

Freelance Copywriting and Editing Transcript

This is a transcript of the seminar, edited slightly for easy reading. You can find the audio version, slide pack and worksheet at www.writershuddle.com/seminars/apr2015.

Ali: Hi, I'm Ali Luke and this is the April seminar for Writers' Huddle: Freelance Copywriting and Editing.

I'm here with Linda Angér, who runs The Write Concept, which she founded in the year 2000. And Linda offers quite a wide range of services to clients. So though we're going to focus mainly on copywriting and editing, we'll touch a little bit on some different areas like public speaking.

And if you take a look at Linda's site, www.thewriteconcept.com, you can see the range of different things she offers there.

So... how do I know Linda? You might remember that in January's seminar we had Barry Demp as our guest speaker, and I worked with Barry for about three years as his writing coach and his editor. And Barry has become a very good friend, and he was one of my favourite clients.

But when I was pregnant with Nick, I made the tough decision to stop doing direct client work to free up some more time for other projects, in particular being a mum!

This has given me more time to focus on Writers' Huddle, which is great, and I hope you guys will reap the benefits of that. But it did mean that I had to abandon Barry, so I was really thrilled to be able to leave Barry in Linda's very capable hands and to know that he's being well taken care of.

And as I handed work over to Linda, I was really impressed not only by her editorial skills – she has a very keen eye for detail – but also by her wealth of experience in the business of writing.

She's been running The Write Concept for 14 years now. And I know Linda has some really great things to share with us today, so I'm really looking forward to digging into those. So welcome, Linda.

Linda: Thank you very much, Ali, I'm honoured to be a part of this.

Ali: I'm really thrilled that you've agreed to be here. So you founded The Write Concept back in the year 2000, which I guess in internet years is quite a long time ago. How has the business changed since then?

Linda: I want to start by saying that... I started the company in 2000, but I'd been in the marketing and communication world since before you were born, Ali. So this was a natural progression for me.

I was actually laid off from a corporate position due to downsizing, and decided that I'm not going to let a corporation have that kind of power over me anymore. And that's when I started my company. I come from a long line of entrepreneurs, five generations of small business owners, so it was a natural thing.

Things have changed dramatically in the last 15 years. Internally and externally. In 2000, the internet was still somewhat new, social media had not yet been born, and print was still very much alive. My focus back then was almost entirely on writing marketing material, so brochures, postcards, advertising layout.

Today, my focus is still marketing but now it's primarily internet-based, and I'm writing website content – LinkedIn profiles are really, really big, and the style of writing has changed as well. Because back in the day it was more formal than it is today, and, I have to say this, people had the patience to let a story unfold.

Ali: Attention spans are shorter – I think with Twitter and Facebook and everything, we can't deny that.

I'm thinking back in 2000 I was still in school, and to be honest, it hadn't even occurred to me that there could be a career in something like blogging. I mean, I think maybe blogs just about existed, but as you say, the internet was still really quite new and perhaps still seen as a little bit of a geeky, techie thing.

Entrepreneurship and Job Security in the 21st Century

So I'm fascinated that you've come from this really long line of entrepreneurs. It sounds like you had not only the great marketing background but also that business background and that drive toward doing your own thing, and as you say, having not just the freedom but also the security, in many ways, of working for yourself. If one client goes under then, hey, there's however many more clients you've got on the books. Which for me has been a wonderful advantage as well.

I worked just for a couple of years in the 9-5 world, and quite early in my time at the company I was in, which was IT, a couple of programmers were made redundant. This was a 15-20 person company. It just kind of struck me that it's really not that secure any more to have a full-time job.

Linda: It's not. You know, it's interesting because in my parents' generation, which would be like your grandparents' generation, a job with a corporation was the ultimate. You had job security. But my generation, we got into the whole downsizing and everything changed.

And to me, there is no such thing as job security. Even in a corporation. So owning my own company, and certainly I had the advantage of seeing my grandfather and my father run their businesses and to learn from just observing what my father experienced, to apply that to my own business – it's a completely different world, and we have to learn to make our world, and make our life, and make our living, ourselves. And we can't depend on another company to do that.

That said, when you own a freelance business, you have clients, and those clients can pull the plug on you at any moment. So being able to maintain strong relationships, and continue to build new relationships at the same time, becomes very important.

