

## WRITING CLASS

by Carol Penn-Romine, student in the professional food writing course at the Institute of Culinary Education



"IT'S LONELY OUT in space," laments David Bowie in "Space Oddity." For freelance writers, that's where we are, adrift in the ether, without the company of anyone who truly understands our lot in life. Our family and friends love us, but unless they're all writers, they don't know what it feels like to slug away at this profession all alone. We writers are a suspect lot anyway, making obscure references, cracking obtuse jokes, and scribbling notes no one else can understand. How do they know we're pondering the structure of an article or where to place that odd paragraph? As far as they're concerned, we could be daydreaming about chocolate soufflés, or sex—or both.

We need to have our batteries recharged periodically, and taking a writing class gives us that recharge in at least three vital ways. Most obvious is the study of the subject itself. No matter how long we've been writing or how much we've studied the craft, we'll learn at least one thing we didn't know. It may be something that's not even on the class schedule.

When I signed up for a professional food writing class at the Institute of Culinary Education, my teacher encouraged me to write humorous essays. I've written them all my life, but seldom have I tried to publish one. I've always been too focused on paying the bills, buying the cat food, and writing informative prose. But during our class, she saw that what flowed most naturally from me was humor. She confirmed there is a market for it and she nudged me in that direction.

Which brings us to the second benefit of signing up for a writing class: the relationship you build with the instructor can be surprisingly helpful. Some are more approachable than others, but if you hit it off with your teacher, you'll have an ally in your corner who can help

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you weather the bad times and celebrate the good ones—and whack you upside the head when you need it.

Toward the end of his life, I had the good fortune to take a writing class with Peter Taylor, the storyteller whose elegant explorations of the changing Old South won him a Pulitzer Prize. One day he mused, "You know, my friends used to be my teachers. Now my friends are my students." I was honored to know that this esteemed author felt we were equals. We feed and we are fed by one another, regardless of our age.

Third, and perhaps most important, are the friendships you build with your fellow classmates. "I've already got all the friends I need," is one of the saddest, most misguided assertions I've ever heard. You can never have too many friends, and in a writing class, you aren't just building friendships, you're building professional relationships. Among the friends you make in a writing class you'll find a variety of ages, education levels, and professional and life experiences. While you will learn from some, you'll find yourself reaching out to help those who haven't traveled as far along the path as you have.

Networking also enables you to share ideas. Some writers are concerned that if they discuss their ideas with others, they'll lose them to someone faster and hungrier. I don't subscribe to this attitude. Rather, I believe in the generosity of spirit, and that the more you give, the more you receive. Often those who network find a painful interest in common, such as alcoholism, divorce, or disease. Contrarily, establishing a network of writing support comes out of a positive, joyous impulse—the urge to write. When we find others who share our passion for the written word, we should celebrate our good fortune. If we're going to drift in outer space, let's bring along some likeminded folks.

Personally, I can't assign a dollar value to all the benefits I've received from the writing classes I've taken. Their worth is far greater than their cost. Just don't tell the IRS.

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