

THE WRITER'S BLOCK

Grand Haven alum Steve Shilling never dreamed he'd become a published poet, but that's exactly what happened. He shares his story and some advice for young writers.

Q: WHAT WERE YOU LIKE AS A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT?

A: I would describe myself as quiet and shy. I know most of my friends wouldn't believe that, but honestly, until I took Public Speaking in 11th grade, I was. I guess I was a day-dreamer, looking out of the windows a lot, drawing up football plays in my notebook, always at home on a Friday night.

Academically, I was a good student, not great. Honor roll, but not always as serious as I should have been. I had great interest in literature and writing and spent a lot of my time in the Bucs' Blade room. That was really where I felt most at home. My senior year, I won a Quill and Scroll Award from the University of Iowa for Best High School Sports Column. I didn't even want to send it in. Fellow staff members helped me send it in. I found out on the morning announcements that I had won. I sank in my chair. Embarrassed. I never thought my writing was very good. I did gain some confidence from that though. Enough to think that maybe I could become a writer.

Q: HOW DID YOU GET INTERESTED IN WRITING POETRY? WAS IT SOMETHING YOU DID IN HIGH SCHOOL OR DID THAT PASSION DEVELOP LATER?

A: Poetry writing was definitely NOT something that I was interested in as a teen. In fact, I never quite got it. In junior high (8th grade, I think), I was asked to read Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening" and when I was finished, was told, "that was nice, but you read it wrong." After that, I never wanted to have anything with poetry again. There were some Langston Hughes poems that I liked in that unit, but I was quiet about that. I can trace my interest in poetry back to those two by Hughes: "Theme For

English B" and "The Kids in School With Me".

Because my Bucs' Blade classes counted as English credits in high school, I wasn't exposed to a lot of poetry after that, because I never really had to take regular English classes. I don't know that I would have loved it, my bad experience would have overshadowed things, but taking Journalism and Creative Writing was my outlet. Writing was my escape from being a teenager. Eventually it would lead me to poetry writing.

It wasn't until I got to Hope College and started my English major that I began to find poetry. It started out small, with me actually liking some of the older English poets, John Donne, Ben Jonson, then I started finding others I liked: T.S. Eliot, Frost, e e cummings, and contemporaries like Ted Kooser, Naomi Shihab Nye, William Stafford, Billy Collins, Lucille Clifton, all of whom came to my college for readings that I had to go to for class.

I was writing for the school newspaper and one of my poetry lit professors, Jackie Bartley, caught me after class and said that I should consider taking one of professor Jack Ridl's poetry writing classes. My response? "Um ... I don't know, I don't think so, poetry's not for me, not really my thing."

Her response? "I tell you what. I'll make you a bet. If you take his poetry writing course and don't like it, I'll pay for it."

"And if I like it?"

"Then you'll have something that you can take with you the rest of your life."

I was pretty sure that I was going to take it and hate it. But a funny thing happened on the way to that payout. I started liking it. Professor Ridl is a dynamic person. And it turned out that he had sent me some notes before I had ever met him, praising some of my sports columns, and because we both had being from Pittsburgh in common.



I went back to Professor Bartley at the end of the semester and she looked up from her desk as I stood in the doorway. "Well, what's my tab looking like?"

"You don't owe me a thing," I said. "I LOVED it! AND I'm taking his second course!"

Years later, Professor Bartley and I were both published in the same journal together. I couldn't believe it. We had come full circle.

Looking back at my sports columns, I now realize that there is some poetry in them. I think I was a poet all along, but never knew that that was the writer that I was meant to be. The proverbial, "I'm a poet and didn't even know it!"

Q: WHERE DO YOU FIND THE INSPIRATION FOR YOUR POEMS?

A: Ideas for poems are all around me. Quite often it can come from a song lyric. More often it is from reading other poems. Sometimes it's just out of nowhere. I just see something and it sparks something and I start writing. I wrote one poem on a bus ride to coach a football game because I saw a cemetery on a hill overlooking this small Western Pennsylvania town. I remember another that I wrote in college on the back of a gas bill that I was going to go pay. I was writing it at a red light and after I paid it, I asked the receptionist, "can I have the back of that thing back?"

Poets notice what other people don't. The entire Coast Guard parade can be going by and I will be noticing a kid with cotton candy all over his face, the sound of the lake breeze as it kicks up to show the bottom of the leaves on the trees, the smell from the food stands a half a block over and not once will I notice the marching band or the song that they are playing.



FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS: Steve Shilling stands atop the bleachers at McGuffey high school's football field. A former Grand Haven High School defensive back, Shilling now teaches English at McGuffey where he has also been a coach in the football program. Shilling credits numerous influences for his poetry including Hope College professor Jack Ridl and his grandfather. "He was a Civil Engineer and always loved my writing because it was something he couldn't do," Shilling said. "I think he would have gotten a kick out of my writing career, been really proud." (photo courtesy Steve Shilling).