A Broad or Narrow Range of Services?

Ali: Yeah - so, with that in mind, something that I mentioned in the introduction about The Write Concept is that you offer quite a broad range of services to clients. So you're not just relying on clients looking for, say, editing, and nothing else.

When I started out in freelancing, I think I went with quite a broad range initially, then I narrowed down and specialised a bit. And I think there are different ways of doing this.

But for writers who are just getting started with freelancing, which I think is where most people in Writers' Huddle are currently at – taking their first steps – would you recommend specialising in one area, so say, just doing editing or just doing copywriting, or is it better to offer a broader range of services like you do?

Linda: In the beginning I focused only on copywriting. I was fortunate to have a friend who had a public relations firm, who allowed me to work part-time for her to learn media relations, and how to write an effective press release, and how to interact with the media.

Now, even that is completely different now because back then we would write a press release, fax it, and then call the reporter. Today it's all done on the internet.

I also had a brother-in-law who was a book designer in New York City. So I began to do brochures with his help – now, this was a couple of years into the business. And then in 2006 he pulled me in on a huge three-book deal, three coffee-table-type books that were 200 pages apiece, and I edited the manuscripts, did all the typesetting, chose the photos, wrote the photo captions, laid out all three books. And that's when the graphic design part of my business came to life.

Working in Partnership with Other Businesses

One thing I've learned is, never try to sell yourself as a one-stop shop. Find your greatest strength in the beginning, and you develop relationships with those that are in complementary businesses who can help you grow.

I say this because someone would hire me to write their brochure content, and then they'd say, well, can you lay it out too? And at first I would have needed a graphic designer to do that, but then in talking to my brother-in-law about his business, and he said to me, "Go buy this program – Adobe InDesign." Adobe had just released InDesign, it was the first version. And it was inexpensive.

So I bought it and he trained me in InDesign. And that's how I became a book layout person. But it wasn't my primary focus. So I started doing brochures that way, and I would create these brochures and I'd email a PDF to him, and then he'd call me up and say, "No, move this paragraph down, and add a photo here, and do this and do that' with all these different typesetting stuff. That's how I learned that.

As my skills improved, and as the world changed, I added people to my team. There are still a lot of things that I don't do personally, **but when someone comes to me and says 'Can you do X?', I say, absolutely, yes. Because I know people in every complimentary industry there is.** I know people that I can pull in for whatever I need and still bill it under my company.

But in the beginning, you focus on the thing that you're strongest at, and then start to build those relationships with other people. I became a book editor along the way, and also took classes in and became a book indexer, because that's a science, how to index a book. And very few people know how to do that properly. So it's not something I do on a daily basis, but if I'm editing a book that would require an index, I can do it.

Ali: That's definitely a skill that I wish we'd had for Barry's book. I tried to do the index... I don't think I did it the best possible way!

Copywriting and Content Writing

I'm interested that you started out with copywriting, because my sense is that with both copywriting and/or content writing, if you'd consider them as different things, that the market is just getting bigger and bigger. There are so many websites and companies who need copy for their site, for their emails, for their blog, what have you.

I've come across slightly different definitions of copywriting and content writing, and related terms, and I wondered if you could just define for us what you would call copywriting and what you would call content writing.

Linda: You know, that's an interesting question, Ali, because in many regards they're the same thing. It's words on a screen, or words on paper, right.

Copywriting as a term came into fashion in the 1950s. This was just the big mad world heyday of advertising in newspapers, which employed copy editors as well as copywriters.

Content is a term that's been born of the internet age.

To me copywriting is an art, because it employs the psychology of language as well as appropriate grammar and engaging terminology.

Where content, in my mind, is just a broad indicator of the stuff that fills up a website. That gives search engines something to search. There are no content police or people who would in years past be called copy editors. So there's a lot of blah, blah, blather out there that is poorly written and generally unedited.

So for me, content is sort of like the poor relative of copywriting, and that's not to say that there's not people out there creating great content – there are. But a lot of what I see on the internet would never make it past a copy editor at the local newspaper. Does that make sense?

