

Interview with editor

# John Adamus



## The Writer Next Door

is creating storytelling advice, analysis, and commentary

Location **USA**

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## Ingredients

- Editor
- Writer

## Preparation

### 1. Artistic Weapon of Choice:

Words. For a long time it was just written words, since I don't always like the sound of my own voice in recordings. But since I started doing streams and weekly recordings that I don't have to listen back to, I've started to add verbal artistic weapons as well. But it's always going to be words.

### 2. Was your childhood particularly creative, or was there a singular event/book/movie that sparked your interest in writing and editing?

My childhood was creative, but not writing or editing initially. I remember playing with a lot of toys, imagining different dramas and adventures to mirror what I watched on TV. Someone on TV jumps off a roof, and the next afternoon, all my Star Wars action figures have to jump off a roof for one reason or another.

I can't remember what it was specifically that got me interested in writing, I can't think it was a specific book, but I remember there was a feeling. I liked (and still do) the idea that someone wrote a story so that someone else could read it, and reading that story would make them happy. I wanted to have the ability to be creative and make other people

happy. That probably says a lot more about my childhood than it does my ability to write.

As for editing, I fell into that entirely because it was something I learned in school, something I was traumatized about in school, and wanted to figure out how to do it for other people but without the shame or terror or panic that I had to go through. Maybe that's just a different way of saying I wanted to make someone else happy, but editing quickly became a fascination and obsession, like discovering how a machine works.

### 3. Do you experiment with other art forms and media?

I do my own sound design and sound editing. I worked in radio for a little while and enjoyed sitting at a workstation and crafting sound effects and clips. This was back in the late razor-blade-and-tape days where early digital was nothing like today, but I liked seeing that relationship between my doing a thing and there being a direct end result.

I'd love to be able to draw, I envy artists quite a bit, and I like art, but I don't have any facility for it or enough patience with myself to develop my own skills.

I always thought my friends who could draw as kids were wizards, because I couldn't draw a straight line without help.

### 4. Who/what are your influences? (Writers, music, butts etc.)

For a long time I've been influenced by people who maybe weren't the best people despite being the best at what

they did. I think I still am, frankly. Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Rex Stout, Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Vincent Van Gogh all left fingerprints on me growing up. They were guys to emulate in some ways and to marvel at in others. Yes, they weren't perfect people, but I thought their imperfections were the cost of their talent. Whatever they were good at, the better they were at it, the more there was some kind of flaw to offset it but not undo it. Just to ... temper it. Addictions, mental illness, anger, depression, controversy, there was always this element of their lives that got tacked onto describing them: "A great talent, but..." and I think for me that made them more attractive and influential. I grew up being told and learning that you had to be perfect or else you weren't deserving of love, care, or attention, that you were at best a nuisance and at worst a source of shame if you did anything less than perfect, but here were these creative titans who were incredibly imperfect and they seemed to be defying the "rules" I had as a kid.

#### Recent broadcasts



**A Conversation About Failure and Creat...**  
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Now, as an adult, I'm influenced by a lot of differently famous or differently known people. Revolutionaries. Rebels. Punks. Thinkers. Fred Hampton. Alan

Watts. Emma Goldman. Raymond Heenan. Obadiah Holmes. Peter Kropotkin. It's less about being perfect or imperfect to get loved and now more about having that independence and passion and clarity in your art and for your art. I'm not that kid trying to get loved, I'm a guy trying to do something that makes a difference.

**5. Do you have a day job or are you able to live off your work?**

I make my entire living off coaching and editing. It's not a great living like how I grew up as a kid in an upper class home that pretended to be middle class so that my father wouldn't feel guilty about how superior he felt to other people, but at least now I know how I keep the lights on and the cats fed and I won't have to go back to a job where I tuck my shirt in and pretend like I'm interested in people's towels or couches or lamps. I do not miss any of those day jobs.

**6. How has business been since Covid hit?**

Initially, there was a huge surge in work. More people were home, more people were trying to figure out how to balance their work and their home and their creativity, so I had more people to talk to and more work to do and it was a good few months. But, because capitalism is a monster and the system sees people as disposable fuel, people had to trade off their creativity and passions and interests to keep their jobs and feed themselves. It's one of the reasons why I started streaming, to have more to do, and have an ability to bring in some income while talking. The pandemic

radically changed my business by adding more dimensions to it.