Q: HOW DO YOU MOVE THROUGH THE WRITING PROCESS. WHAT'S THE MAP FROM "IDEA" TO "READY TO PUBLISH?"

4. I have to admit that for me, it's sort of a gut-feel thing. I have written enough poems now to know when I like something I have written vs. something that isn't really working. Sometimes I know that a line or a word isn't working or it needs a different title and I'll set it aside for a while and come back to it later. Some poems never quite work.

Early on in my poetry writing career, I would send some things to Professor Ridl and get some feedback. And they might get sent out for publication or rejection. I don't have to do that anymore. As young writers, I suggest getting someone you trust that will give you honest feedback. It helps more than you know.

Once in a while an editor will send one of mine back with a rejection, but with some feedback. I like that. Just the other day, I had one accepted, but the editor had some ideas for improving the poem and I took them, felt the worked and told her to go ahead with it. The one thing that Jack Ridl always told me about his suggestions is, "take them or leave them." And he's right. No matter where it's coming from, it's still your poem. Sometimes you can see that it works. Sometimes you

have something that you want to work. They can go through many edits or very few. I have had some that were finished as written. There are some that I still don't know what's wrong with them. But if I feel they are ready to publish, they get sent out.

Q: WHAT DO YOU GET OUT OF DOING THIS?

A: What I get out of poetry, first and foremost is ... that it is a place, a place that I can be. I can go back to the 4th grade, I can be someplace that I have never been, like Paris or Salinas, California, I can be across from my grandfather at the dinner table one more time on some summer Thursday. And from the process of writing, I get a process of discovery. I can find myself. Find things long forgotten. Find out how to write the next poem.

Q: WHAT ARE YOUR BIGGEST INSPIRATIONS AS A POET?

A: There are a lot of who's and what's that have been inspirations for me in writing poetry. My grandfather. He was a Civil Engineer and always loved my writing because it was something that he couldn't do. He shows up in my poems a lot. I think he would have gotten a kick out of my writing career, been really proud.

Jack Ridl, obviously, inspired me a lot. I would read his stuff and say to myself, "I want to write like that." And it turns out that you can't write like Jack Ridl. He's in another league. But I found my voice in doing so and I like what it is and what he inspired in me to find of myself.

And my two children, Stephen and Courtney, inspire me to write and keep on writing. I want to be able to leave something behind, so that they can look at it, read the poems and say, "our dad did that." I was lucky this summer to have a poem published with my daughter's own artwork. Our first collaboration! Amazing. <https://firstclasslit.com/2016/07/25/the-wandering-king-by/> As far as what inspires me ... it's an easy answer. Since I was a young kid running around Lake Hills Elementary School, I wanted to be a writer. I wanted to see my book on a shelf at The Bookman on Washington Street. It just turns out that it's a poetry book and not the Great American Western Novel that I thought it would be. And when it is, I want to come back and read at Grand Haven High School. In the library. That would be like Bruce Springsteen playing The Meadowlands for me.



THE SHILLING FILE

HIGH SCHOOL: Grand Haven High School class of 1989. Sports Editor: The Bucs' Blade, 1988-89. Cornerback, varsity football team.

COLLEGE: Hope 1995 (BA in Literature)

CURRENT JOB: Teacher, McGuffey High School (just south of Pittsburgh). Classes taught: public speaking, 9th Grade Advanced English.

IS THAT NOT THE SCOREBOARD CLOCK Shilling leads the student section in the "Scoreboard Clock" cheer during a win at the Pirates' Pit in 1989, an honor that went with being the student section leader. "I think that high school me would laugh in disbelief that (I) became a poet," Shilling said. "Maybe older me would put his arm around younger me and say 'listen kid, believe in yourself and your work. Your newspaper adviser, Dale Brinks thinks so, others have told you so. Listen to them.'" (photo courtesy Steve Shilling).

Q: WHAT DO YOU THINK 'HIGH SCHOOL STEVE' WOULD THINK OF HOW YOU'VE DEVELOPED AS A PERSON AND A POET?

7. I think that high school me would think of adult Steve Shilling's poetry? That's a great question. I think high school me would laugh in disbelief that he became a poet. But I hope that high school me would read them and then realize that wow, this is a lot like I write now, only it's sports columns, but it's in there. Maybe older me would put his arm around younger me and say, "listen kid, believe in yourself and your work. Your newspaper advisor, Dale Brinks thinks so, others have told you so, listen to them."

Q: DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE POEM?

I have gotten this question a lot and I do not have any one poem that stands out as a favorite. There is something about each one that was important enough for me to write it. There's definitely lines that I love over others that I have written. Time goes by as if squared ... I shoveled snow tonight under a flamingo sky ... palpitating as the radio guy ticks off the names ... but poems are like your children. You love each one of them the same and you send them out there and you hope that they make it. Some go on and live in print. Some come back and tell me, "I didn't make it." But I pat them on the head and say, "it's gonna be okay," then send them back out there to try again.

