

On starting something new



Food culture writer and editor Jaya Saxena (founder-owner of Ravenous) discusses how reading your writing aloud improves it, what happens when you befriend creative folks with similar interests, and why you sometimes need to just go for it.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2743 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Collaboration](#), [Independence](#), [Money](#), [Process](#), [Success](#).

You're known for your strong voice, and you've talked a lot about how you developed that voice. I'm curious how you maintain it. I'm asking as a writer who, upon reading some of my work last year, was like, "I feel like I'm adjusting my voice for the audience rather than letting them come to me for my voice."

That is so hard and so tempting, and something I have to be actively conscious of. One thing for me is that, yes, developing my voice is something that's taken my entire career, and I hope that with every piece I write, I get better and better and find it more and more, but it takes active thought. It takes that idea of sitting down to a piece and not just being like "I'm going to write the piece" but, "What can I do here that maybe I haven't done before, or what have I done in a previous piece that I want to continue to push myself on?"

In terms of maintaining it, one of the things I always do when I find myself stuck, realizing my writing seems a bit flat, or that I'm just explaining something and not really breathing into it or letting it have life is, I pull away from the computer, and I tend to just pace around my room and try to literally talk it out as if I'm speaking to a friend. I'm not always trying to be conversational, but it helps me shake out in my head, what is the actual point I'm trying to make? And then, I can add the language on top of that.

Maintaining your voice is an act of trying to build and keep confidence whenever you can—which is a struggle, which is difficult—and trying to remind myself, I have built a career, or I have a specific voice, and it is worth it to try to do what I can do the best that I can instead of trying to mimic anyone else.

When you first started talking aloud as part of your writing process, did you have any cringe about it? Like, "I'm speaking this out loud. This is so uncomfortable," because whenever I think about doing that, I'm like "ugh," and I've never done it.

No, not really. I don't know if you've ever done this, but when I was a kid, if I would get nervous about speaking to someone else, I would almost talk out the things I would want to say in my head beforehand, so I maybe had a bit of a habit of being used to talking out my ideas.

Something I remember learning in high school that I've also used as another little craft bit is that, when you're done writing an essay, explicitly read it out loud because that is an easier way to catch more grammatical mistakes or places where you've maybe used the same word multiple times. It became easy for me to use talking aloud as part of the writing process. Part of it is that, sometimes, I talk to friends or my wife. If I'm working on a long story, I absolutely utilize people around me to be like, "Does this sound crazy? Does this make sense to you? What's going on here?"

I hear what you're saying about talking to your wife, because when I don't want to speak the sentence out loud or ideate out loud, it's because I have a housemate here, and we're friends, but that feels a little personal, whereas if I were to live with my partner, it might be like, "I can just bounce this off of you." I'm sure that level of personal comfort in your home has been a big factor.

Yeah, and also, I've always liked writing in a collaborative setting. I mean, obviously, there's part of me that loves going in my little research hole and my little writing hole, but when it comes to thinking of ideas or getting other points, I've always loved working on a team, throwing out an idea, and being like, "Is this resonating with anyone? Does anyone have any thoughts?" Often, better stories come out of that collaborative brainstorming process.

I would love to hear more about that, because yes, I've had many editors in life, but I've never been in-house at a publication.

I was at Eater for almost seven years, and recently, some colleagues and I started Ravenous, which is a worker-owned food and culture site. One of the reasons we wanted to start a site instead of just going the individual newsletter route was precisely because of that idea of collaboration. Being edited and hearing each other's ideas, and talking about broader issues and figuring out what coverage should look like, we all thought it made our work stronger. That is much more difficult to do when there's just one of you writing your newsletter or a blog. We love the idea of having that broader team and supporting each other and the various slightly different perspectives we have on the food world.

After getting laid off and before launching Ravenous, I've been freelancing. I've found that it's really difficult, because unless you have a close relationship with an editor, you're out there having to form a formal pitch. You're writing up your little paragraph of the story you want to write, you send it in, you do research on it, and you make your argument for why you think that that story is going to be good for that publication and why you think it's relevant. But you are still doing that in your own circle.

Often, if you get rejected, you're not getting feedback on why. Maybe it was, "We don't have the budget," "We already have a similar story," or "Something wasn't working about the pitch." Having a professional network, whether that comes from a newsroom, a journalism organization, or a writer's group, or is formal or informal, is so important for anyone to get better at writing.

From what I understand, you're the series editor at *Best American Food and Travel Writing* in addition to having Ravenous. I've noticed some other bylines recently, like that one story you did for them. about Outclose. I'm curious how you're choosing to balance that little bit of freelance work with everything else you're doing and where that choice comes from.

The *Best American* editing, that's one of those jobs where there's a month and a half per year where it's really intense. The rest of the year is mostly reading our submissions and reading other food and travel writing that I research and come across. It's beneficial for me that I have this excuse to seek out all this great writing. Just talking to other people makes you a better writer. Reading makes you a better writer, and I get to read all this great food and travel writing.

In terms of freelance, Ravenous...none of us have been getting paid for this yet. It's been months of free labor. When we do start taking money from what we've raised already, it's going to be part-time salaries. I believe all of us will continue to be freelancing or finding other ways to make money.

It's difficult, the freelance writing market right now. I was a freelancer before I started at Eater, which was in 2019. This past fall, I started freelancing again, and rates really had not changed and, in many cases, had gotten worse, whereas my bills have not stayed the same. Those have all gone up.

One aspect of it is just trying to see who pays the best, trying to see where I'm going to reap the most for my efforts. It's difficult, because there will be places that, ideologically, are doing great things, but I just can't bring myself to put in that effort. On the flipside, if I get some great-paying gig, I hope I can use that

extra money to allow myself to write for a place that's doing great work. And sometimes, great opportunities come all at the same time, and sometimes, it's a month without hearing back from anything, so it's rough figuring out the timing of it too.