Ali: That makes sense. I think it's a fair point. To be honest, I've certainly come across websites where they're very focused on content in the sense of having content for search engines and putting in lots of keyword terms. My impression is that this sort of approaches being devalued, because search

engines like Google are becoming considerably more sophisticated and they're discouraging people from just stuffing keywords into content or having very thin, generic content that's just designed to try and get some traffic in.

But there's an awful lot out there on the internet where I'm amazed that anybody's ever been paid to write it. Yet obviously people *are* paid to write both website copy and blog posts, and email newsletters, and you know, all the stuff that people do read online.

Getting into Copywriting or Content Writing

What advice would you have for someone who kind of wants to get into this area, so you know, they're interested in either writing slightly more traditional copy for a landing page, or you know, advertisement copy, or they're interested in writing blogposts. How would they get started?

Linda: Again I will say, develop your strengths, and promote it like crazy. Study the craft of writing from a reputable place, and join local organisations. I don't know about Great Britain but here in the US we have a Chamber of Commerce in every city, you have something like that that's an organisation that's meant to promote local businesses.

Ali: Yeah, we have similar organisations.

Building Your Network

Linda: So join an organisation like that, because they always have things going on in your local community where you can meet other people and interact, and start to become known. I'm a member of three different Chambers of Commerce at this point in time, just because my network has really expanded.

The other thing is that there's also Business Network International, it's called BNI, which is a large organisation, there are chapters everywhere in the world, and it's a great place to meet people in the local business community, and also to learn how to network effectively.

So those are some of the things that I'd say if you're trying to look for how to build a business – those are two places I would suggest you go. Does this answer your question, Ali, or were you looking from a different perspective?

Ali: No, I think that's really good, and I agree that networking is perhaps something that writers find a bit of a challenge. I know that I'm somebody who naturally is perfectly happy spending lots of time in a room on my own, writing. Making the effort to get out and meet people is sometimes a little bit of a struggle, or outside my comfort zone.

But I know a lot of the best writing gigs I've had, or the best contacts I've had, have been when I've met people at conferences. **Even if we had an initial relationship, say, on Twitter, there's definitely something that's different about forming those friendships and those relationships face to face and not purely in the online world.**

I suppose one thing I was thinking about in terms of copywriting and content writing for blogs is how you get started if you've written a little bit for print, or if you've written at school or university, but you've not really got any clips or any testimonials. Beyond just networking with people and getting to know people, what else can you do at that stage?

Developing Your Craft

Linda: Beyond networking? Wow, that's really - that's a challenging one. Because to me, 90% of my business comes from networking. And/or referrals from people that I've worked with in the past.

You have to get out there, you have to write. Start a blog, and just get writing about the things you know and the things you're passionate about, but make sure that you're writing with clarity, you're writing with focus, and that your grammar and spelling are correct, because that's a big problem in today's world.

So just focus on your craft, and start developing what relationships you can. Even if you're not one to get out and go to something like a Chamber of Commerce or a networking group, learn to do that first of all, but also start building relationships online.

Reaching Out and Making Connections

LinkedIn is it for business. Facebook is a lot of fun sometimes, but LinkedIn is where you really need to be to start building business relationships. Look for who are the editors of the magazines you want to write for, who are the bloggers in your industry, if you have a particular niche. And connect with them, and follow them, and learn from them.

Ali: Writers can sometimes be reluctant to reach out. But I know as a blogger, if I get an email from a new blogger, or a tweet from somebody who wants me to take a look at their blog, I'm usually very happy to.

I know that I'm busy and a lot of bloggers and a lot of writers are busy, but it never hurts to ask. The worst that someone can say is "No, sorry, I don't have the time." And that's not the worst thing in the world. So do reach out there, and definitely try and build those relationships. I think you're right that LinkedIn is an excellent space for forming business connections.

Dealing with Feedback

Linda: And I agree with that, but I do want to piggyback on that and say, as a writer and particularly in the beginning, you have to have a thick skin. If you ask someone to review your blog and they pan it, you can't boo-hoo. You have to understand that.

When people give you feedback, whether you like that feedback or not, that's valid feedback. And you need to look at what you've done, what you've written, and ask, where is the grain of truth in what they are saying? How can I make this better? Because there's always room for improvement, and we have to learn to speak to the understanding of our readers. Does that make sense?

Ali: It does. And I can understand why a lot of writers fear rejection, fear criticism. You know, it's never comfortable to have somebody say that your blogpost isn't working, or the design of your blog isn't right, or this needs to be changed in your writing.

