

Latinidad 3/13: 10th Anniversary – Writing Classes

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1. Saludos

In continuation of my celebration of Latinidad's tenth anniversary, I am culling the best advice and advisors from back issues to help you get published. Previously, I've discussed managing money and time. This month's focus is honing your craft.

Writing guides are no substitute for writing classes. Neither are one-day, one-weekend, or one-week long workshops. The ideal environment in which to hone your craft is a formal writing class that takes place over the course of an eight to twelve week semester. I highly recommend the online courses offered by UCLA Extension Writers' Program. To learn more, read this month's Q&A with Liz Gonzalez, Instructor, UCLA Extension.

Helping Latinos get published,
Marcela Landres
marcelalandres@yahoo.com
<http://www.marcelalandres.com/>

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2. Q&A

Liz Gonzalez teaches creative writing courses online through the UCLA Extension Writers' Program. She teaches "Essential Beginnings: An Introductory Creative Writing Workshop" and "Writer as Witness to Life." For more information about Liz, please visit <http://www.lizgonzalez.com/> For more information about the UCLA Extension Writers' Program, please visit <http://www2.uclaextension.edu/writers/>

Q: When is a writer ready for classes (e.g. when they have an idea, or have written some pages, or have a complete manuscript, etc.)?

A: Since there are a wide range of courses available to any level of writer, I

think that a person is ready for classes when he or she feels comfortable to share his or her work with others and wants to improve his or her craft in a class environment. For example, one of the courses I teach through the Writers' Program is "Essential Beginnings: An Introductory Creative Writing Workshop." My students in this class vary. Some have been writing in the closet or have wanted to try their hand at writing, some want a brush up on the basics, and some fall somewhere between. All want to ease into creative writing and are ready to work with a group.

Q: What are the advantages of online classes vs. brick-and-mortar classes?

A: As one who has taken and taught on-land and online courses, one big advantage of the online courses is convenience. Students can check in anytime of the day or night, in their pajamas or frumpies, after the children have gone to bed, during a break at work, or before starting the day. I also like having time to reread the lectures and work in the workshop and digest them before responding. For a beginner, I think the anonymity is a safe way to get started. I also like that I get to work with people from around the country and world. I have students stationed in the Middle East, and traveling or living in Asia, Europe, and South Africa. The diversity of voices and perspectives from around the world make the classes and work more engaging than in a local classroom, even one in a city as diverse as Los Angeles.

Q: Which attributes and/or credentials should writers seek in a teacher?

A: This is a difficult question to answer. Students could take a course with their favorite writer and find that the writer isn't an engaged teacher. Word of mouth isn't always available. And having a degree or a great deal of publications doesn't necessarily make a good instructor. I suggest that writers read the instructor's bio to see if there is a pull. One can always get a feel for an instructor during the first week, reading the posts, lectures, and assignments, and if the class doesn't seem right for the student, s/he can drop in time to get a refund.

Q: Could you offer three tips on how writers can make the most of their experience in class?

A: * Be open. If you come in with a specific set of expectations, beyond what the course promises, you might miss what that person has to teach you.
* Print the lectures and handouts. Read them closely, and reread them.
* Make time in your schedule for the class and meet deadlines.

Q: On the other hand, what are the top three mistakes writers should absolutely avoid?

A: My response to this question applies most to new writers.

* Dismissing the value of rewriting. I am a big advocate of "rewriting is writing."

* Not taking the time to hone one's craft before sending work out for publication. Many writers, including myself, regret having "shoddy" work published. You can never take it back!

* Not reading. Somewhere someone said, "Beware of the writer who has written more than he or she has read." It's too true.

Q: How has your own writing influenced your teaching? And how has your teaching influenced your writing?

A: In addition to "Essential Beginnings," I also teach a course I designed, "Writer as Witness to Life," which addresses what I learned on my own about "writing creatively about events and experiences that are personal and important without getting too self-absorbed, sentimental, preachy, or narrow." All the lessons I use for both classes are craft lessons I wish had been taught to me when I started writing. They also give beginning writers a stronger foundation in the craft basics.