"What I get out of poetry, first and foremost is ... that it is a place, a place that I can be.

I can go back to the 4th grade, I can be someplace that I have never been, like Paris or Salinas, California, I can be across from my grandfather at the dinner table one more time on some summer Thursday.

***And from the process of writing, I get a process of discovery. I can find myself. Find things long forgotten. Find out how to write the next poem."* --Steve Shilling**

PROFESSOR SHILLS' ADVICE FOR YOUNG WRITERS

1. Just Write! Don't worry about form so much at first. Get those lines, word and images down on paper. Then go back and edit it for line and rhythm and word choice.
2. When sending work out, don't be afraid of rejection. I get turned down 95% of the time. That makes me successful 5% of the time! You have to understand that it's not personal. Poems get rejected for a variety of reasons, mostly because they just didn't work for the editorial staff's vision for that particular issue. That doesn't mean your work is bad. I have had poems rejected 30 or more times, then get accepted the very next time they were sent out.
3. READ. There's a lot of great contemporary poets (and dead ones too). Google: Jack Ridl, Billy Collins, Ted Kooser, Jim Daniels, Naomi Shihab Nye, Kay Ryan, Terrance Hayes or simply, "Contemporary Poets" ... you're gonna find ones you like, ones you don't, but you're gonna become a better writer because of it.
4. Find the writers around you. You're not the only one. Share stuff. Form a little club. Meet. Read. Listen. There's a couple of lines in a short story by William Allen, entitled "A Whole Society of Loners and Dreamers" in which he writes (of writers): They are dreamers, loners, bookworms ... it was a tremendous feeling to discover that I might not be alone – that there was a whole society of loners and dreamers – and that they were called writers.
5. It's all about comfort! Whether it's a certain kind of pen, or notebook, a comfortable pillow or couch, indoors in your room, or out by the lake ... find the comfortable place and way to write and go with it.
6. Lastly ... poems are never finished ... they're abandoned.
(I'll let you figure that out as you begin your writing journey)
7. Writer's Block - how do I cure it?
Answer: LOWER YOUR STANDARDS
You will have written something you like or that got great feedback and go to write the next poem ... and not be able to start.
You will think you have "writer's block". You don't.
You are just trying to "top" the last one you did. You can't think that way, don't try and compare the poems. They are separate pieces of you.
If you "just write" and start somewhere, rather than try and think about how to top the previous poem, the journey you go on will be amazing.

POEMS BY STEVE SHILLING

Fall in Michigan

roars in, a lion with the crisp
Canadian wind on its mane, past
gold aspen trees, white birch trunks,
through backyard football games.

You turn your nose up to it,
like so many cats do, pull in deep
its reviving breath before curling
up on the couch under the afghan

your great-grandmother knitted,
the cool breeze stroking your
head while the pumpkins wait
to get chosen. The leaves rain

down in colorful patterns, hickories,
dogwoods, red and sugar maples,
orange, maize, vermillion, amber
turning to rust. Only the evergreens
left standing with their clothes on.

Winter in Michigan

is constant. A mind game.
A test of wills. Especially on
the lake, where the low steely
sky stays a cover beginning

in October, keeping its feet on
your coffee table into April.
The wind steals your breath,
freezes deep into your lungs,

howls into the night, bending
tree branches into a long
loud scrape against the side
of your house. The lake

effect arrives while you dream,
eats breakfast with you at
the kitchen table while you
wait for your school, palpitating
as the radio guy ticks off the names.

On The Bus Ride To School

When I was six, the bus arrived early,
right after I caught the Lone Ranger
and Underdog, the first stop on those
bitter Lake Michigan winter mornings.

Scraping the frost off the inside
of the window I could barely see
the odd neapolitan sandwich:
rows of pine trees, the icy blue horizon,
the lake effect dome rolling in.

Spring in Michigan

comes late, leaves early,
like the guest who eats the
sandwiches you've put out,
downs a lemonade but is

in a hurry to get somewhere
else when the conversation
runs out. But spring will
leave behind the green of

the catalpa, black locust,
and maples in the yard,
wear away the last of the
black snow piles in cold

corners, warm the gleaming
wood grain of the floorboards
as the cat stretches out in
the rays through the window.

Summer in Michigan

is spent afloat, on the soft
waters of the lake, bobbing with
the whitecaps as they roll in
to take the beach. Grilled

meat in the air leads you
as schools sit lonely, quiet.
The chairs are set out on main
street for the 4th of July parade,

the two of you share cotton
candy at the carnival, steal
kisses behind the Tilt-a-Whirl.
Hot winds blow dust devils

on baseball diamonds, we all
run in for shelter from the
afternoon thunderstorm,
t-shirts sticking to our backs.

