Jessica Alice:

Hello everyone, I'm Jessica Alice. I'm the director of Writers SA, the South Australian Writer's Centre. I'll also acknowledge that we're meeting together on Kaurna Land and I always like to acknowledge the importance of acknowledging country, it's culturally appropriate to do so, but also it's a really important thing for writers to do because we're meeting in the context of talking about storytelling and an artform that has existed on this land for many thousands and thousands of years. It's a real privilege for us to be gathering together, to continue that tradition. So, it's wonderful to be here with you.

Jessica Alice:

So today we're going to be doing a few different things. We're going to be hearing from a few speakers. Then we'll be having a discussion where you'll have an opportunity to ask questions of the speakers. And then, we'll be hearing from the artists who were involved in the project. So, there's a few different ways for you to interact with the event today. We will hear today from Gayle Kennedy, who will be appearing on the screen soon, Kate Larsen, Carly Findlay and Gaele Sobott. So, please welcome the panel. [audience applause].

Jessica Alice:

I would love to introduce to speak now, Kate Larsen.

Kate is one of Australia's best-known Twitter poets. Her alter ego, Katie Keys, has written and posted a daily poem on Twitter or Instagram for nearly a decade. How many poems is that?

Kate Larsen:

A lot. [audience laughter]

Jessica Alice:

A lot. That's a lot of poems! Everyday! for a decade! Who can do maths quickly? that's a lot.

Carly Findlay

We’re writers here.

[audience laughter]

[audience chatter as audience members calculate the number of poems]

Jessica Alice

What was that?

Audience member

3650.

Jessica Alice

3650. That's a lot of poems!

As a writer and poet-in-residence, her work is being published on commission by Arts Centre Melbourne, Australia Council for the Arts, Kill Your Darlings, Overland Journal and anthologies, magazines and blogs in Australia, Asia and the UK. She's a former director of Writers Victoria, co-convener of the Arts Industry Council of Victoria and CEO of Arts Access Australia. Please welcome Kate Larsen.

[audience applause]

Kate Larsen:

Hi, thank you, I'm thrilled to be here. It's a great privilege to be here. I've been a great fan of Access2Arts for a very long time, and it's a wonderful honour to be on the table with so many writers that I admire. I'm here, I guess, with my disabilities sector and my literary sector hats on, to talk about professionalism in writing. So how to develop and pitch your ideas; how to move through the editing and proofreading stages to get to where you're ready to send the words out into the world, which is obviously the terrifying bit that we're all working towards eventually.

Kate Larsen:

When we talk about the writing process, we often divide it into two key stages. So one is obviously the craft of writing, so the doing of the work, the creative practice itself. And then, there's the business side of the writing. So there's getting that work and taking it out into the world. And even though we all work with words, I mean were all here because we love words, writers are notoriously difficult of writing about their words; of writing about themselves.

Kate Larsen:

We find it a lot easier to write the creative practice than to write about the creative practice. I know I struggle with it too. But even if you're just starting out, for all of us, it's important to be professional in how we talk about our work. Even if we don't consider ourselves a professional writer yet. And it's important because it helps build a reputation. It helps grow an audience. It helps increase our chances of getting chosen for things like jobs and funding rounds and getting into publications. And it can help get us remembered in the way we want to be remembered. Australia has a wonderful literary scene, but it's very close knit and it does talk to each other. So you want to make sure your remembered in the right way and not in the wrong way.

Kate Larsen:

I'm just going to whip through some of my key tips on how to do that.

So getting ready is the most important thing. So no matter what you're writing, whether it's a short story or poem or funding application, it's about giving yourself enough time. So it's not a mad rush at the end. Because we all do that sometimes. And that's about the use of time to do the multiple drafts. To do edits, the structural edit, which is really looking at the whole thing and take it all apart and put it back together in a different order; or the smaller line edit, which is when you tweak bits and pieces in that stage. It's also important to get feedback on your work from other people. But try and do that from someone who is not related to you, because your mum's always going to say you're great.

[audience chuckle]

Kate Larsen:

Getting ready is the first thing. Making a good pitch is about doing your research.

