

Quote Unquote: Constance Hale Describes Seven Stages of Manuscript Grief

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Constance Hale is a writer, editor and teacher. Her business card says scribe.

By Robbie Dingeman

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Originally from Mokulē'ia, Constance Hale graduated from Punahou School, Princeton University and earned a master's degree from the University of California, Berkeley. She has worked at the San Francisco Examiner, Wired magazine, and written three books on language. (Sin and Syntax sold 100,000 copies.) She splits her time between O'ahu and the Bay area. And she dances "a damned good hula."



PHOTO: Elisa Pelayo

EVERY PERSON is a writer. We all want to write. We all have the capacity to write. We all have the capacity to be creative. It's often not encouraged.

WE ARE THE SPECIES on the planet that gets to do this thing. It's very much a part of who we are as beings, as souls, the desire to communicate, to express what we have inside. That is just part of being human.

I ALWAYS wrote well, but I never planned to be a writer. I really wanted to be a doctor. And then I took chemistry at Princeton and realized that was out of the question.

IT WAS VERY HARD to have grown up on the North Shore of O'ahu and to all of a sudden be at Princeton. I started writing just to survive. I felt so different from everyone else. I felt so lonely in a way, in my own spirit. Writing was a thing that I loved to do and it kind of saved me when I was at college.

I REALLY have felt that my kuleana as a writer is to write about this culture for those who aren't familiar with it, or who may have a wrong stereotype about it.

SO THERE'S writer's block and there's procrastination. They're different. Writer's block is, really, you cannot write, you freeze, you freak out, you have anxiety, you can't get started. There's also procrastination. You're not really blocked, you're just putting it off. Sometimes you're not ready to write. Sometimes you need to think more. Sometimes you need more research.

I HAVE this whole rap I do about the seven stages of manuscript grief.

The first draft is the easiest, because you sit down and you're so excited, you have this assignment. You're full of yourself. You start writing. It's just the vomit out.

The second, I call the backfill draft. That's where you go back and you fill all the holes.

The third is the oh-shit draft. When you actually read what you have on the page and you realize it's terrible, what were you thinking; you thought you had a story and there's no story here.

The fourth I call the Prozac draft, the deep depression draft. You think, I'm going to suffer professional embarrassment. I'm going to have to go back to graduate school and become a lawyer after all.

The fifth, I call the hard slog. you have to just keep working. You have to show up every day, keep moving your pencil across the page, keep typing into the screen. It will get better. Have faith.

The sixth is the something-clicks draft. You write a sentence and you like it. You sort of follow it. You start to understand the voice.

And No. 7 is the pure-play draft, you just go, and you're just polishing the sentences. And that's the point at which I show it to someone.

Did you know? The third Mokulē'ia Writers Retreat Nā Wahi Ho'oulu (Places That Inspire Us) is May 3–8. Check online for more info campmokuleia.com/retreats/writers.

Read more stories by Robbie Dingeman