We'd all love it if, when we handed over our work to a friend or a writing peer or a mentor, they'd say "This is perfect! Don't change a single word." But to be

honest, the way you grow is through that feedback, and through sometimes criticism, and rejection is frankly just part of being a writer.

Linda: Right. And there's a huge difference between "I don't like what you said" and "I'm not clear – the way you said this isn't working." So there's a difference between an editor's eye, that says "This works", and someone who's being judgmental and saying "Well, I don't agree with you."

So you have to look at that standpoint too, that just because someone doesn't agree with your point doesn't mean that your writing is wrong or that you've written it badly.

But feedback you want is from people who will say "wow, your opening paragraph was kind of blah, and it wasn't until the third paragraph that I got engaged," or someone who might say – I know this is referring more to fiction-type stuff – "there's just no life to that character".

When you ask for feedback be prepared to get whacked in the face. **And understand the difference between criticism of what you're saying and criticism of how you said it.**

Ali: I think that's a really important point, because sometimes people will react to your work in slightly odd ways, because of their particular issue, or some hangup that they have.

I've found it most helpful to try and get feedback from several people at once, because if three people all say the same thing, then chances are you need to make some changes. Even if you think, "that paragraph was perfectly clear, how could anyone not understand it?" ... if three of your readers say "I didn't really get what you were writing here," then it's about the reader's response and you need to adjust.

Linda: Right. And then I'd also caution people that it's handy to read your work, or have your family and your friends read your work and give you feedback, but they're not the professionals.

So if you're really looking for feedback on the effectiveness of what you're writing, go to the professional people. Find a true editor, or find – there are people who make a living as what they call beta readers. Find those people,

because your friends and your family are always going to say, "Oh, that's so nice, you did such a good job", they're not going to tell you the truth if they don't like it, because they don't want to hurt your feelings.

So if you really are truly interested in getting appropriate feedback that can help you become a better writer, and a better communicator, then you need to find the people outside of your immediate world, who can give you independent feedback.

Ali: I think that's so important, because you're right that our loved ones hopefully just want to say nice things to us. They want to preserve the peace, they want to be encouraging, and if they're not writers or editors themselves they may find it difficult to pinpoint what might be a problem.

It may actually seem to them that the piece is perfectly all right, but somebody with a little bit more expertise in terms of writing could tell you about all the grammatical mistakes, or they could tell you the structure is a little bit off.

Linda: Right.

Ali: We mentioned a few minutes ago about really getting the basics right, you know, having a good grasp of grammar and spelling, being able to structure things, being able to write in an appropriate tone, whether it's a persuasive tone for something which is advertising or what have you. And I think nailing those basics is definitely important.

Within Writers' Huddle, certainly what I've seen of members' work is that we've got the basics down pretty well, and it's sometimes just a case of fine-tuning and just getting used to writing for different formats and different purposes, and meeting the needs of your different clients.

Writing for Print vs Writing for the Web

I wanted to ask this particularly, Linda, because you have been running The Write Concept for a decade and a half now, and I know that you've also done quite a lot of work for both print and for the web. **Is there a difference between writing for print, which maybe we think of as a slightly more traditional form of copywriting, and then writing for the web?**

Linda: Well, I think that they are really different animals. I think that print, for the most part, is more traditional, but I'd also say that in many regards it's more elegant and flowing, where writing for the web is more rapid-fire and bare-bones.

So you need to understand your audience. When I work with clients I get very specific in asking them a lot of questions about who is their audience, who are they targeting. When people say "well, anybody who ... or everybody who (fill in the blank after that)", I pull out an old copy of the telephone book, which no one has any more, and I say "Please show me where 'everybody' or 'anybody' is listed in this phone book." Because that's too broad a context.

So I give my clients an exercise and say, I want you to create a person. If your average customer is a 45-year-old, married woman, housewife with two kids and drives a Mercedes-Benz, then write that all down. Let's draw a picture. What does she look like? Where are the places that she hangs out? All of these kind of things. And that gives us a very targeted view of the person to whom we are speaking.