Again, if you've written a great short story and you've edited it and edited it and given it to other people, and they've told you what's good and what could be better and you edit it again and you want to try and find someone who wants to publish it. The research stage is really important. That's about making sure the place you want to send it to publishes short stories in the first instance, but also reading the last couple of editions and libraries are a great place to find subscriptions to magazines and journals. Because if they have just printed a short story about alien unicorns devouring the planet, they're probably not going to publish another one in the next edition. So, make sure to do your research before. If you're writing to a journal or submitting your funding implications to find your work, the KISS principle is always important: Keep It Simple Stupid.

Kate Larsen:

Don't try and over-complicate what you're saying. Just say what the work is in as clear a way as possible. We often, when we're nervous, we try and fill the space with academic and overly-clever sounding words, and actually, it has the opposite effect. Just being as clear as you can about what you're doing helps. Also being clear about what it is you're pitching, what your story is. what makes it different from what they normally post? What are you offering? Which could be "I'm writing this from my own experience." That could be the angle, that could be the edge that gets you in the door. Publishers at all levels are very busy people. They get hundreds, if not thousands of submissions, and this is publishers in literary journals and trade publishers. They get bombarded with hundreds of applications every day. So we as writers, need to do everything we can to make them say yes. So that's about everything from not making sure your application has been proof-read to get rid of the spelling mistakes, to making sure it's as tailored to that publisher as possible.

Kate Larsen:

So it's getting ready, making as good a picture as you can. Promoting yourself, which Carly's going to talk some more about. A lot of writers, we struggle between the balance between writing, doing the actual work and then writing about the actual work. But we're really lucky because unlike classical dancers, for example, we can use the tools of our graded craft as marking tools as well. It's not as easy tradition than other people in other art forms. So even if you're writing a Facebook post about coming to this event today, for example, that's still using your writing craft. So, it's practice and it's reinforcing the way you work with words.

Kate Larsen:

Your online profile, if you don't already have an online profile through a website or a social media accounts or that kind of thing, and you do want to try and make a living from your work. Starting some type of online profile is a good idea. More and more we are seeing that online profile making a difference in who gets published. So a good online profile. You don't have to be everywhere, just choose something and do it well. But it can, again, make the difference in publishers saying yes. They need any excuse you can give them to say yes instead of no as an excuse.

Kate Larsen:

Being professional is important for ourselves. But, look for professionalism in other people too. And I say this just having run a writer's centre. If you've submit your manuscript, say you've written a book, you've sent the manuscript off to a publisher and someone writes back to you within three hours and say, "I love it, I want to publish it." Be a bit wary. Anybody who says yes too quickly has to be treated with a grain of salt. Anybody who then says, "I love it, but I want you to pay $300 for me to really tell you if I love it or not." Yes. Alarm bells starting to ring. And certainly please, please, please, if you are ever in the experience of receiving an offer for your work that comes with full publication of a full manuscript, this obviously is less of an issue for smaller works, but please don't think anything ever without getting some legal advice first. Because people like Jessica [Alice] and I are the on es on the receiving ends of the sobbing people who have signed away their entire life's work. Which is obviously not a situation we want anyone to be in.

Kate Larsen:

Just to summarize some quick top tips around being professional. Be ready, in it. Make sure you can summarize what your story is. So, if you're caught in a lift on the way down today with the publisher of your dreams, and they say, "Hey, I saw you in that THANK Forum, what is it you're writing about?" You need to have an answer to that question.

Carly Findlay

That’s in my presentation too.

Kate Larsen:

Yeah, great. So be ready. Research where you want to pitch it. Make sure it's the right place for you. Be reliable. If somebody wants you to write something, make sure you deliver on time or at least negotiate different timelines. Be nice work with. This is a small sector. Being nice to work with makes a big difference. And starting small, there are much more opportunities for smaller pieces, so short stories and poems, that kind of thing. You start small and you build a portfolio working up.

Kate Larsen:

So just a few top things, top tips on what not to do. Don't wait for someone to come to you. You can self-publish. You can put your work out there on social media. You don't have to wait for gatekeepers in the same way. Try to avoid gimmicks, like scented paper. I used to receive a lot of funding applications with little miniature bottles of mini baboos tucked in. [audience laughter] Or a teabag stapled to the application saying, "Have a nice cup of tea while you read my story." [audience laughter] They don't help. Never a good idea. [audience laughter] And there's never any fees for comic sans, obviously. [audience laughter]

Kate Larsen:

Don't be too humble or too modest. Women writers in particular often do this. You'll see, there's been a lot of research done on pitch emails. Women overwhelmingly do things like, "I just thought; If you don't mind; If you have the time to look at my piece. I would really love if you could. But don't worry, no pressure if not.” Whereas, actually sending something like: "Look I've written this, sending it to you for your consideration. I'll be sending it onto somebody else within a week. If I don't hear back from you. If you are interested in publishing, I'd be interested in talking about a fee."

