

Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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Lessons from an Overcoat: Reuse, Recycle



A Yiddish folksong I love gave me the theme for today's post. (If you like, you can [listen along](#) as you read.)

In the song, a poor guy is face to face with an old overcoat--so old it's coming apart at the seams. Snip, snip--he cuts up the coat and makes from the pieces a very fine jacket. When the jacket gets old, he turns it into a vest. When the vest falls apart he makes a tie. From the tie comes a button.

Finally, he has nothing at all. You'd think that would be the end--but no. Out of nothing he makes . . . a song.

From this musical gem, I've learned to look for ways to reuse and recycle the work I've already done.

Getting noticed as a writer means being seen, and seen again, in many different places. That means finding ways to meet the requirements of different venues without having to start from scratch with each one.

Once I've published a piece in one venue, I ask myself what other venue(s) might be interested in the same material, either verbatim or in a different form. I've used my book--a "quest" memoir about the Holocaust in Lithuania--as the basis of countless articles, essays, speeches, blog posts, and social media posts.

Here's how:

Be on the lookout for new places to publish a blog post, article, or essay, as well as new speaking venues, conferences, and social media sites. Every couple of months, I visit the websites of authors who write on themes similar to mine to find out where they're publishing and speaking. I look around on Twitter and Facebook to find places where people are gathering to explore related issues.

Query new venues, trying to stick as close as possible to material you already have on hand. For each pitch, use as few words as possible to describe what you could write or speak about. Include a three-line bio, a few short reviews or endorsements, and a link to your website or to samples of your work. (Some venues don't accept queries and instead require you to send in the completed piece.)

Publish and publish again. Some venues have no problem reprinting a piece that has been published elsewhere. For others, especially online sites, a small amount of rewriting, including a new first paragraph or a new angle, will be enough to make your existing piece welcome in a new place.

Turn a book talk into a post, article, or essay--and vice versa. If an overcoat can become a jacket, then a book talk can be transformed into a written piece, or the other way around.

Quote yourself on social media. Pull evocative sentences out of your books or articles and use them as tweets or Facebook posts. Provide links to where they can read more.

Move past work around on your website or author newsletter. Re-introduce previous posts, articles, or podcasts.

Take notes. A notebook is a writer's best friend. Notes can be valuable raw material for the next piece of writing. Remember what Nora Ephron's mother told her: "Everything is copy."

Don't throw it away. Save the treasures on the cutting-room floor. Discarded scenes, paragraphs, and phrases can be turned to good use in future work.

The poor tailor in the song might have called it making something out of nothing.

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