

## Confessions of an Online Writing Course Junkie

By Sharon Buchbinder

At five in the morning or midnight, when normal folks are sleeping, I can be found doing homework. Am I working on another degree? No, I'm enrolled in yet *another* online writing course. My husband thinks I'm crazy, and I've had writing friends suggest that I might just be addicted. I was thinking about starting a twelve-step program and calling it "Cyberstudents Anonymous," but then I realized it would have to be online and everyone would be writing. What is it about this irresistible urge to be a perpetual student? With four degrees, it's not as if I need anymore diplomas on my wall. When an online course is announced in emails and on the loops, I'm like Pavlov's dog, drooling to get started. This week after enrolling in yet *another* online course, I decided it was time to do a little reflection, and discovered the top ten reasons why I love online courses.

**Reason Number 10: Learning the Ropes.** Coming from a background of dry-as-sand academic nonfiction writing, I recognized early on that I didn't know much about writing fiction. I had a first draft of a romantic suspense that was more mystery than romance. Readers kept saying the biggest mystery was that the heroine's boyfriend wasn't in the story. At

a friend's urging, I joined Romance Writers of America (RWA) and Maryland Romance Writers (MRW). Then I discovered RWA's Mystery/Suspense Chapter, Kiss of Death (KOD), and their online classes in both the technical and craft aspects of writing. Then I found Writer's U and Rose's Colored Glasses. I put a toe in the water, and the riptide pulled me out to sea.

**Reason Number 9: Networking, networking, networking.** I've been in so many online classes that I keep running into the same people over and over again. We cyber-wave and cyber-smile at each other. Sometimes I even meet a classmate in person at a conference or workshop. It's always interesting to see what face goes with that funny online name. It's a great way to meet people in the Romance genre across the country and around the world.

**Reason Number 8: Celebrity Teachers** The online courses are offered by nationally recognized authors. I've taken classes with Tracy Montoya, Laurie Schnebly Campbell, Karen Docter, Angela Knight, Mary Buckham, CJ Carmichael, Elle James, Delilah Devlin, Layla Chase, Megan Kerans--the list goes on and on. They have not only been published once, but many times over. They've been through rejection and the thrill of THE CALL and are generous with their knowledge, skills, and wisdom. And most importantly they are kind to newbies.

**Reason Number 7: Cheap, Cheap, Cheap.** The courses are very affordable, ranging from \$15 if you're a member of Kiss of Death to \$30 if you're not. Other groups charge \$20-\$35 a workshop. Today's face-to-face university courses cost a lot more than that. You can spend hundreds of dollars on workshops or conferences. Online courses are a great value.

**Reason Number 6: Every Day is Dress Down Friday.** I can attend class in my pajamas. Or in jeans. Or a business suit. In cyber-space, no one can see me. No one sees me yawn, scratch my belly, or chew my nails. My dog can yap and carry on without interfering with class, my phone can ring off the hook, and I'm still paying attention, soaking up information. As long as you have a computer and an internet connection, you can go to class. I wish it was that easy in my day job!

**Reason Number 5: Loads of Feedback.** Most of the classes I have taken have homework and exercises that the student posts online for the class and instructor. At any given time, someone will be online, reading your words. And giving you feedback. Did I head-hop? Use too many adverbs? Show and not tell? Choose a weak word? Be prepared: someone in class will let you know how to improve your writing. Sometimes, it's more than one person. I have learned that if I hear the same thing three times, I need to change what I'm doing.

**Reason Number 4: Convenience, Convenience, Convenience!**

Does it get any more convenient than this: Go online, look up a class, sign up for the class, pay for it online, wait for the email invitation from the group moderator, and start on the first of the month. This year, I decided to save time and sign up in advance for an entire year's worth of courses in advance. The KOD coordinator told me she wished more people did that, it would save her a lot of time reminding people to register.

**Reason Number 3: No Weather Related Cancellations** Have you ever planned to do something, and it was cancelled due to snow, ice, sleet, whatever? Online courses are rarely cancelled due to weather. Okay, a hurricane, tornado, or major power outage *might* be a problem, but generally speaking, the show goes on like clock-work. Each class usually begins with a syllabus and introductions, and the classes roll on out across the month, as planned. Even if the teacher's sick, I've found that the lectures are prepared and posted on time. Wish we could say that for every face-to-face class!

**Reason Number 2: The Next Big Thing.** People who teach and take these classes *know* the genre. They can tell you if a story idea you have has been done to death. I once thought I had a very hot story idea, a romantic suspense set in Las Vegas. I posted my question to the class and was told, not only had it been done, it had been *overdone*. I have never worried about

someone stealing my story ideas in these classes. Everyone comes with their own experiences, ideas, and voice. We each have a different perspective, with different styles. And, the classes are reminded every month that the materials we discuss in the course are copyrighted and not to be shared with those who didn't take the class.

And, a drum roll please:

**Reason Number One: Results, Results, Results.** Before I took an online course, I couldn't tell you the difference between a synapse and synopsis. I have taken three courses on the topic from three different teachers, and at last the neurons fired off that synapse and I GOT IT! I have learned about motivation, pacing, plotting, sexual tension, editing, enneagrams, personality types, characters, goals, conflict, and writing a winning query letter. Every class has given me more than I expected. I have gained knowledge and new friends, and I'm happy to report that I am finally having more acceptances than rejections when I submit my stories.

**The Bottom Line: Online Courses Work.** As in everything in life, you get out what you put in, but if you are willing to do your homework, participate in class, ask good questions, and critique with kindness, you will find your efforts are paid off with success. Twelve-step program? I think not. Now, where did I

see that advertisement for the January 2009 class on plotting  
via motivation?

**This Article first appeared in *The Writers Pulse*,**  
Maryland Romance Writers, Romance Writers of America® Chapter  
10, Vol 23 No 4, April 1, 2008.