Teaching creative writing keeps my craft chops sharp. It's a constant reminder to practice a writing process and develop layer by layer. My students' creative approaches to the writing assignments teach me too. As poet and activist Raul Salinas would tell his workshop groups, I come to learn as well.

3. Resources

HOW EDITORS THINK

"I read How Editors Think in one sitting and was engaged from beginning to end. It is well written, highly informative, and humorous—I found myself laughing out-loud in a few spots! Thanks for sharing the secrets of the trade."
—Mayra Lazara Dole, author of Down to the Bone

Inspired by my experience as a former Simon & Schuster editor, How Editors Think: The Real Reason They Rejected You reveals what it really takes to get published. For more information, visit:

<http://www.marcelalandres.com/E-book.html>

UNPUBLISHED/SELF-PUBLISHED NOVEL PRIZE

Deadline: March 31

The Literary Blockbuster Challenge sponsored by Inkubate offers \$5000 for an unpublished or self-published novel that combines elements of literary and mainstream fiction. For more information, visit <http://www.inkubate.com/>

FANTASY/SCI-FI/HORROR WRITING WORKSHOP

Application Deadline: April 8

Class Dates: June 10-July 19

The Odyssey Writing Workshop combines advanced lectures, exercises, extensive writing, and in-depth feedback on student manuscripts in the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and horror. For more information, visit <http://www.sff.net/odyssey/>

POEM PRIZE

Deadline: April 15

The Editors' Prize Contest offers \$1000 and publication in Spoon River Poetry Review for a poem. For more information, visit <http://www.srpr.org/>

POETRY AT ROUND TOP FESTIVAL

Dates: April 26-28

Features workshops with poets Lorna Dee Cervantes, Joe Ahearn, and Tony Hoagland, among others. For more information, visit <http://poetryatroundtop.org/>

GRUB STREET MUSE AND THE MARKETPLACE CONFERENCE

Registration Deadline: April 29

Dates: May 3-5

Features craft classes, panel discussions, and meetings with agents and editors. Participants include Justin Torres, Emma Straub, and Helena Maria Viramontes. For more information, visit <http://www.grubstreet.org/>

BUSINESS FICTION CONTEST

Deadline: April 30

The Henry Hazlitt Contest for Business Fiction offers a prize of \$500 and a \$2000 advance for publication by Fiscal Press for a novel on the theme of business or entrepreneurship. For more information, visit <http://fiscalpress.com/>

SHORT STORY AWARD

Deadline: April 30

The E.M. Koeppel Short Fiction Award offers \$1,100 and publication on the Writecorner Press web site for a short story. For more information, visit <http://www.writecorner.com/>

CREATIVE NONFICTION AWARD

Deadline: May 1

Zone 3 Press offers \$1000 and publication for a work of creative nonfiction. For more information, visit <http://www.apsu.edu/zone3/contests>

LATIN AMERICAN/SPANISH LITERATURE PRIZE

Deadline: May 1

The Katherine Singer Kovacs Prize sponsored by the Committee on Honors and Awards of the Modern Language Association offers a cash award for an outstanding book published in English or Spanish in the field of Latin American and Spanish literatures and cultures. For more information, visit http://www.mla.org/prizeinfo_kovacs

\$50,000 LITERARY PRIZE

Deadline: May 1

St. Francis College sponsors the biannual \$50,000 Literary Prize to a mid-career author who has recently published their third to fifth work of fiction. Self-published books and English translations will be considered. For more information, visit <http://www.sfc.edu/page.cfm?p=4045>

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“In order to even begin to learn how to play his instrument, it takes the guitarist weeks to build calluses on his fingertips; it takes the saxophonist months to strengthen his lip so that he might play his instrument for only a five-minute stretch; it can take the pianist years to develop dual hand and multiple finger coordination. Why do writers assume they can just ‘write’ with no training whatsoever—and then expect, on their first attempt, to be published internationally? What makes them think they're so much inherently greater, need so much less training than any other artists?"
--Noah Lukeman

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Marcela Landres

Author of the e-book "How Editors Think: The Real Reason They Rejected You"

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