Clear, Concise, Engaging Web Writing

When you're writing for the web, you have to remember that you have ten seconds to grab people's attention and maybe another ten seconds to hold it before they decide whether they're going to click off and go somewhere else. **So you really need to be extremely clear, extremely concise, and very, very engaging.** With print, you have the luxury, I will say, of being able to develop a character or a story, or your program, in a more relaxed fashion. Does that make sense?

Ali: Yeah. I think when we're reading print we'll more likely be sitting down with a magazine and a mug of coffee or something. We haven't got ten browser tabs open and Skype in one window and Twitter and Facebook ... When people read online they are just distracted, and as you say it does need to be that rapid-fire and really pared-back sort of writing.

Linda: Mm hm. You know, there's that old detective – "Just the facts, ma'am, nothing but the facts." And that's sort of where you have to go. On the internet, depending on what you're writing about – if you're blogging as a

fiction writer or microfiction or whatever it is, or just a casual blog – it doesn't have to be that rapid-fire, but if your web writing is for website pages for a business, you need to know you have a very precise point, and get to that point very, very quickly.

Ali: I think that's really true. Because often we'll be looking up information online, we don't want to read through 20 paragraphs about the company's history. You want to know, what's their phone number, or where do I order their products?

People are looking for specific information. And as a writer you just want to give that information as quickly and succinctly as you can online.

Linda: One of the mistakes that beginning writers make a lot, both in fiction and in non-fiction, is they feel like they need to set the scene, and so they start with a bunch of backstory that really doesn't matter, or that can be woven in in bits and pieces as the story goes.

But as a writing coach myself I taught people, no, I don't care if it's business or fiction, start with action. And whether it's on screen or on paper, you have to dump the reader right into the middle of the action in order to make them feel like they're part of it. And that's how you engage people.

Ali: OK, that's extremely good advice. It's what my fiction editor told me, with my first novel, was to get into the scene late and get out early. Don't have two paragraphs setting up the scene and then winding it down at the end. Just get the interesting bit in the middle.

Linda: Beginning writers, I mean, maybe for your own sake you need to write down all that backstory. But once you've gotten that out of the way, then throw it away. In my writing courses back in college, a lot of the professors used to say 'kill your darlings' – have you ever heard that?

Ali: I have, I have.

Linda: Yeah, and I think that's critical. And sometimes even now, today, after 40 years as a professional writer ... I write a lot of poetry and I'm looking at this page and going, but I really love that line! However, I know that that line doesn't move it forward, so it's got to go.

Ali: It is tough sometimes to make those decisions. And I think this is definitely where professional, outside help is needed – an editor who basically can assist you in seeing, okay, where do those cuts need to be made? Because it can be quite hard sometimes with your own work, especially when you're starting out, and perhaps you've not had a huge amount of experience, to see, where have I given unnecessary information, where have I waffled on for three paragraphs or something?

Linda: Right. You know what, the purpose of the first sentence is to move the reader to the second sentence. The second sentence is to move the reader to the third sentence. So there should always be a sense of movement from one sentence to another, from one paragraph to another.

Learning to Edit Other People's Work

Ali: I know one big branch of The Write Concept is editing, and proofreading as well, I believe you do. And obviously editing someone's work is a very different skill from just writing the whole piece. You know, say if you're writing as a ghostwriter, it might have a similar result, but it's a different way of working.

I haven't done a huge amount of editing myself – it is something that I do offer for clients, but it's not been my primary or even one of my main strands of work. And one of the things that I think is important, but I'm not 100% sure exactly how to explain to people how to do this, is how to preserve the author's voice when you're editing their work. Especially if their natural voice is rather different from yours as a writer. How do you go about that?

Linda: **You have to consider yourself as an actor, taking on a character. You have to learn to become your character.** And I work very hard at this, because I prefer to meet with my clients face to face, or at least over a Skype video call, so that I can hear their voice and I can see their body language and their facial expressions, and it helps me understand their cadence and the fullness or finiteness of the language that they would use.

So you have to learn to listen to people not from the standpoint necessarily of understanding what they're saying, but from the standpoint of – I'm going to call it the music of their voice.

Editing for me is not a one-shot deal. It's not, okay, give me your piece and I mark up a bunch of stuff or I move a bunch of stuff around and then I send it back to you and it's done. It's a conversation.

I work very hard before I start with the first word to understand that client and, like I say, their cadence and the kind of language that they use, right from the start.

