

She spent as much time as she could writing. She realised that her drive to be productive – to put words on the page – sometimes got in the way of what she really needed to do, which was more ephemeral and indulgent: reading, walking, day-dreaming. Other times she could see it helped.

She realised what it was that she kept writing about: home, place, cities, belonging. It made everything feel more straightforward.

Once upon a time, there was a girl who wanted to be a writer. She wanted it so badly, she stopped writing.

Knowing where you are

Sarah Butler

All of it is work

None of it is easy

Be brave

Keep faith

Carve out time



Knowing Where You Are

Sarah Butler

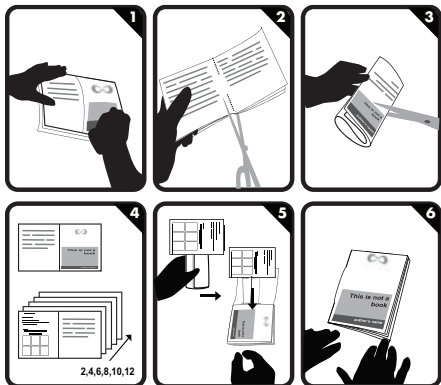
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Then she got a job, and the job was about books and writing and writers. And the more real-life writers she met, the more she started to think that her dream might not be impossible after all. She started to think about words like practice, and craft, and perseverance.

She read hundreds of books by other people, but when she tried to sit down and write one, it seemed impossible.

She tried telling herself off, but it didn't help. She tried buying herself a desk, notebooks, nice pens, but that didn't help much either.

She spent three years at University reading books by people who were, on the whole, dead. She couldn't help but feel intimidated.

Money too: because it offers time and space and comfort. She struggles with the balance. How to keep on writing novels with no guarantee they'll get any further than a folder on her computer that isn't called 'work', and the inside of endless brown envelopes? Easier, surely, to stick with the stuff that pays. At least then you know where you are. At least then there are deadlines, and other people, and praise if you do it well.

But without the writing – the writing she does, not for money, not because it's easy, not because she wants to be famous, but because she is filled up with stories and **if she stops she is lost** – none of the rest of it makes sense.

When she told her parents she had decided that writing was 'it', she heard the worry in their voices, although it might actually have been a reflection of her own – writing was hardly a safe, secure future; **writers didn't get pensions.**

She signed up for night-classes. She read out her work to the class and they nodded and smiled and she felt like a million dollars.

She quit her job and took an MA in Creative Writing. Before she went she met a writer who said, 'Those courses can't really teach you how to write, but **they fast-forward you by five years.**' She carried these words in her head, and decided she agreed with them.

The thing was, she realised, she believed in stories. She believed that stories could connect people; challenge inequalities; reveal truths. She also realised that she believed in beauty and joy – recession or no recession – and that it wasn't something she needed to apologise, or make excuses, for.

When pushed, she decided there were certain things she needed in order to keep on doing what she did. She's done too many degrees to write 'binary opposition' without cringing, but:

Self-belief	Validation
An enclosed space (a shed in the garden, a room with a door)	Outside spaces – city, mountains, the sea
Peace and quiet	Stimulation and inspiration
	Friends, peers, conversation

Once she got paid £50 for a short story.

She finished a novel. She got an agent. It didn't work out. She wrote another novel. That didn't work out either. She wrote another.

How much should you charge for a word, she wondered. Was a well-placed 'but' worth more than a self-satisfied 'ingenuous'?

She developed a list of words she wondered about: **creativity**, community, sustainability, regeneration, recession.

When she jumped, she had to decide how much to charge. She called some people, and picked a number somewhere in the middle of their numbers.

£50, once, would not pay the rent.

She worked part time, with poets and novelists and young people – she loved it, but not quite enough. She wanted to go freelance, but **it felt too risky**. She needed the security of a partner (with a full time job), and a spare room for an office, before she'd jump.

She began to shift her two worlds closer together, and the titles of the two folders – work | writing – started to bother her.

She realised that there were ways of working as a writer that didn't just involve writing novels.

She learnt how to say 'my practice' without blushing, and found it was a word she liked. Practice. Practice. Practice.

She had two folders on her computer: 'work' and 'writing'. She got paid for the things related to 'work'. She didn't get paid for the things related to 'writing'. She kept the two things quite separate.

The partner was less secure than she'd thought, but by that point things were working out. She set up an office in her rented bedroom. She made business cards and a website. She networked. She tried things out.