

For Beginners Only

Breaking Eggs—Beware of the Comfortable Rut

By Melissa Gray

Like any professional, writers can find themselves in a rut. A comfortable amount of assignments coming in, not too hard, not too challenging, just enough to get by. Well, I recently found myself in such a spot. I hadn't queried much for a while, didn't have too many submissions making the rounds and was working for a couple of editors here and there.

I had dreams, I had hopes, but it was easier to have those than it was to actually put the pen to the paper. I knew without a doubt I could make it if I pushed myself, but I was comfortable and it was easier to say yes to another boring assignment from a familiar editor than it was to run the dreaded risk of rejection. My muse had definitely flown south in anticipation of winter.

My stability, though, my thoughtless happiness in my little rut, came crashing to an end when I learned one of my long-time editors planned to leave. Having been in this business as long as I have, I know that new editor = new talent. Suddenly the car payment looked ominous, the house payment out of reach, the orthodontist out of luck, and Christmas around the corner.

Like any desperate person, I headed out the door to the nearest temporary employment agency. I didn't sit down to write queries; no, that would have taken too long. I knew without a doubt I needed to get to work, the kind of work that guaranteed a paycheck every Friday. No time to look back. I had made the mistake every successful writer I knew had warned me about: I had one editor accounting for the majority of my income, and was in deep trouble.

Halfway through my first week in a temporary customer service position...I cried. My brain had shut down and all I wanted was the intimacy of my own computer

screen, soft music in the background, and a nice cup of tea. The bright florescent lights, the incessant ringing of the phone, petty co-workers, and rude customers were getting to me. My muse was back and screaming, "You've done it this time! WHAT are you doing HERE?" I hated punching a time clock, asking like a child for bathroom and lunch breaks. I knew without a doubt that, if my future consisted of day after monotonous day of customer service work, I was a goner.

Each day, though, I would drag myself to work, smile, and talk kindly to strangers, all the while longing for the time to write. Like an addict seeking a fix, I found myself jotting queries on napkins, and numerous story ideas on cash register tapes. On my lunch hour, when I was not running errands I was scouring the *Writer's Market* for my "Get out of jail free" card. But by the time I got home each night the responsibility of my children and time I had spent at work had taken its toll. I had no energy to write, barely enough to keep up with the few dwindling assignments I still had.

I learned after the second week that working as a temp was not for me; I had to be challenged, I had to be creative, I had to write; it was do or die. The high of pulling an article together from scraps of research and interviewing could not be beat. But I was still having problems determining if my need to write outweighed the need to make my house payment on time. Then nirvana, an editor I had written for only once sent me a "job-well-done" note with payment for a story. I could do it; that note was all the affirmation I needed. I wasn't a "Girl Friday"—I was a writer.

I reached a happy medium. I told the temp agency I could work for them two or three days a week and the other days I queried my heart out. I pulled the napkins and cash register tapes from my purse and mailed out ten queries the first day. Onward and upward, that's my new motto, and no, I will never trust all of my eggs in one basket again.

Melissa Gray writes from Springfield, MO. ✉