

# Revise with Confidence Free Video Series

## Video #1: Gain Fresh Perspective

### Transcript

Hey, I'm Joan Dempsey and I'm glad you're here.

Imagine this. By the time you're finished with this video series, you

- Won't worry anymore about whether or not your writing is really any good,
- Won't be afraid that you're wasting your time,
- You'll simply be able to get straight to work, focus on your writing, and do what's necessary to ensure that your writing is as good as it can possibly be.

We're going to get there by using a simple 3-step process:

1. Gain Fresh Perspective – on why you worry in the first place, so you have a better understanding of what's going on
2. Distance Yourself – so you can see yourself as a writer more objectively
3. Use Simple Tools – that will help you advance your skills as a writer

Gain Fresh Perspective + Distance Yourself + Use Simple Tools = You as A More Confident Writer

What you won't get in this video series is a promise from me that I can turn you into an overnight bestselling author, it won't teach you to write a novel in thirty days or a memoir in four weeks, and it won't give you everything you need to become the next JK Rowling, Alice Munro or Stephen King. Writing is far more complicated than that; we both know it. You may, however, be inspired to become like four of the many writers with whom I've worked, whose stories you'll hear later – Maureen C. Berry, Tim Queeney, Shannon Huffman Polson and S.K. Lamont.

Today's video is both an introduction to the full video series, and a look at the first step in our process - Gaining a Fresh Perspective on yourself as a writer. Here's what we're going to do:

- 1) First, I'll tell you a little bit about who I am;
- 2) then we'll make sure this video series is right for you by posing a few questions and exploring the types of writers I expect will benefit most from this series;
- 3) Then I'll share my thoughts on the current 'speed-focused' writing climate in which we're all working
- 4) Finally, we'll jump into the first step of how to discover whether your writing is really any good: Gain Fresh Perspective.

A little bit later on in the series I'll also tell you about my online revision course – Revise with Confidence: See Your Writing Like an Editor, a companion course to this video series – but more on that later.

First, a little bit more about me, so you know what you're getting into. This is where I work, in what's fondly known as The Shed, a converted chicken coop and tool shed out behind my house here in New Gloucester, Maine, in the United States. I am an experienced writer and teacher of writing, with advanced degrees in both from Antioch University Los Angeles, and I help serious creative writers master the craft of revision through online courses, free online writing and revision resources, including the free monthly Revise with Confidence newsletter, the Revise with Confidence Facebook group, and 1-1 feedback.

I've written and published a number of short stories and non-fiction pieces, and I've written two novels, the first of which is sitting on a shelf (quiet, literary), the second of which is currently under consideration by four literary agents, although I'm also seriously pursuing the possibility of independently publishing my work.

I've worked 1-1- with well over 100 writers on their manuscripts, many published, others still seeking publication and some who are simply trying to perfect their

writing skills and finish a story or an essay or a novel or a memoir to the best of their ability. And I teach premium online revision courses designed to help you become the best writer you can be.

Like many of you, I'm sure, I've been writing for a long time but I didn't get serious about my writing until I took my first writing workshop at Grub Street Writers in Boston, back in 2000. That's when Grub Street was first getting started, and I took a fiction writing workshop with Manuel Munoz, author of the story collections *The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue* and *Zigzagger* and the novel, *What You See in the Dark*. In that first writing workshop, Manuel gave us a writing prompt, to choose a line of poetry he provided to start writing a story – I chose a line from “End of Summer” by Stanley Kunitz – *The roof of the silo blazed*. In that exercise, in very short order, a character named Poke appeared to me in that magical way characters have of appearing, and I fell madly in love. I knew in that instant that I wanted to spend my days thinking hard about words and the craft of writing, and today that's what I do for work. Every day I get up, walk out here to the shed, write, and work with writers like you. Was that first story any good? No. Not at all. But I couldn't have told you that at the time. At the time I had no idea whether it was any good, and of course I worried that it wasn't, and I also secretly dared to think it might be great! But it would take years of hard work and rejection

and doubt about my own abilities before I felt confident enough in my writing ability to say “I’m a writer” and not only *not* feel self-conscious about it, but feel like “yeah, my writing’s pretty good.” That’s why I designed this video series, to work with you so you can stop worrying about whether your writing is any good, and get on with your work in such a way that you can ensure that your writing is as good as it can possibly be.

