

# How to make a living from writing

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## **Yes, you can do it.**

No, most authors in Australia don't make \$13,600 a year, despite how often you hear that discouraging quotation. I doubt there is a single author who makes \$13,600 and, if they exist, they are extremely skinny. That's the average that Australians make from writing books.

My darling husband makes \$56 a year from his more-than-a-decade-old book. A dear friend's deeply revered academic text, in libraries world-wide, makes her about \$400 a year. Those figures are averaged with writers who make millions of dollars a year. And they exist too. 'Some' (a highly technical statistical term meaning that, as far as I know, there are no surveys of who earns what, but I've counted up the ones I actually know) authors make about the same amount of money per annum as teachers. At least twenty writers, from personal knowledge and so undoubtedly there are far more, make hundreds of thousands, or even those millions, per year. It is as possible to earn your living as an author as it is from being a neurosurgeon or barrister. In other words, many people do it. But only if they are extremely good.

## **It is as possible to earn your living as an author as it is from being a neurosurgeon or barrister.**

And like those two professions, being a writer means that you work extremely hard but don't make any money for at least two years. You plot and research your book. You write it and then rewrite it. Trash it and begin a version so different from the first that there's no point keeping more than a few paragraphs from each chapter. Rewrite once more. Submit ... and it's accepted.

You are given an advance based on the projected first edition's sales.

This may be enough to keep you in coffee, especially if you prefer tea, unless you are already famous and/or the book is seen as having instant best-seller potential.

You rewrite again, on advice from the editor. You rewrite a third time, on the advice of the second editor. The book is published. If it is about the sex life of cricketers, it will sell 100,000 copies in three weeks, then be severely discounted and never printed again.

**More likely - and if it's not about cricket - it will sell a few thousand copies and, if it is good, sales will keep increasing for the next ten or twenty years.**

You are given an advance based on the projected first edition's sales. This may be enough to keep you in coffee, especially if you prefer tea.

But no matter how well it sells, you won't see any royalties for months – royalties are paid on sales three months after each six month selling period – for example, you will be paid in late March for sales from the previous period of July – December.

Financially successful authors are those who are either the writers of best sellers (the name of whoever said, 'It only took me ten years to be an overnight success' has been lost) or who have accumulated a backlist, a number of books that make a respectable though not flagrant sum of money every year, enough for the publisher to keep them in print and available to the book-buying public. The backlist is the backbone of a long-term, successful writer's income.

And while you are becoming established, how can you top up your income? Once authors were treasured as book reviewers. These days there are fewer reviews and fewer publications in which those reviews can be read. Most reviews are done online for

nothing. And sites like Amazon do not approve of authors reviewing books, as they may be part of dubious reciprocal 'You say my book is brilliant and I'll say yours is too' deals.

If you write for young people, school visits pay well, though only if you can also speak well, and preferably not just about your book but also about the craft of writing and the contagious joy of being a reader. Add freelance journalism, paid mentoring and possibly winning an award and you have ... well, enough possibly to pay for your muesli, as well as coffee. In other words, you will need another source of income, from being a waiter to having a (financially) supportive spouse.

## The real questions are:

1. *Can you write well?*
2. *Can you give six good reasons why your particular readership will want to read what you write?*
3. *Do the words and themes nibble at your neck and not let go? And do you care enough about them to write and rewrite and keep rewriting? Amateurs write once and dabble at a rewrite. A professional is ruthless with the delete button.*

## And then?

1. Write.
2. Write well
3. Rewrite, rewrite and rewrite.
4. Only submit material that others will want to read.

Brilliant writing does not necessarily mean that enough readers will want to read it for it to be saleable. If you have an IQ of 247 you will only be saleable if you make your work accessible to those with an IQ of 125. Dilute that cognitive density ...

Do not take advice from anyone who is not an experienced editor or an award-winning or best-selling author. Your Mum does not count, unless she is one of the above. Any child will adore having the phone book read to them if you cuddle them at the same time

and perform it with passion and expression (I've tested this) so don't rely on their reactions either.

**And do not give up. If you can get published once you can do it again, far better. And once more, heading towards brilliant.**

And believe that, like barristers and proctologists, if you have talent, determination and allow yourself enough years in which to hone your skills, then the career of 'full-time author' exists, just as I dreamed it might when I was twelve, and parents, guidance counsellors and teachers, all with the best intentions, discouraged me.

It is slightly strange to have everything your twelve-year old self dreamed of. It is also far more fulfilling than even a daydreaming child could imagine.