

HOW I BOUNCED BACK AFTER SEVERAL DEFEATS TO BECOME A CREATIVE WRITER

“Success is the ability to go from one failure to the next without loss of enthusiasm”.

The above caption on Professor Stephen Westland’s mug sums up the story of how resilience in the midst of many failures helped me to bounce back and develop my creative writing skills

As a young boy growing up in the agrarian region of Benue State, Nigeria, the expectation for me was to go to school and fall back on agriculture. Many of my peers were either cultivating the soil with sizeable hoes or raising animals at a subsistence level. I equally had a fair share of agriculture when the responsibility of raising my father’s animals rested upon my shoulder. My father, being an engineer at Benue Cement Company, would usually resume work by 8 am and close around 4 pm. During this interval, while he was away, I usually fed them. There was a time when one of the boars at the farm knocked me away as a little child for feeding it late. This experience dismayed my thoughts of embarking on a writing journey. My teachers at school, who should have helped me in primary school, unfortunately, never had the knowledge of creative writing nor could they spark up the writing potential in me. This negligence made me reserved and unable to coordinate my thoughts.

My first experience with writing came to me during an entrance exam at Mount Saint Gabriel's Secondary School in Makurdi during my primary school education. One of the English language question during the exam was, "Write an essay about how you spent your most recent holiday in 10 sentences." Because I had to compete with over 900 other pupils for only 150 admissions spots, I rapidly gathered my ideas and, using the shaky information I had picked up from reading books, I composed a compelling article. Fortunately, when the admittance list was made public, I was one of the few students chosen from the pool of applicants.

Upon resumption to junior secondary school, I was always wowed me when my seniors are recognized during the assembly for excelling in literature. I started to become interested in competitions because of this. On one occasion, my teacher introduced the book "Animal Farm" to us during my junior secondary school three literary session. I started to appreciate the work of authors like George Orwell and Jerry Agada as we took turns reading this engaging book. How the author sat down to engage critical thinking and write a great story fascinated me. My creative writing potential was further greased by the way characters like Snowball, Boxer, Squealer, Napoleon, and the farm owner were weaved in by the writer to perform their roles in the book.

When I was still a junior student in high school, Maclean, a toothpaste manufacturer, sponsored an essay contest for students in Benue State. Each participant was required to write an article and submit it together with an empty pack of discarded Maclean's pack per the submission guidelines. The star award winner of the essay will receive a Nokia phone, our teacher then told us. Several youngsters throughout the State sent in their entries for examination because of the tantalizing prize. Throughout this time, I had to deal with the conflict between creating a successful essay and obtaining a Maclean's pack. The latter was

more difficult for me because Nigerians at the time did not like Maclean's products. I nevertheless collected my ideas and wrote an essay on a foolscap sheet. I combed in trashcans, my dorm room at school, and footpaths while looking for a Maclean pack. At first, my search turned up nothing, but after persevering, I located an old tube of the toothpaste, put it in an envelope with my essay before submitting it to the organizers of the competition. After weeks of evaluation, a little boy from a command secondary school was awarded the star prize following the review of the entries by the assigned judges. Despite failing, I took heart from the effort I made to take part in the competition without a writing mentor. This, in my opinion, was the spark that sparked my ability to bounce back and continue writing.

During the 3rd term holiday break of 2007; my story-telling writing skills took a new turn after attending an English holiday lesson. My teacher at the lesson introduced me to the use of provocative openings. According to him, "it helps a reader to be interested in a piece of writing." With this knowledge, I was able to craft numerous compelling stories for the entertainment of my peers. It even assisted me in answering the essay section of my English language paper during my Junior Certificate examination in 2008.

In light of these experiences and my results in the junior high school examination, I was enrolled in a science class to study the sciences. This choice left me with little time for literary study and slowed down my writing progress. I was only thinking about ionic bonding, projectile velocity, differentiation, and Mr. Niger d at this moment.

