living has become less about finding or securing a quiet private space for writing outwith the bustle of getting and spending, and more about finding a congenial and recompensed shared space in which or for which to write. So the paragraphs below consider different aspects of that shared space, in terms of an ongoing balancing act between practice, opportunity and income.



## **Beginning, Middle and End**

A friend of a friend said recently that artists are often responsible for initiating, processing and completing projects, and very few are equally good at all three. So try to assess what your strengths are, and find collaborators who can complement them. I'm best at the middle bit, processing. In terms of initiation, I've managed to connect with people who are good at generating ideas, and also apply for commissions with set briefs (in terms of theme and/or outcome); and in terms of completing, I like working with artists, designers and publishers who have a passion for making things, especially books, and who can take a text and realise it in a satisfying way.

## **Commissions**

I've run poetry workshops for many years; most focus on participants' writing, rather than my own, though if the work is to be published I might be involved as an editor. Recently there's been a certain dovetailing of workshops and my own writing, and I've been commissioned to write pieces following sessions with various interest groups, incorporating their ideas and words to varying degrees. At one level such writing has an element of the personal removed, in that the parameters are set by others, but at another level it's extended me as a writer, giving me access to areas of experience I wouldn't have otherwise have. I've worked with visually impaired people, investment managers, hospice day patients and army veterans; I've researched and written about Victorian professors of Chemistry, coal mining in Midlothian, Byron's proof-corrections and the 11th century Battle of Mortlach.

## **Collaborations**

I heard Tony Harrison read a few years ago. He reckoned he was the only person in the UK who made his living just by writing poetry. Not by teaching, or writing reviews, or writing novels, but just by writing poetry. He qualified it by acknowledging that "writing poetry" included making new performing versions of classical plays; so not a solitary, speculative act, but a commissioned, double collaboration, with both the original playwright, and contemporary theatre makers.

## **Visuals**

I enjoy working with visual artists because I find they suggest – through their work, or more casually, in conversation – different ways of working, and opportunities for collaboration. Artists are good at thinking about how to present texts – whether that's online with the latest web design programmes, suggesting print formats (books of different shapes and sizes, cards, posters, calendars, bookmarks...), or using different materials (stone, wood, glass, ceramics...) – and where to present them – indoors and outdoors, in formal and informal spaces. Graphic designers are good people to know – the way they treat text in visual terms can suggest new directions for your writing, especially in terms of structure. I haven't worked with musicians, but they too are often looking for words to bounce their own ideas off, and will offer different ways of presenting the work, live and recorded.

## **Translation**

Make the most of any language skills you have. Maybe you're from a bilingual background, but even if all you have is school French, holiday Greek, the Gaelic or Urdu your granny speaks, find texts in that language that appeal to you, and translate them. You learn a lot about the way your own language works by trying to replicate in it a text from another language. It's also a chance to try writing in another voice, one you wouldn't necessarily have the confidence – or arrogance – to attempt on your own. Meet writers who work in that

language; they'll show you alternative ways of working and thinking, from poetic forms to how readings are organised. They might even translate your work or invite to read abroad. Do likewise; you'll extend your own opportunities and readership.

### **The Work**

I worked with a theatre company many years ago, who devised their shows communally. Not that they ever talked about shows, or pieces, and especially not plays, as there was no script; it was always simply "the work". "Work" reminded you of the effort that had gone into its making, and that impersonal article always struck me as important; the thing now existed as something out there in the world, taking its chances separately from the care of its makers. Think of what you make as "the work" – you may not be on the same hourly rate as a plumber, but a reader who gives your work time needs to be able to depend on its workmanship – on its watertightness – once you've left the building. And you need to be able to negotiate it in terms of your wallet as well as your heart.

### **The Money**

Be upfront about payment. If you're doing this for a living, and are working freelance, calculate your day rate, and try to stick to it – though if someone is offering you ten or twenty days' work you might feel able to nudge it down a bit. Sometimes you'll be offered less than your minimum, but it might still be worthwhile weighing up what you have to gain – if the project gives you an opportunity to extend your work, or is going to be well-publicised, or will lead to an attractive publication or exhibition, maybe the long-term benefits outweigh the short-term belt-tightening. Remember that as a freelancer you get no holiday pay or sick pay, and come next January or July you'll have tax to pay on your earnings.

Occasionally, by way of contrast, you can take the 'reassuringly expensive' route, only accepting a job if you're paid properly, either because you know you'll want to dedicate a lot of time to it or, conversely, because you're not that bothered if you don't get it. The more you charge, the more seriously you're taken – and the more can be expected of you.

You can estimate the hours needed to prepare, run and follow-up a workshop easily enough, but how do you cost writing a poem? You might manage it in a morning, or you might still be struggling with it a fortnight later. Be fair on yourself, but also be fair on whoever is paying you; you can't be expected to work for nothing, but they can't be expected to give you an open cheque. All you can do is allocate a reasonable amount of time, and negotiate a fee accordingly. Think about other opportunities; is there a related event you'll be paid for, can you make something from magazine publication, will this commission lead to other work?

### **The Writing**

This is shorter than the section above, because that's impersonal and this isn't. My only advice is, set aside time. I write best first thing in the morning. Later in the day, even if I'm doing something else, I run over phrases and lines in my head, and sometimes make progress without really trying. As for other specifics and stimulants – paper or screen, caffeine or alcohol, garret or café – that's entirely up to you, and what you can afford.

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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.