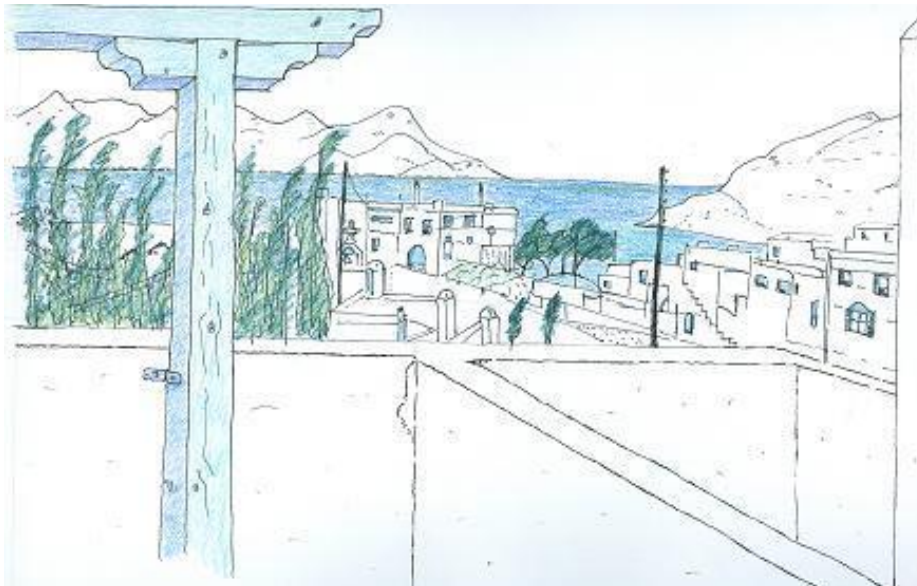


Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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Writer on Vacation



No, unlike some writers, I don't actually write on vacation. (Unless you count postcards.) But I do use my vacation time to restore myself, improve my craft, and advance my career. Here's what I do:

1. Draw. Instead of writing, I like to dip into another art form. I asked an art teacher friend to suggest a vacation assignment. Here's what she advised:

"Wander around observing and absorbing, and look for a specific scene that you can go back to sketch for about 30-60 minutes. Close your

eyes and notice all the sounds of the place before you start. Open your eyes and visually study the scene. Then draw what you see.”

The time I spent sitting and sketching – at a café table, atop a stone wall – was deeply relaxing and put me in touch with nooks and crannies of my creativity that I hadn’t known were there.

2. Read like a writer. On vacation, I read for the pleasure of it, of course, but I also challenge myself to slow down and examine the author’s craftsmanship. I particularly like to take a close look at the first page of a book. How does the author establish her authority on page one? What does she do to make me keep reading? How is the theme reflected in the very first sentence? A vacation is a great opportunity to think about what works and what doesn't in a piece of literature.

3. Keep a journal. I bring a notebook and fill it up with sensory details, reflections, facts I’m learning about the place I’m in. I don’t think of this as real writing and don’t necessarily plan to use these notes as material for a writing project. But the mere act of scribbling helps keep my observational powers and recording skills fresh. I’m thinking like a writer, and that feels good.

4. Get a writing assignment or two. A local newspaper or a favorite website can be good places to start. Pitching stories can give you an entrée to amazing experiences-- and enhance your C.V.

Before traveling to Lithuania to do research for my book, *We Are Here*, I approached several publications with story ideas. The assignments I obtained opened doors. People were eager to provide me with special tours and spend time making sure I understood what they were up to. Once home, I used my

notes to write the articles and eventually incorporated the material into the book. (Granted, this wasn't exactly a vacation, but the principle applies.)

5. Give a talk. While on vacation at my mother-in-law's one August, I arranged (far in advance) to speak about my book at a local library. You might think everyone would have preferred to kick back and enjoy the summer air... but in fact I had no trouble drawing a crowd. I found the event invigorating...and sold some books!

Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). To see all of her Writing Tips, visit her website at www.ellencassedy.com.