Is this video series right for you? You are absolutely in the right place *if* ...

- You are worried that your writing isn’t any good;
- You’re concerned that you might be wasting your time doing this writing thing;
- The writing on your page doesn’t match the writing in your head;
- You’re serious about your writing and are willing to invest in yourself to make sure that your writing is as good as it can be;
- And you want a simple solution to help you get past these concerns so you can just get down to work and focus on your writing.

If that sounds like you, you’re in the right place.

We writers are currently living in a world where speed is highly valued, and speed is not necessarily a friend to quality writing. You probably know Ann Lamott’s

wonderful book, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (if you don't, check it out), and this is the source of the now famous maxim, to "write a shitty first draft", by which she means to crank out a complete first draft without worrying (yet) about the quality of the writing. National Novel Writing Month, or NaNoWriMo, sprang up to encourage novelists to do just that, to crank out 50,000 words in 30 days. And then, of course, there's the ability for any one of us to publish our own work, whenever we wish. All of this has led to the creation of a segment of the literary culture that values a speedy writing process and a rush to publication. There's nothing inherently wrong with this. There are plenty of writers out there who are cranking out books and selling them like crazy, even if they've never had another person review their manuscripts. Some of them are good enough, and many more are not.

But here's the other trend I've seen. Writers come to me every single day who have been cranking out those drafts and even publishing their own books, and they simply still don't know if their writing is any good. NaNoWriMo takes place in November every year, and in December I am inundated with inquiries from writers who don't know what to do next; many of them had no idea how difficult it would be, or how much time it would take, to take the cranked-out first draft and revise it into something worthy of publication. This speed-happy environment can create a

lot of unnecessary self-doubt, and lead people to worry that they're wasting their time on this dream they've had of writing a book, because they didn't understand that they couldn't crank out a terrific piece of writing in no time at all; they didn't understand that writing well would be so challenging.

But every day I work with writers who have overcome their concerns, have faced their own current skill limitations, have decided to invest in themselves as writers and every day they are working to create the best writing they possibly can. In short, they're living the writing life. That's who this video series is for.

I work with ordinary, everyday writers, not New York Times Bestselling Authors or National Book Award Winners (not yet, anyway), but writers who are in love with writing and invest a significant portion of their lives to working with words. What I love most is seeing writers move from a place of uncertainty and self-doubt, to a place where they're excited and energized to focus on their writing, and take their work to the next level by revising it to the best of their ability.

Writers like:

- Shannon Huffman Polson, author of the memoir *North of Hope: A Daughter's Arctic Journey* and a series of essays, *The Way the Wild Gets Inside: Field Notes from Alaska*
- Tim Queeney, author of the novel *George in London*, a novella - *The Borealis Incident* -for Steve Konkoly's Perseid Collapse Kindle World, and a trilogy of Perry Helion thrillers.
- Maureen C. Berry, author of *Salmon: From Market to Plate*, the forthcoming memoir *Hurricanes, Handcuffs, Pepper Spray & Scrambled Eggs*, and a forthcoming Mick Delgado thriller
- S.K. Lamont, author of the forthcoming novel, *Katie Reeves and the Dragon's Heart*

Each of these writers have come to me because they're serious about their work and are invested in continuing to ensure that their writing is as good as it can possibly be. Each of them wanted to

- Gain fresh perspective
- Get distance
- Add some simple tools to their already well-equipped toolboxes

I'll tell you more about these four writers as this video series unfolds.



Here are some more specifics about what lies ahead in this video series:

- 1) Gain Fresh Perspective on why you worry in the first place - today
  - a) By learning what other writers are experiencing
  - b) By digging into the psychology of self-doubt
  - c) By reframing your concerns so you can move beyond them
- 2) Distance Yourself from yourself as a writer
  - a) To be more objective about who you are and who you are *not*
  - b) To learn how your own psychology might be getting in your way
  - c) To begin to form ideas about what you need to do to become the best writer you can be
- 3) Use Simple Tools
  - a) We'll explore a variety of tools in three different categories that will help you advance your skills as a writer
  - b) You will also get a special invitation to join my online course *Revise with Confidence*, a companion course to this video series, which uses this same simple 3-step process and applies it directly to your writing, so you can get the objective distance you need from your work in order to confidently revise it to make it the best it can possibly be. More on that later.

Now, how do we determine whether your writing is really any good?

Our first step is to Gain Perspective.