With Ravenous, how did you and your colleagues go from "We have an idea" to "We're going to take the risk of starting a new publication"? Because media and writing aren't exactly the most stable spaces right now.

We were all laid off at the same time from Eater. I believe there were 14 or 15 of us that were laid off at the same time. Ravenous is five founding worker-owners. Right after the layoffs, a lot of us had been inspired by a lot of worker-owned media popping up, and since we were active in the Vox Media Union and the union bargaining committee, we weren't strangers to labor, organizing, and those processes.

After the layoff, a bunch of us casually started talking about, "We've been thinking it would be cool to start a publication like this for a while. We've thrown around this idea, but what would that actually look like, and what would that take?" It's a lot of work. Eventually, it came down to the five of us who had the time, ability, and willingness to put in all that free labor.

It's been a real process. On top of figuring out our entire editorial strategy—of all of us, four of us come from writing, editing, and journalistic backgrounds, and one of us has worked more in audience and social media, though she's also a fantastic writer and gets to do that a bit more—none of us have finance backgrounds or MBAs, so we're thinking about what kind of stories we want to publish, and then we're trying to answer these questions of, what do we want the structure of this business to look like? How much money do we need to raise in order to do the very basic things we want to do and make any money? For our fundraiser, our goal was that each of the five of us takes home \$2,000 a month. We're not gunning for million-dollar salaries here.

What do we want the website to look like? What is our strategy? Are we website-first? Are we newsletter-first? Do we want to do podcasts eventually? We're having all these business strategy conversations. It's thrilling, because we do get to do whatever we want, try things out, and trust our instincts, but it's also terrifying because if we fail at this, it won't be because a CEO came down and said, "Your jobs are cut because we have to pay back these investors." It's because the things we tried weren't sustainable.

The big thing for me was, as you've experienced, media is such a mess right now. We're seeing, every six months, these giant media companies have layoffs. Having a staff job is not synonymous with stability any more, so we were all like, "If that's the other option, we have to try this. We have to try to do something else and build something new and ideally better. If it fails, it fails. If it doesn't work, we will all get jobs elsewhere. We'll figure out other ways to make money. We just have to try."

Going back to freelancing: Pitching, coming up with ideas, reporting, writing, researching—it can become a bit of a cycle, a bit redundant, maybe even discouraging. When that's happened to you, how have you powered through that? How have you found encouragement again?

Some of it is just a waiting game, the dopamine hit of finally having a pitch accepted that, then, you chase that again. I've put effort into trying to build relationships with a couple editors at places that seem receptive to regular work instead of, when I get a pitch accepted, to try to have those conversations of, "If that goes well, I would love to keep writing for you. Are there any stories or subjects that you are actively looking for pitches on?" To really develop that relationship lessens having to cold email a bunch of editors to see if they're interested.

I've been a professional writer long enough that when I was laid off, I did get many editors reaching out to me saying, "We would love for you to pitch us." Now, I have that connection, but it's not, "We're coming to you with an assignment, we're coming to you with specifics." It was just a broad "pitch us, please."

It's difficult not just to think of a subject you want to write about but the particular angle and the sources you might want to talk to, and all the pre-writing and pre-research needs to be done when you pitch something.

It's a lot of unpaid labor to get that all prepared on a really big risk that the pitch might not get taken up or, if it is taken up, that you're going to get paid \$500 for it, which is not rent. The thing that also keeps me going is seeing those opportunities and knowing that, with every new publication, it does get my work in front of different readers, and that can only be beneficial and grow people who might follow me elsewhere.

You live in New York. How much of your success with pitching and making connections do you think can be attributed to you living in a media capital and being able to meet folks in person, versus any ability to cultivate meaningful connections online?

I'm a born-and-raised New Yorker, so living here was not strategic, necessarily, for my career. It was just where my family is from and where I love, but it's also beneficial to a career in media, so I don't deny that I have that. But a lot of the editors I've been working with as a freelancer, I haven't met in person. Those have been online connections. When I was at Eater, a bunch of my editors were always in different places. I had, for a long time, two editors who lived in LA, one who lived in Portland, and at Ravenous, I'm the only one of us in New York. We have one worker-owner in Chicago, one in Michigan, and two in Texas.

That is such an incredible thing that the internet has allowed. It hasn't completely leveled the playing field of living in these media capitals, but that can be utilized to your advantage if you're a freelancer and you want to pitch a more local story to a national publication and be like, "I'm already here." You don't have to have someone in New York who's never been here parachute in or guess as to what's going on. You can speak to things directly.

It's still beneficial to live in New York and make those more casual social connections, but I also think that keeps happening online so much. On social media, on Discords, I know so many people who have built their careers with people they only know from the internet or, for a long time, first met online, and I think that's amazing. I always tell people that building those networks wherever you can is just so important. So much of it is building a social network. Instead of trying to be friends with the hotshot editors, make friends with people who are doing the same stuff you are and interested in the same creative pursuits, because you're going to wind up lifting each other up. It's thrilling seeing how the internet does help with this stuff.

My wife and I were in London recently. She was doing a series of live shows for her podcast, and her two co-hosts, she had never met in person before because they both live in the U.K. She got to meet them for the first time after starting a relatively successful podcast with them. You never know where those connections are going to come from.

Jaya Saxena Recommends:

Five songs to help you breathe through a crisis

Claude Debussy - "Suite Bergamesque"

Anil Kapoor - "Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh"

Leon Bridges - "River"

The Five Stairsteps - "Ooh Child"

Blur - "Tender"

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