We would pick up two or three
stiff armed riders, knee deep
at each unplowed driveway,
bread bags hanging out of the
tops of boots to keep the slush away.

For another hour's ride with
my Speed Buggy lunch box an armrest,
I would dream about football
and plodding through the thigh-deep
snow at recess for another touchdown.
Far away still from the morning lessons,
math and reading.

Cutting School

Just before 1st period,
jacked up on 100% of the
caffeine from the best Colombian
coffee beans that money can buy,
I made an executive decision.

I ran, did not walk, ran
screaming down the hall, paying
no attention to the other teachers,
all pain-stakingly lecturing away like
little worker bees to the glossed-over
eyes of the disinterested, as if each
were Plato, reciting The Republic.

I turned the run into a sprint,
Tom Cruise style, arms in full blown
pumping action as I lofted a folder
full of handouts in the air behind
me, leaving the huge flakes falling
in my slipstream, banging the bar
to the parking lot door like an
NFL lineman leaving the line
of scrimmage, then slid TV-detective
like over the hood of my car, jumped
in, starting it in one fell swoop, barely
missing a school bus and a startled
group of 4th graders, book bags-a-flying
as I peeled out of the lot, as eager
as a C-average senior on the last
day of school, no plan, packing
six dollars in my pocket, the sun
in my face, my hat turned backwards,
a defiant grin and a world of asphalt
opportunity in front of me.

Chain Gang Pretty

The prom court eight had their
picture taken by the local
newspaper at school today.
An interesting interruption
to the quiet pace of the library
as they came unannounced
out of the back room where
they had been changing into
their dresses, filing one-by-one
like death row inmates on their
way to break rocks. Barn red,
sea-foam green, navy, tangerine,
glittery, sparkly, satin, taffeta,
lace. Ten minutes later the train
returned, same straight line, no
one talking, not a single smile
for us bookworm paparazzi
applauding their return.

Directions to Summer in Grand Haven, Michigan

Tell your boss that you are taking a week off and begin just past noon on a June Thursday. Listen to the lakeshore breeze rush through the shoreline pine trees and it will tell you the stories of my youth.

Drive over the humming drawbridge and park your car on Columbus Street in front of the house with the rose garden. You are parked on the infield of the best wiffle ball park any neighborhood ever had.

Walk two blocks in either direction and have a slice at Fricano's, or the fries at Ray's and you will taste July. Continue down Washington Avenue, walk into the Bookman, and wander through the pages of my dreams.

Make your way downtown and get your hair cut from Ron at The Glo. The good magazines are on top of the jukebox. Cross the street to Fortino's. Step inside and smell. Nowhere

The One About Death

"Read me the one about death, I like that one." -audience member at a reading

Sure, you'd like that, I'd bet.
Wallow in your blood when I
read it. But which one, my black
cloaked friend? The one with
snow blanketing my town? Which
of course means death. Or how
about the one where fall moves
into winter? Leaves and snow
cannot mean leaves and snow,
we are of course talking about

death. Maybe you mean the one
about my grandfather's death,
which is more about his life, but
I'm sure you wouldn't notice,
wrapped up in your own dark
lines. The world doesn't hate
you. Anymore than your skull
and crossbones tattoo suggests

on earth will you ever smell love like that
again.

Past 1st Street and the Grand Theater, turn left
on Harbor, have a beer at the Tip, two corn
dogs
with mustard at Pronto Pups, but save room
for a burrito at Butch's (#3 sauce if you dare).
Wonder if you will ever need to eat again.

Get up and walk it off. To the lighthouse
at the end of the channel. Then hike up
Emmett Street to the top of 5-mile hill.
Stop and look over the town I grew up in.
Nice little harbor town, isn't it?

Saunter your way down Prospect, toward the
crescendo of waves on Lake Michigan as you
pass through to the public beach, past the
Hawaiian Ice stand, and turn south when
you see the two beach chairs in the distance.

Sitting in one will be a guy in a Tigers cap,
with a three day Brett Favre growth and a
styrofoam cooler filled with beer, his nose
in a book and feet in the squeaky white sand.
Well done, Magellan, you've found me.

that you do. So I'll read you the
one about death. As soon as
the Grim Reaper sits down to listen
we can cash in our chips and grab
life from the hand of death, peer down
the valley of the shadow of death,
make the last roundup, singing our

swan song up to boot hill. I'll even
buy the farm for you. Invite
Shakespeare up to the dais to tell us
about the Black Death. And if all this
goes belly up, we can leave this earth,
go to a better world, cross the great
divide where Donne will toll the bell
and Frost will introduce us to the
Hired Man. We will tell no tales,
simply blend into their Society, their
world of unacknowledged legislation,