

Tanya Elizabeth Egeness Epp Schmid

Four Simple Words

When I began my writing career, I suffered from a common ailment among new authors called “premature submission.” My first draft felt so inspired, so sexy, that I couldn’t resist the urge to hit the submit button almost before I’d secured the last period. When I received the ominous rejection email, I took another look at my “masterpiece” and was embarrassed to discover I’d left my zipper open.

Fortunately, I joined a writing group made up of people I’d met in a creative writing class. With four other literary fiction newbies, I learned the writing tip that got me on my way to my first publication with a Top 500 literary journal: refuse to be done.

Unfortunately for my writing pals, I initially repeated my mistake by simply sending my sweaty first draft to them. Eventually, I learned to set my work aside for two weeks, then do a rewrite of my own before asking my fellow writers to have a look.

In the meantime, I’ve learned the wisdom of waiting and rewriting, often three or more times before burdening other writers with my story. By then, I had specific questions for them: Where did you laugh or cry? Does the setting reflect the mood of the piece? Is it clear what my main character wants? The specific comments I received were more helpful.

Here is where “Refuse to Be Done” gets interesting. When I began to expect further rewrites, I divided my writer’s group into alpha and beta readers because once a reader has seen a draft, their response to a rewrite is colored by what they read previously. The two people in my writer’s group who were good with general advice became my alpha readers: the first to receive my already intensively rewritten piece. When I’d received both of their responses, I revised and waited, revised and waited, all over again. Then I sent my newest version to my two line editors, my beta readers, who pointed out where additional polishing was needed.

I didn’t follow every piece of advice, but if comments were repeated, I knew I needed to look closer. Often new ideas of my own improved the story late in the editing process. I was sure to keep numbered copies of each draft in case I’d had too much coffee that morning and killed more darlings than necessary.

In George Saunders’ master class novel “A Swim in a Pond in the Rain,” he reminds us that a young Tolstoy wrote “The Snowstorm” based on a personal experience. Saunders writes, “Forty years later, he (Tolstoy) used the same material to write Master and Man” which is considered one of his masterpieces.

I’m not saying you should hold onto that story of yours for forty years. Tolstoy didn’t. Most writers are proud of their lengthy “declined” list on Submittable. Including me. But maybe hold off just a little longer before scanning the list of journals ready to take your three bucks.

Finally, “Refuse to be done” gets you past that “this piece sucks” moment, when

after weeks of pain and suffering you have the urge to toss your story. Don't. Obviously, this story is something you feel passionately about. You've come this far. What were those four words again?



Originally from Wisconsin, Tanya E. E. Schmid was a Doctor of Oriental Medicine until 2014 when she started a permaculture farm near Bern, Switzerland. Her work has appeared in *The Fourth River*, *Valparaiso Fiction Review*, *Ponder Review*, *ENO*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and others. Tanya was a finalist in *Ruminant's The Waking Flash Contest*. She is the author of "Tanya's Collection of Zen Stories," and is currently writing a novel. www.tanyaswriting.com

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