**7. If you weren't an editor, what is another career path you may have taken?**

I love this question. When I was younger, and once I was done being crushed by learning I could not be Indiana Jones, I wanted to study law and be Matlock. The rules for how things work have always fascinated me and there's something about the depth of knowledge a lawyer may have that I still spend a lot of time thinking about. I'm sure anyone who spends that many years studying a thing learns a lot about it, but to me, there's a huge difference between studying something like the law and studying something like writing. One isn't more valid than the other, but law is way more complex to me. I still think about finding some online education in the law if I ever walked away from helping writers. I would want to be a lawyer in a hoodie.

**8. Do you have a studio or office space? Can you show us what it looks like? Any tips on sorting/organizing or are you of the mindset that creation comes from chaos like myself?**

I've had dedicated studio spaces before. They became workshops and and explosions of cables and half-completed projects. I learned a few years ago that without some structure and limitations, I'll fill a space and clutter a space and get in my own way far more than I'll succeed. When I had to sell all that stuff off so I could buy groceries and pay bills, I promised myself I'd never tie myself down to a separate building when a separate room from where I sleep would do just fine.

The recent iteration of my entire workspace looks like this:



Everything on one long stretch of a desk in an unfinished room. Just enough gear to do all the things I need to do, none of the distractions of 20 half-finished things screaming my failures at me instead of my successes. I would love to have more material, to have carpeting, to have sound panels that actually stick on the wall for more than an hour or two, to have higher quality gear I wouldn't have to rent or make trades for. I'd love to not have this and show you something better so that you'd think I was way more polished or successful, but this is where I work every day - amid cables and toys and tea and endless notes.

**9. Would a successful editor such as yourself have advice for other editors or writers trying to make it?** When I first

read this question, you need to know I laughed. I would not consider myself successful. Yes I can edit a book and make enough money to buy food and stay warm or dry, but I don't think I'm successful. I'm good at what I do, but the way the industry appraises success, you'd have to look at the people who either grift or who churn out work with less depth. They're the ones I don't see struggling for attention online or for work. I think they're successful. I'd love to be them minus the mediocre work or the false hope. Maybe I spend too much time thinking about how lopsided all that becomes and I could instead think about just doing the work and "playing the game" and I'd be more popular, but I wouldn't be me.

If you're an editor, or you want to be an editor, here are the three best things I can tell you:

1. Yes, what you do matters. There are going to be loads of people who swear they don't need editing, and they'll have all different kinds of excuses or reasons why they don't want an editor, but there are going to be people out there who need what you provide. It's a vital talent and skill.

2. Practical always beats technical. It's way more important that you can explain to someone what's wrong, why it's wrong, and how they can make it better than it is for you to cite particular lines from the CMOS at people. If you want to help people, you need to be able to turn the rules and the errors you flag into practical advice they can do something about.

3. If you've done your job well, you've made the writer better. Not just on that one line on that one page, but you've given them something they'll remember for the next line on the next page and all the lines and pages thereafter. Your work is invisible but critical. Don't get bogged down in the trappings of the job title, go help writers.

**10. Do you have advice for artists looking to get on book covers?**

Yes. Stop working for free. Right now. Just stop it. Don't work for exposure. Exposure is for film and for dying in the 1800s. I'm not saying you need to jack up your rates and price yourself out of the field, but if you're getting started, the two best tools you have at your disposal are your portfolio (have multiple pieces, make them easily accessible) and your ability to produce work on a deadline for money.

If you don't let people know you offer something, how are they going to know to come to you for it? And since what you do takes work (it's amazing how you take something empty and fill it, don't forget) you should be paid for that work. It's completely understandable to be afraid to attach a price to your work because to you it's just moving a pen or a brush or a mouse or whatever, but to someone who can't do it, you're basically conjuring something into existence. That's valuable so it's not bad to ask for at least \$250 for it.

And it gets easier to talk about money and pricing the more you do it and the

more you do it openly with other people who are doing it. You might always feel like you're "just" an artist the way I feel I'm "just" an editor or coach sometimes, but to someone on the other end of the conversation you're doing the thing they can't and they need you. And you need to eat so they need to sign that contract and pay that invoice.