Kate Larsen:

But also don't hype yourself up too much on the opposite side. I can’t tell you how many applications and submissions I've received that said: "You can stop looking. Here is your winning article. [audience laughter] So not too humble, not too over the top. Try not to use a pity-hard applications and submissions to Journals. Applications are judged on their merit. And if you tell the panel in your application that you need the prize money in order to pay your rent, that just makes it uncomfortable for everybody. And doesn't make a difference to whether your work is good enough or not.

Kate Larsen:

One of the things about the writing sector being so competitive, we all have the story in us and we all want it to get out there. But there are more stories than there are opportunities. So one of the things we all have to think about is how ready we feel to send our work out in the world, knowing that the likelihood of rejection is high. Whenever you are ready to send out, wait until you’re having a resilient week. I will often hold off on things, if I'm feeling a bit low, that I'm not ready to be told that it's been rejected. Look after yourself when you send things out. But also look after yourself when you get the rejection back. And sure, write the response in all caps that you feel the need to write, but try not to press send. Because the next day you might re-think the pressing of the send. And you won't have sent that out and potentially damaged your relationship.

Kate Larsen:

My last point is the most important one. It is that we exist in this wonderful literary world and there will be opportunities to get your work out there. So when those rejections come, and they will come, the trick is just try not to be disheartened. Just to pick yourself up and have another go. It doesn't mean that your story or your piece isn't good. Just means it's not right for that particular moment, for that particular publication. So keep it going is important. That's me.

Jessica Alice:

Thank-you, Kate. [audience applause]

Jessica Alice:

I'll summarise a few of the things that Kate spoke about. In telling us a little bit about the idea of professionalism for a writer, Kate spoke about the importance of thinking about building your reputation as a professional. About the importance of receiving objective critical feedback; so sometimes family members are too eager to tell you positive, but maybe not necessarily, useful advice. Research publications before you send writing to them. So that you know that it's the correct publication for the piece. Make sure that your writing is simple, clear, and concise. That you're not over-complicating things. Finding your unique story angle or what it is about you as the writer that makes you unique. Being nice to people when you're networking and remembering that it is a small industry and you will run into people down the line. Not being too humble. Being able to talk up your talents and talking up your expertise. Being ready to send work out.

Jessica Alice:

You said to be ready to send work out in case you get a rejection, but you also need to be ready that if the work is published, then you have to deal with it being out in the world, which is a whole other thing. I wanted to ask you one more question before we move on. You will have, after we hear from the full panel, You'll be able to ask everyone some more questions – so note them down. But I wanted to ask you, how do you know where to publish work? If you have a novel where can you find a publisher, and if you are writing a poem or a short story, how do you find those outlets?

Kate Larsen:

Starting small. So, the short stories and poems and that sort of thing. So again, this is where social media can be an amazing tool. If you're on social media, following places, like Writers SA and other writing organisations, you can see the opportunities as they come up. Australia has a really rich literary journal culture and libraries like this one often subscribe to them - like Overland and The Engine and publications like that. Libraries are great If you can subscribe to a literary journal, it's great to do so. It costs money, obviously. So, we can't all subscribe to all of them, but supporting the sector that supports us is a really important gesture where you can. But otherwise libraries are great. Resource libraries are always also a great resource. So if you're working on a book manuscript and going to the section of the library that's relevant to your work and seeing who the publishers are of the writers you admire. I spend a lot of time in bookshops and in libraries doing just that. I'm just looking at the backs seeing who those publishers are and then going to their websites and seeing who that, again, who they published recently.

Because similarly, if they've published the new version of the Space Unicorns, book recently they're not going to publish another one in the next year. So yes, looking in the bookshelf, but as writers we need any more excuse to do that. It's a great place to start.

Jessica Alice:

Wonderful, thank you Kate.