

THE ON-PURPOSE WRITER

by Dennis L. Peterson

While rummaging in my attic for a reference book, I rediscovered two other books. Momentarily distracted from my quest, I flipped through them. Resuming my original search, I thought about the single, unifying message of the books. It applies to all writers, from struggling wannabes to established professionals.

The On-Purpose Person (1992) and *The On-Purpose Business* (1998) by Kevin W. McCarthy discuss valuable principles that could spell the difference between success and failure for our writing efforts.

The keys to successful writing are twofold: *discovering* our purpose and *being* on-purpose in everything we do. Discovering and being must be intentional. If we are to be successful, they cannot be accidental, incidental, or occasional.

Each writer's purpose might differ, depending on genre, market, and audience. And how we implement that purpose might change as we develop as writers and even as we age. We fulfill our purpose by setting goals, but purpose is more than goals. Goals are merely mileposts on the road to fulfilling our purpose. And purpose finds its highest fulfillment not in merely being published but in having helped our readers in some way—informing, entertaining, or persuading them.

Our purpose remains constant even when we face problems with our writing or suffer rejection. Having purpose causes us to see our problems not as setbacks but as opportunities to grow, improve, and discover creative solutions. As Anton Chekov wrote, "You must once and for all give up being worried about success and failures. Don't let that concern you. It's your duty to go on working steadily day by day, quite steadily, to be prepared for mistakes, which are inevitable, and for failures."

I *discovered* my purpose long ago, but I struggle with *staying* on-purpose. Life has so many distractions to knock us off-purpose. We get busy living. Spouses, kids, bills, and errands demand our time and energy.

"The trick," Harland Ellison declared, "is not to *become* a writer, it is to *stay* a writer. Day after day, year after year, book after book. And for that, you must keep on working, even when it seems beyond you."

We must prioritize. What is most important? What will help—or hinder—the fulfillment of our purpose?

Staying on-purpose requires determination, perseverance, diligence, investment, focus, good judgment, and a commitment to continued growth and development. But these requirements do not demand perfection.

We should periodically ask and answer several key questions.

1. What *is* our purpose?
2. What motivates our writing?
3. What means will fulfill our purpose, and who are we serving by it?
4. What are we doing to fulfill our purpose?

Writing is often a solitary task, but to become and remain an on-purpose writer, we need what Napoleon Hill termed a “mastermind group.” This group of people will not only praise us when we get an acceptance or have our work published but also be honest and straightforward enough to tell us when our writing stinks, when we need to sit down and write rather than just *talk about* doing it, and when we are off-purpose.

Every time you flip a light switch on or off, think about your writing. What is your purpose for writing? Are you on-purpose or off-purpose at this moment? If you’re not on-purpose, what is keeping you from being on-purpose and fulfilling it? What can you do to get back on-purpose?

Focusing on those questions will help us become and remain on-purpose writers.