



Books & Writers



Want to make a quick million? Don't be a writer!

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Writer: Writers and authors develop written content for newspapers, magazines, books, advertisements, movie and television scripts, songs and on-line publications.

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So, you want to be a writer? If you are already a writer, you probably know that you don't write for money, whether you are E.L. James (*Fifty Shades of Grey*) who made \$92 million last year, or a weekly newspaper columnist (who made \$92 million less than that).

You write because you love to write. It brings you joy and, if you are lucky, brings enjoyment to others.

But if money is a driver, just know that you're probably not going to get rich by being a writer. While salary.com sets writers' annual salaries between \$38,000 and \$97,000 a year—the fact is that there are many writers who work for far less.

For example, many writers are free-lancers, who only get paid if they write things that are published, and even some of those (especially articles written for websites) are not paid at all.

If you write a book review accepted by the *Los Angeles Times*, you'll get paid \$50, but a freelance story in *Cosmopolitan* could earn you \$2,400 (that's about \$2 per word).

Of course, on the other end of that spectrum are the great fiction writers who sell millions of books.



According to one national survey, writers' annual salaries average between \$38,000 and \$97,000 a year.

According to Forbes.com, James Patterson made more than \$80 million last year while Stephen King came in at a cool \$28 million. *Gone Girl* author Gillian Flynn and *Hunger Games* author Suzanne Collins reportedly made about \$23 million each (there are 7 women in the world's top earning authors list compiled by *Forbes*).

But if writing a novel isn't your idea of fun (it took Margaret Mitchell 10 years to write *Gone With the Wind* but E.L. James wrote the '50 Shades' trilogy in only 18 months), you could always try your hand at writing a television script.

According to the *Soap Opera Network*, head writers made about \$33,345 per week for a one-hour show, although "regular writers" for a half-hour show might receive about \$1,827 per script. Neither one is bad, assuming you have the patience to write for a dying genre.

If you want to be a newspaper

reporter, salaries range from \$20,700 to \$78,000 or more, depending upon your experience and the size of the market you are working in. Television reporters are paid higher, some making \$135,000 to \$400,000 per year, according to workinenertainment.com.

One downside about being a reporter: the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the number of jobs for both print and broadcast reporters is expected to decline by eight percent between now and 2020.

Of course, if you want to be a playwright, you might have to moonlight a little. According to one publication, playwrights might be paid between \$12,000 and \$20,000 for their work if it is produced—and then get six percent of the gross receipts. If the play's a flop, you might pay your rent for a year or so.

Of course, you can always self-publish. Self-published superstars are rare, like E.L. James and Lisa Genova, whose self-published novel, *Still Alice*, spent 40 weeks on the NYT's best seller list (and was later made into a movie starring Julianne Moore and Alec Baldwin).

Of course, one study found that the average annual salary for self-published authors was about \$10,000—although that was highly skewed because of several at the top of the list who really hit the jackpot (while both James and Genova first self-published, both were later signed by large traditional publishers). Many self-published authors are lucky to make \$500 in one year.

But \$500 sounds like a fortune to many poets, perhaps the

lowest paying writing job around. Statistics from *The New Yorker* magazine note that *The Paris Review*, one of the most prestigious literary publications in the world, pays just \$75 for each poem published, although if you are lucky enough to publish a poem in *The New Yorker* you would make \$460.

Even Walt Whitman, one of America's greatest poets, had a 'day job' as a government clerk (of course, one way to beat the odds as a writer is to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, which Whitman did, a prize that today carries a monetary award of about \$200,000).

But it's not the money that drives most writers, whether they are getting paid or not.

The late American author Henry James reminded us that "writing is its own reward."

So, decide if writing is something you want to do, because choosing it as a career based on what you might earn is the wrong reason (actually, choosing any career field based solely on money is wrong).

As a writer, you must love what you do, as any other reason will just make you miserable—and probably broke.

[David R. Altman has been nominated for Georgia Author of the Year by the Georgia Writer's Association for his first book of poetry, Death in the Foyer. He lives part time in Jasper, and can be reached at altmandavidr@gmail.com and www.davidraltman.com.]