But there's always times when a client will say "well, I would never use that word." Or "that's not exactly what I meant". And so we go back and forth a few times and we work together to make it smooth and engaging and in their words and their voice. But still clear, concise and engaging.

But here again I want to mention the psychology of language. There's - are you familiar with the DISC system?

Ali: No – tell it to me!

Linda: I don't remember exactly what it's called, but if you google DISC, it's a system like Myers-Briggs that divides people into four categories of how we behave, interact and understand the world. And so when you learn about these different behavioural styles, and how people relate to each other, it can help you a lot in understanding another person's voice.

I'll give you an example. A couple of years ago I was working with a client who had a business partner. And I was doing some marketing for them. So in our first meeting, when he told me this, I said, well, tell me about your partner. Because this guy was very animated, hand gestures all over the place, just a real out-there kind of guy.

He said, well, I'm the idea guy and he's the one who takes the ideas and makes them happen. So with that one statement I understood that they were two very distinct styles of being in the world, in these two business partners, and when I put my proposal together on the project they wanted from me, I had to provide information in two different ways.

One had to be the big picture, the world is your oyster picture for the ideas guy, and then on the other hand I had to provide not minute detail but enough detail and structure to it that the nuts-and-bolts guy would get it.

So I'll go back to what I said in the beginning. Consider yourself an actor. As you are learning about your client, and starting to edit their work, you need to be in their character. So you need to learn to be an actor on paper, or on the computer screen.

Ali: I think that's a wonderful analogy. And it's interesting, this brings out something more than just finding the right voice for editing – it's also about serving your clients in a way that's a good fit for them.

I've had some clients who want to communicate everything through a task management system, I've had others who want frequent phone calls, I've had clients who are very terse by email – not rude, just they get straight to the point, they send short emails. I've had other clients who'll want to send paragraphs by email.

You just get used to working with somebody in the way that they feel comfortable and happy. And I think certainly part of running a successful writing business is being willing to be at least a little bit adaptable to different ways in which different people like to work.

As you say, some people are very big-picture, they want the whole grand scheme, and that's what inspires and drives them. Other people want the nitty-gritty detail of exactly what's going to happen when, and have a clear plan.

Linda: Exactly.

Developing Public Speaking Skills

Ali: So I just wanted to wrap up, really, with one question on public speaking. Because I know you speak to groups, not just about writing and editing but also about personal development and some other topics.

And I think that at some point most writers will find that they either want to speak in public, you know, perhaps at a conference or to build up their reputation, their expertise, in some way, or maybe they'll need to speak in public.

Say you have a book published and your publisher wants to arrange a book launch and have you read from your book. Well, you're probably not going to want to say "no, sorry, I'm too terrified!"

But public speaking can be a quite intimidating thing for writers. What tips would you have for somebody who hasn't done any public speaking before, but wants to or needs to get started?

Linda: You know, there's been studies done on this, and surveys, where they've found that people fear public speaking more than they fear death. Wow.

Ali: I guess it happens more often.

Joining Toastmasters

Linda: But the best advice I can give anyone is, join Toastmasters. Toastmasters is international, there is a club near you, I guarantee. Go to toastmasters.org and put in your country and zip code or postal code.

You can say, I want a meeting that's in the morning or the afternoon, or however it is – you can put all kinds of different options for yourself, and they'll give you a list of the clubs in your area.

It's very inexpensive. My club is \$50 every six months, \$100 a year. It's like peanuts. **It's the best organisation in the world for learning to be comfortable in front of the room, and to learn effective presentation skills.**

Tips for Reading Your Work in Public

Linda (cont): One of the worst things for me is going to a book signing, one that's associated with a reading, where the writer stands up in front of the room with their book in their hand and does this monotone presentation that doesn't engage at all. They're just reading. They're not performing.

You need to learn to perform your work. There was emotion in it when you wrote it, let that emotion be in your voice when you present it. So I say, memorise your material so you can be very effective in that. Make eye contact with every person in the room. Smile.

Being on stage has never been a frightening thing to me, because I played guitar and sang in bands from the time I was in high school up until just a few years ago. So I love being in front of the room. But I see that a lot of people find that very challenging. You need to be comfortable in being in front of the room.

