

What Makes You Strong Makes You Sell is intended to encourage aspiring authors to focus on what they do best in their writing-- instead of getting bogged down trying to fix what is wrong. Yes, weaknesses must be addressed, but by focusing on their strengths, writers gain an insightful and positive approach to their work.

1. What is the biggest strength in your writing?

My biggest strength is persistence, though I didn't recognize it until the last few years. My second biggest strength is forging ahead even in the face of poor odds. Again, that's a trait recently recognized!

2. Would you say you took a leap of faith in writing about a surfing vampire -- rather than boxing yourself in with a safer, more conventional character? Is this based in knowing your strengths as a writer?

Oh, yes! That was a Mount Olympus leap of faith for me!

"What if?" is the question writers most often think we ask ourselves. When my vampire character burst into my awareness, I had to think, "Why not?"

So many fabulous authors were writing so many wonderful vampire books, I took a chance writing a vampire character at all! One that surfs and plays bridge along with guiding ghost tours? I had to make the conscious decision to trust the character. To take that leap of faith. To forge ahead and forget the odds.

3. Did you always know your strengths or did you come to realize your strengths gradually -- or was there an "ah-ha" moment?

Recognizing my strengths was a process, and a long one at that. I had thought my strengths were dialogue and humor, and they are strong elements in my work. However, I came to learn that writing strengths are as much about the writer as they are about the craft. More so!

At the same time, I did have an "ah-ha" moment or two. One was when I broadened my view of writing strengths to include aspects such as persistence, risk taking, belief in oneself, and in the value of one's work.

4. I'm planning to include critique groups as part of this article. I believe you work -- or have worked -- with critique partners and critique groups. Do

you think focusing on a manuscript's strengths could be beneficial when writers are giving feedback to each other? I'd also like your opinion on how too much reliance on a critique group can delay a writer's ability to rely on her own instincts, know her own strengths. How listening to too many people can kill off the initial spark in a story – as does overworking a manuscript. So the more a writer knows her strengths the less likely to fall into these traps. Any comments on this? Okay to disagree!

Actually, I agree! I've had wonderful critique partners, but it's easy to fall into relaying what doesn't work in a manuscript instead of what does. Critique groups by their nature also tend to focus on aspects such as pacing, characterization, and the like, rather than how the story works as a whole. Some critique groups I've been in didn't tend to look at strengths in a broad sense. I'm not pointing fingers. I've fallen into the same trap of seeing details instead of the whole!

I've also rewritten manuscripts until I choked the life out of them. Sometimes in response to critique comments, sometimes because I focused far too much on minutia. I don't want anyone to go through that!

When I critique now, I make the effort to comment on what I find compelling about the author's strengths and about the story.

5. Would you say your strengths compensate for potential weakness in your writing? Are you willing to say what those weaknesses are? Aspiring authors would be encouraged to know that published authors have aspects of writing that don't come as easily to them.

My main weakness has to be self-doubt, a trait I probably share with many writers. We live in a world that sees and reports more of the negative than positive, so it's easy to fall into that trap with our work and ourselves. We're also in a business in which we seek reviews, and those are not always favorable, much less glowing. Add in sales figures, book awards, bestseller lists, and the competition for new contracts, and there are a slew of aspects over which we have no control.

I recently found myself nose deep in doubt and had to ask a good friend to remind me what the heck my strengths were. This wasn't an exercise in ego. I think of it as being in an unfamiliar city, standing on a corner not knowing which way to go. I can stand there and be fearful of going the wrong way. I can look at going the "wrong" way as being an adventure. Or I can break out a map, a GPS, or simply ask for directions. Sometimes that adventure is what I need. Sometimes, I simply need directions. Keeping our strengths firmly in mind helps us move forward with confidence, whether we know exactly where we're going or not.

6. Any advice to aspiring authors about focusing on their writing strengths when approaching their manuscripts – and their careers?

In Huna medicine, there is an axiom that energy flows where attention goes. In other words, what you focus on is where you'll invest your energy – whether you're conscious of it or not.

That said, my advice to aspiring (and published) authors is to:

1. Identify your strengths, type and print them, and post them on or about your work area.
2. Remind yourself of your strengths daily. Whatever they are, hold them close and protect them!
3. Review your strengths each time you sit down to write. Review them each time you revise. Review them as you write bios, query letters, blogs – whatever!
4. Make your strengths your mantra, because you need to know them as automatically if you're to have your focus on and energy flowing into the positive.

Focusing on strengths will boost every aspect of your career. And then, you persist!