



A FOCUS ON NATURE CAREERS HUB AUTHOR

LUCY MCROBERT – AUTHOR



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is your role, and how long have you been doing it?

Authoring and writing is one of many roles that I hold; I've been writing environmental articles, blogs, columns and so on since I was 21 (so ten years) and had my first book, *365 Days Wild*, commissioned by Harper Collins in 2016 and published in 2018. I wrote all 85,000 words in six months.

What are your main responsibilities?

For an author, this isn't a straightforward answer. My responsibility is ultimately to my publisher: to meet their deadlines to their high standards. Within that, I may have deadlines within deadlines, research commitments and appointments, visits, phone calls, interviews and so on. But very few people are only authors - unless you're very successful - so I'm always juggling other bits of work, too. I don't know any nature writers who make 100% of their income from writing.

Who are the main people you have to work with?

My agent and publishers are the first port of call, but within that there are editors, publicists, commissioners, designers and so on, plus anyone else who you may need to work with on talks and promotion, like newspaper editors or magazine writers. They're a varied bunch, but if you have one, your agent is the most important point of contact.

What does your day-to-day look like?

Unfortunately, it's not that simple - as a freelancer my life is very varied, and I don't have a strict day-to-day routine. This is largely shaped by what childcare I have that day, and every writer will be different, depending on what other work they're doing, what project they're working on at the time and who with. As freelancers we have to be flexible with our time, to fit around family commitments and the clients' needs. One day I might work two hours in the early morning, the next I might work into the evening and not switch my computer off until gone midnight, the next I might do a standard

nine-to-five. There's a lot of emails, but I'm strict on keeping on top of these, and I personally foster a minimal-meeting culture, where I value my own time as precious, and I try to avoid group Zoom calls unless absolutely necessary.



Lucy with her book 365 Days Wild



Lucy outside looking for birds

What was your pathway into your role?

I've always loved writing, and English was my natural, favourite subject - the one that I excelled in. I studied History at university which developed my writing skills further, and immediately started writing articles for small-scale organisations and local newspapers after that. I was the researcher on Tony Juniper's *What Nature Does for Britain* (Profile, 2015), which took about 18 months, and working in communications for The Wildlife Trusts meant that I was always writing in some way: content creation for print and digital, social media posts, official charity strategies and board papers. I blogged for a year or so and off the back of that got approached by an agency, Northbank Talent, who help shape my writings and help me craft book proposals, supporting me every step of the way with pitching ideas to publishers. I first started writing my column for *Birdwatch* magazine in 2014.

What is the salary range for this type of role?

How long is a piece of string? I know people who received £1,000 advance for their first book, and I know people who received 300 times that. Advances are what the publisher pays you upfront to write the book (usually non-fiction) - this is often split into three or four payments (one on signing the contract, one on delivery of the material, one on publication of the hardback (if there is one) and one on publication of the softback. If you work that out over say four years, that can be a really tiny amount of money when you factor in the costs of research and a daily rate. You'll find that writing is very much a 'spare-time' activity if you're having to pay bills and work another full-time job. After your advance you'll get offered royalties - anywhere from 5% of the sales through to 15-20%, but you only receive these once you have paid back your advance to the publisher. If you're looking to start out in fiction writing, you may need to produce the whole manuscript before the publisher will buy it off you for publication, so you wouldn't receive an advance at all in this instance. Every book and every publisher is different, depending on your previous experience, previous publications, the strength of your idea and the strength of your writing.

Is a degree essential to your role?

Absolutely not. A degree is not essential. You need a brilliant idea, a lot of willpower, a touch of creativity, self-discipline, an ability to get beyond imposter syndrome (especially early on) and the power to translate your thoughts into words. Some of the best writers I know are dyslexic, and

struggled with English at school, due to the constraints we put on education. Being a good researcher helps, whether that's for fiction or non-fiction writing.

What are the most useful skills to have for this role?

You're going to need willpower, and lots of it. Deadlines are often months in advance, so if you work best to a tight deadline, consider setting yourself mini ones within this timeframe (e.g., 20,000 words after two months). Self-discipline is crucial, creativity, a love of writing, a willingness to be edited (we all get edited! Do not be precious!) and most of all an amazing story that you want to tell. You may have one story in you, or you may have hundreds. If you don't have an agent, you'll need an eye for contracts and the legal bit, some negotiation skills and good pitching skills - you don't have to take the first offer that comes along.

CAREER PATHWAYS

What GCSEs could someone study to help get into this career?

I'd always advise getting a spread of GCSEs, but ultimately very few of mine were relevant to what I do now. English (Literature and Language) was probably very important, but it's not for everyone. I don't even have a Biology GCSE - and I work in conservation! I have Double-Award Science, which was a bit broad-brush to say the least.

What A-Levels or BTECs could someone study to help get into this career?

Again, for authoring I'm not sure this matters too much, as you won't be producing a CV or applying for a role like you do with others. No one in publishing has ever asked for a CV from me, however I did English, Maths and History to A-Level (two of which developed my writing skills), plus Health and Social Care and Psychology to AS-Level.

What could someone do after they leave school to help develop their skills for this career?

You don't need a degree to be an author, but you may find certain courses develop a love for your subject: English, History, anything environmental or even lots of Humanities degrees will give you skills in research and writing, developing an argument and being creative. So, don't worry too much: do what you love!

If someone has graduated university, what next steps could they take to develop their skills for this career?

When you're starting out, it's all about developing your skillset and experience. Contact local newspapers and ask if you can write a nature column, approach organisations to do content creation (voluntarily or low-paid), build your skills in other communications areas, keep your own blog, or simply dive right in and start writing your ideas down if you have them. Spend as much time as possible outdoors for inspiration and set time aside in your week for your writing. Network, promote yourself on social media and research/follow editors in the publishing houses that you love. Building your portfolio is critical.