It's really easy for us to get focused on ourselves, especially as writers because we tend to spend a fair amount of time alone with our thoughts and our work, and by our very nature we like to explore what makes things tick, including ourselves. The problem is, though, that sometimes that introspection can become too myopic, and we can develop tunnel vision about ourselves. It's easy, then, for those worries to become magnified – is my writing really any good? Am I wasting my time? – and those worries then become paramount, and they can get in your way of focusing on making sure your writing is as good as it can possibly be.

Today I'm going to challenge you to Gain Fresh Perspective on yourself so you can break free of that tunnel vision.

At this point I've worked in one capacity or another with thousands of writers, so the first thing I want to tell you is that you're not alone in worrying whether your writing is any good. About 8 years ago I did my first bit of research while I was preparing to create my first online course for writers. I did a survey of writers like you, and I asked a series of questions. The one I was most interested in was this:

*Name three challenging obstacles that keep you from pursuing your writing more seriously, listing the most challenging obstacle first.*

I thought for sure the most challenging obstacle would be time. To be honest, I'd already started to research time management techniques to determine which might work best for writers. But guess what? Time was named as an obstacle, but it came in a distant second (by far) to the number one most challenging obstacle, which turned out to be ... the writer herself, the writer himself. Here's what I heard: self-doubt, self-loathing, self-inflicted discouragement, no confidence in my writing ability, belief that my writing isn't any good ...

This past year, I dug in more deeply to find out more specifics about what writers are truly worried about, the kinds of things you might talk about with your friends behind closed doors, or not talk about at all, and from hundreds of survey responses and more than 20 phone interviews with ordinary writers, here's a representative sampling of what I heard, in their own words:

- I always fear that I don't have what it takes
- I'm afraid I'm wasting my time and nothing will ever come of it
- I fear that I'm not a good writer, that I'll find all of what I've done has to be tossed, not just revised

- That any good or beauty or light I had in there will be taken away [through revision] and the whole thing will become useless, boring, childish, because there wasn't enough good in it in the first place
- I'll have nothing to show for all my hard work
- I always fear that what I write really sucks more than I thought, and that no manner of revising, editing and rewriting can save it.

Even Alice Munro, the deservedly celebrated Canadian author who's been called *our Chekhov*, experiences self-doubt. Munro has umpteen books to her credit, more than 50 stories published in the *New Yorker*, and sixteen major literary prizes, and still her confidence falters. In the summer of 2006 I saw her at the MacDowell Colony, where she made a rare public appearance to accept the Edward MacDowell Medal in Literature, an esteemed award for lifetime achievement in the arts. At the ceremony, while Munro looked on with a wide smile, her agent and longtime friend, Virginia Barber told the vast audience that "every time Alice completes a book she opines that it will be her last. She's used up all of her material; she has nothing to say."

Munro nodded her assent, and might have even mouthed, "It's true."

And when Munro herself spoke, she reiterated her own doubts about her abilities,

not just concerns about whether she had anything else to write, but about whether she could write it well enough.

I loved hearing this.

I felt totally inspired, because I felt like my own doubts were in good company.

Alice Munro, as it turns out, is no superhero. She's just a woman who's learned how to get over her concerns and stay at the writing desk.

You're not only not alone, you're in good company!

Let's face it, writing is a business rife with rejection, and rejection is not good for our self-esteem.

First there's the writing itself. Anyone who's participated in a writing workshop or an online critique forum knows that you're trained to look primarily for what's wrong. You're always in the cross-hairs of the red pen, which operates like a heat-seeking missile, homing in on what's lousy with your work. You're taught to focus on what to fix, delete, omit, slash, on which darlings you ought to kill.

You do get praise, too, but it often doesn't matter as much because you hear the criticism more clearly. We're trained to focus on the negative. We're used to it.

You get high praise from six readers who've read your writing, and criticism from a seventh – what do you focus on? Often you'll focus on the criticism. We always seem to be focused on what needs to be fixed.

Next, of course, are rejections you get from editors, agents and publishers, or rejections you get directly from readers in the form of negative reviews or poor sales if you went the indie route and published your own work.