**11. Do you work to a strict schedule each day or week? Or is it more of a fluid process?**

For a very long time I worked 7 days a week, 10 to 14 hours a day with the rest of my time devoted to anything and everything so removed from work. It was a very extreme ends-of-the-spectrum kind of existence. What it led me to was a really unhealthy but hedonistic desperate lifestyle where I chased happiness and courted disappointment. I had loads of discipline but my expectations of myself and my time and my work were Himalayan and I was coming at everything entirely the wrong way. There was a cycle of working to the point of burnout then barely recovering then working more over and over, all trying to "win" or "earn" some longer stretch of restoration that I'd honestly never give myself. It sucked.

I tried working whenever and wherever and it was too undisciplined for me. I found too many excuses and distractions wherever I looked and I suffered for it. My work wasn't as good, I didn't feel as good, it wasn't the right fit for me.

Now I work 5 days a week, somewhere



between 8 and 12 hours a day, punctuated in a few spots with an hour or more break. I take weekends off. I try to not even go near the desk for those two days, but invariably I end up there to take some notes or watch something or plan the week ahead.

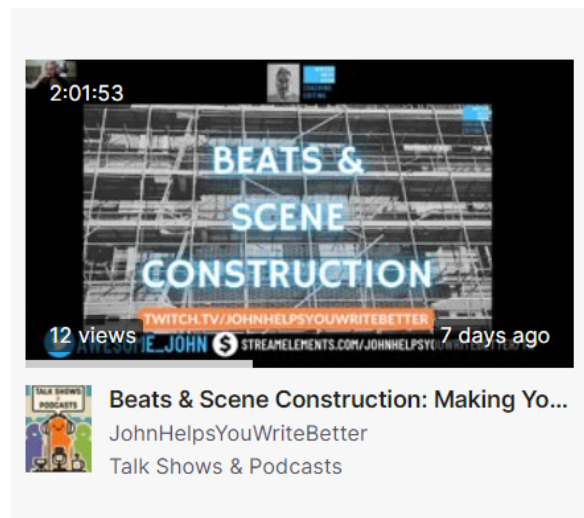
For a long time I thought that if I didn't work so many hours, I wouldn't get paid so much, and that makes sense if I was still at the mall selling towels because it was an hourly wage. But now, and I kind of can't believe I'm figuring this out in my mid-forties, it's really apparent that I'm not technically paid by the hour, so that Sunday afternoon where I'm away from the desk isn't some kind of failure, it's some kind of salvation.

**12. Can you tell us what you're currently working on/what you most recently produced?**

I just wrapped up 3 books that will be out in 2023 and I just finished recording a 40-something-minute long rewrite for a terrible movie from 2015. I've got plans later this week to stream a few things, including a Writers Chat, and at some point I should probably go back and finish the two-thirds complete newsletter I've been writing a sentence or two at a time. One of the things I love about this job is also something I fight over: work can be a kraken, long tentacled and eager to pull you into the depths, so there's always a fight to keep doing one thing at a time to its conclusion.

**13. In what ways have you failed? And what have your failures taught you?**

This is the question I've been waiting for. I have failed so many times in so many ways. I've had public failures and private failures. I've had failures end up online, I've had failures end up in industry gossip. I've lost relationships and friendships and business partnerships. I've ruined good things for myself and others. I've had great opportunities and turned them down over stupid short-term interests that I knew on some level wouldn't pan out. But for a long time that was what I did: build a very tall pedestal, fly too close to the sun, come crashing back down.



What failure continues to teach me is that there's a difference between failure and perfection. Things don't have to be perfect - there is no perfect software or tool or way to record or what to record or chair or best way to do whatever. There isn't the perfect working relationship or perfect community or perfect class or "one true way" to do anything. You build your toolkit for success out of broken things and repaired things and functional things and in the end, you can get where you want to be if you're willing to show

up and try and do your best to change what isn't working.

I live with the pain and memories of failures. Of people who walked away. Of deals ended. Of plans stopped. Of dumb choices I made because I was impatient or scared or hurting or bored. I live with the ghosts and echoes of so many what-ifs and what-could-have-beens. I think so much of life is lived between balancing time and focus between them and making your life the sort of space you feel proud and loved and heard in.

I would not have learned that without suffering the failures I have.