And that's where networking can really help too, because those networking groups, like BNI or the Chamber, they always have opportunities for people to stand up and do a 30-second or 60-second commercial about their business or themselves. So when you focus on being a people person, even if you're not a people person, and you learn those skills, you become far more effective.

I will tell you Toastmasters has been awesome for me, because like I say, I'm not afraid to be on the stage, but what I never knew in all the speaking that I've done for years and years and years was how to put a program together with a structure and a purpose, and following a particular process.

So that's where it's been really effective for me, but for a lot of other people it would just be the opportunity to get up in front of a room full of strangers and not be frightened.

Ali: I've been along to a Toastmasters meeting as a guest, I haven't actually joined as a member, it's been one of those things that's been on my to-do list for far too long.

I was very impressed with the structure of the system, the fact that people come in with no experience and they go through a very systematic process of delivering speeches, and there's lots of support.

They have a feedback system, I believe, with something positive first, then maybe something to work on, then something positive to end with. So it's a very constructive, supportive environment. You know, no one's going to expect you to be perfect on day one.

Linda: Absolutely not, and in fact, at my Toastmasters club meeting this Monday we had a conversation about that. Because one of the men in my club has been in Toastmasters for 17 years, and has three times made it to the annual Toastmasters' international speech competition. And there are like

38,000 people across the planet who participate in this competition. So to make it to the world champion stage is a huge honour.

And this man, Jeff, in my club, has been a semifinalist three times in the last 17 years. And he stood up on Monday and did a small presentation, and he said 'um' a couple of times, which is very out of character. And that's another thing. We have someone that we call "The Wizard of Ahs", and that person's role throughout the meeting is to tabulate how many times someone says "um" or "er" or "ah" or "so, I did this" – filler word kind of things that don't really belong in a presentation. So it was very out of character for Jeff to do that.

And we ended up having a conversation about how, with Toastmasters, it's not about getting it right all the time, but it's about becoming more comfortable with our ability to hear our own speaking. We call it developing "Toastmasters' ears." So that we hear what we're going to say before we say it, and can have the control over our thoughts and our presentation and our speech to be able to sit back and be silent for a moment rather than saying "um" or something like that.

It's an awesome organisation, and we also learn a lot of leadership skills. As you said, there's all these roles going on, and everybody fills these roles at a different time, so you learn a lot about how to present and control the process of a meeting. Or in the case of what we might be discussing, how to present appropriately at a book reading and signing.

Ali: You're absolutely right when you say Toastmasters is all over the world. I think everybody in Writers' Huddle should be able to find a group that's accessible to them. If you can even go along as a guest once, I think you'll pick up a lot. And you may then be inspired to take it a bit further.

Things like copywriting and editing are skills, you learn those skills, you develop those skills, and probably for most of us in Writers' Huddle, skills like writing and editing come quite naturally. Maybe we've been writing for years and years, and we've forgotten how we learned some of the basics.

A skill like public speaking may not come naturally. Now for you, Linda, it sounds like it's just part of who you are. But for me I think I'm somewhere in

the middle. I do enjoy being in front of an audience, but I'm shaking at the knees.

So I do love it, I love the thrill of it, but it still makes me nervous. I know I do have a long way to go in terms of my skill level. I don't think I'm awful at speaking in public – I sometimes get invited back to speak again when I've done sessions! – but I do think that it's something where I could certainly be more skilled.

I think whatever stage somebody's at, you can learn to be a better public speaker, even if you're currently terrified of the whole idea. It is a skill that's learnable. And for me that was one of the great things about looking into Toastmasters, was realising that it's a skill that people learn and there's a step-by-step process. It's not like some people are just born to be amazing keynote speakers.

Linda: Right. And it's ongoing. It's a lifelong learning.

Ali: Yep. We'd probably better wrap up there, because we've packed in a lot. And I hope this will give you in the Huddle some ideas, some steps for perhaps going forward if you are looking into freelancing or getting started in freelancing, or if you're just interested in perhaps doing some non-fiction alongside your fiction writing.

If you've got questions, please leave those in the forums, I'll be happy to pass them on to Linda. And I really hope this gives you some encouragement, and some new directions. So thank you so much for joining us, Linda, this has been really wonderful.

Linda: Thank you, Ali, I have been very honoured to be part of this.