The odds are not favorable – listen to what Benjamin Percy shares in his terrific *Poets & Writers* piece, “Go the Distance: What Rocky Taught Me About Submission:”

*When you're shoving paper into envelopes and licking shut the flaps, you've got to know the odds. Look at a magazine like Glimmer Train Stories. Every year they receive some forty thousand submissions – of which they publish about forty. Yeah. That means no matter how badass your story is, it's probably going to get rejected.*

And even with those odds, we still often take rejection to heart, we still take it

personally.

There are so many of us out there competing to be one of the forty, and our numbers are growing by the day. Just look at the growth of MFA programs across the United States. In 1975 there were 15 of them, in 2016 there are 218.

When you think about all the writers coming out of those programs, and all those other writers outside of those programs, all of us competing for the same small slice of the publishing pie or a respectable ranking on Amazon or Barnes & Noble . . . that's enough to create some concern about whether you're wasting time.

But what's the real psychology behind all this self-doubt? It can't only be based on feedback and rejection and competition. I did some digging into our psychology, and it turns out we're primed for criticism at an early age, which leads to our flagging self-esteem, which of course leads us to worry that our writing isn't really any good.

You've probably heard of Jack Canfield, of *Chicken Soup for the Soul* fame. You might not know that more than twenty years ago, Canfield was part of an interesting project in California called the California Task Force to Promote Self-

Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. Apparently two out of every three Americans has low self-esteem, which is actually what causes self-doubt and lack of confidence.

In short, we don't like ourselves all that much.

Canfield says that a University of Iowa study found that the typical American two-year old gets an average of *432 negative messages every day*. I find that number staggering. The study was done by listening to parents talk to their kids in the grocery store.

Even with all those negative messages, Canfield cites another study that tells us that 80% of second-graders still have high self-esteem. But by the time they're in fifth grade that's gone down to 20%, and kids right out of high school . . . well, only 5% of them have decent self-esteem.

No wonder we're worried that our writing isn't any good!

Here's the deal.

You're worried that your writing isn't any good, and let's be honest – if you're just starting out, whether you've written your first story or participated in your first workshop, or it's your first year as a serious writer or you're getting your MFA or



you've just finished NaNoWriMo or have completed a rough draft of even your fourth novel ... at that early stage, let's face it, your writing probably *isn't* any good, and that's okay. You have to take the time to learn your craft, just like anything else you have to learn. I think because we're taught to write from an early age, we tend to expect that writing should be easy; it's not.

Here's what we're going to do; we're going to reframe the question. Instead of asking, "Is my writing really any good?", let's ask "How can I ensure that my writing is as good as it can possibly be?" Very different frame, right?

Here's what we've seen so far:

- You're not alone
- You're in good company
- The business of writing is rife with rejection
- We're primed from an early age to have low self-esteem
- And, our initial writing probably isn't very good.

What do you think? Does this help you to gain fresh perspective?

Today we've talked about

- The speed-happy culture in which we're all operating, the rush to crank out a draft and publish quickly;
- How the ordinary writers I've worked with have pushed beyond their concerns so they can focus on making sure their writing is as good it can possibly be, writers like Shannon Huffman Polson, Tim Queeney, Maureen C. Berry, and SK Lamont
- The psychology behind the self-doubts so many of us have about the quality of our work and the culture of rejection in which we operate;
- The need to reframe the question, from "is my writing any good" to "how can I ensure that my writing is as good as it can possibly be?"

In the next video we're going to look more closely at that reframed question – "how can I ensure that my writing is as good as it can possibly be?" Specifically, we'll work through the second step of the three step process:

Distance Yourself – so you can see yourself as a writer more objectively – not being fully aware of the type of writer you are is one of the critical things that can get in your way of making sure your writing is as good as it can possibly be. We'll take a look at what to do if you don't like your own writing (I'll share a personal story about this, as well as one from author George Saunders), and we'll look at the

psychology behind our tendencies to do what's called "self-handicapping" and what that means for your writing. Each of these are important things to understand about yourself as a writer – without understanding them, you'll have a much more difficult time ensuring that you're writing to the best of your ability. Keep an eye on your inbox for that second video.

Don't forget:

Gain Fresh Perspective + Distance Yourself + Use Simple Tools = You as A More Confident Writer

And later on I'll also tell you a little more about the Revise with Confidence online companion course to this video series, and how this same simple three step process – gain fresh perspective, distance yourself, and use simple tools – can be applied directly to your writing itself, so you can see your writing more objectively in the same way you're beginning to see yourself more objectively, both of which, together, will ultimately lead you to be more confident about your writing.