#### 14. You have Patreon, discord, editing and twitch streams. How do you balance it all?

Do I balance it all? I guess maybe I do. Scheduling helps. Knowing that there's a stream on this day at this time and a recording to do on that day, so that the rest of the time and effort can be mapped around it. I would love to give recording and streaming more time, I am just now at a point where I'm starting to see consistent returns and it's giving me the impression that things are growing but at the same time it's hard to not think that there's something maybe getting less attention.

A big thing for me was changing how I thought about work. I used to say that Patreon was there to pay the bills, and that I made those recordings in a strange transactional way, as if me watching Star Wars "paid for" someone giving me \$2 dollars a month. Moving away from thinking about how many minutes I'd have to talk to pay the electric bill and thinking about more in terms of talking about a movie because it can help a writer write something better frees me up to say more about the things I wanted to say and to do so in ways I want to. Now I don't feel like I'm breaking some rule or offending some customer when I talk about social exploitation or copaganda or an actor's toxic harmful views.

Streams remain a bit of an anxiety engine for me, a blend of thrill and fear where I get to work on the fly with pressure and a spotlight on me, but also a time and place where I don't feel as alone or detached from actual people who I can actually help. I know the effect they've had on me has changed both how I can explain and communicate what I need to while also making it way way clearer to me that I should be operating in one direction over another.

Sometimes I do feel so out of balance, so lopsided and so overwhelmed that I'm sure I'm either making things ten times harder for myself or I'm so far from where I need to be that I'll never get to that point where people know what I do and why it may be what they need.

**15. Is there anything you wish your clients knew?**

I've struggled answering this. I wrote two or three different responses and discarded them. I wish they knew how much I believed in them and know that they're going to be great authors if they keep going. I wish they knew that I'm grateful for all of them, not just financially (thanks capitalism) but because without them I don't know what I'd do. They're people I admire, and they're people I'm lucky enough to help get wherever they want to go.

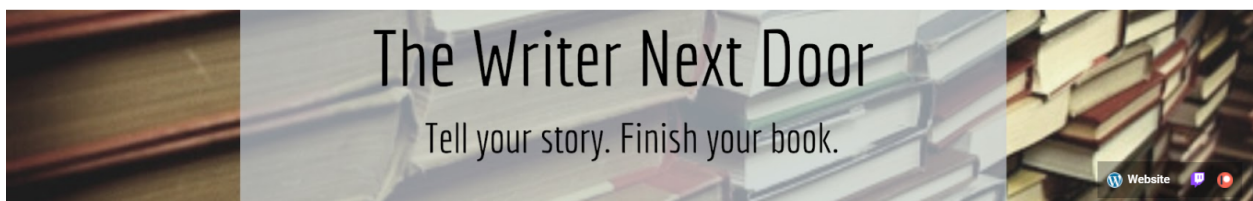
If that's too melodramatic an answer, here's something practical: I wish they knew the physical and mental exhaustion that editing and coaching can be. Just because the job isn't the same as writing doesn't make it less taxing than writing. The anxieties and frustrations and feelings are different, but still present. It takes time to do this, and I wish I was far faster than I am, but I think I traded speed for quality.

**16. How many cats do you have and what are their names?** There are 2 cats: Luna and Linus. I like them a lot. Sometimes one more than the other.**Upcoming Shows:**

*I stream on Twitch every Monday and Wednesday night. Monday nights I teach something, Wednesday night I do the Writers Chat, a full-on live Q&A where anyone writing anything can come and ask any question. The door is always open, there's no cover charge or hoop to jump through, you just show up either day and get help.*

<http://twitch.tv/johnhelpsyouwritebetter>

*Once a week my Patreon supporters get hours of advice and audio commentaries as part of Watch Movies, Write Better, which I guess is a podcast just for them, or maybe it's a produced thing, I never know what to call it. But here's how it works: For \$2 a month (or \$5 or \$10 if you want more stuff), you get audio for a movie - literally I watch the movie and talk over and through it, pausing periodically to point out different story structures and problems. Not to make fun of it, not to say it's all bad in that faux-outrage way, but to show how a story can be made or made better Then I talk about how it could be made better, what changes would it have to make using the ingredients on-hand, and then walk the reader through what a different version would be. Like everything else I produce, it blends education with humor with practical advice. <http://patreon.com/johnhelpsyoucreate>*



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