My writing career however bounced back in 2009 when a family member gave me a Nokia phone with internet access. I created accounts for Twitter and Facebook with this gadget. I became more inspired to organize my thoughts and put them into writing as I read more blogs from my friends and influencers. For instance, "Jesus is the reason 4 de season" was the title of my first social media post, which I made on December 18, 2010, at 6:52 am. As I kept writing, I saw an increase in reader engagement. When I attempted to write longer posts, I was limited by the 1024 character limit of Facebook and the 140-character limit of Twitter. This made me migrate to the use of Facebook notes for longer writing compositions. The more I wrote, the more commendations I received from other social media users. This gave me the confidence to start searching for writing gigs online. Each time I find one, I will retreat into a quiet place to scribble down my thoughts on sheets of paper. Due to my limitation of not owning a computer set then, my writings would first be typed as notes on Facebook using my phone depending on the word count. Afterwards, I will visit a cyber café, pay for an internet connection, and copy all the notes from my Facebook page to Ms Word. I will then edit the work into a presentable format before submitting it to the organizers.

In my first attempt to participate in an online essay competition, I was slapped with a rejection email. I continued, however, but still got loads of rejection mail. Due to multiple messages of failure in my inbox, I adopted the habit of deleting rejection emails for my writing. While I was about to delete a rejection email one day, a thought flashed across my mind. "You have been deleting loads of rejection emails without count. Why can't you keep them as a testament for the future? At least you will be able to track your writing journey and growth through them. The email will also serve as motivation for future writing mentees who may face the same challenge." As these thoughts crystalized in my subconscious being, I stopped deleting my rejection emails. As I look back after several years of writing, I fault the

younger me for not having a writing mentor early in life. If I had one, many of the mistakes I made would have been avoided. As rejection emails littered the corridors of my inbox, I developed the habit of voracious reading. This exercise helped me to expand my vocabulary and build my creative writing skills.

According to Peter Drucker, the most important resource needed in today's economy is no longer labour, capital, or land but knowledge. With the burden of Nigeria's unemployment rate at 33%, I am continuously motivated to arise after a writing failure to pursue the indispensable currency of creative writing knowledge in order to be prepared to navigate future storms.

In a bid to meet up with my equals globally, I began cultivating the habit of reading winning articles from writing competitions. Immediately after a story, essay, poem, or prose is released as the winning entry of a competition; I will download it and spend time internalizing it. Sometimes, I will read them over five times to become acquainted with the literary tricks and skills used by the writer. Soon, my writings too began to command some forms of technical acuity.

After writing my Jamb examination in 2012, I was employed at a bakery for 6 months before gaining admission into the university. The stressful nature of the job squeezed out my writing interest as I was then expected to resume as early as 7 am and close sometimes by midnight. Things, however, took a new turn when I honoured my admission to study plant breeding and seed science at the Federal University of Agriculture, Makurdi in 2013. This relieved me a bit and helped me refocus on my writing development. In my second year, I got a laptop, which eased me from the stress of typing with a phone and visiting the café. It was during this period I found out that essay and research writing were my areas of strength after examining my SWOT.'

After graduating from the university, I embarked upon the National Youth Service Corps (a one-year scheme designed by the Nigerian Government to encourage young graduates not above 30 years to serve the country in regions alien to them). As fate had it, I was posted to Katsina State in the Northern part of Nigeria where illiteracy was at its peak. As a class teacher, I was saddled with the responsibility of teaching over 300 student's Agricultural sciences and computer studies. One day after delivering a well-researched lesson using English as a medium for communication, my confused students complained about their inability to understand English. After making effort to further explain as much as I could, a student confidently said "*Mallam (teacher), please explain in Hausa language*". This confusion coupled with the poor performance of my students prompted me to organize an English holiday lesson to equip students in my host community with communication, writing, and comprehension skills. I taught my students how to read, write letter, construct sentences, and name parts of the body.

In 2019, I came across the Drucker forums' essay and being a resilient writer, I sent in my essay for the competition. Although I was optimistic of winning, the result never favoured me. This setback should have halted my writing acceleration pedal but I never gave in. I have continued to send in my essays to the forum since then despite consecutive failures.

In the year 2020, I carried on honing my craft until the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted all of humankind's progress. The lockdown period was a blessing in disguise for me because it allowed me to block out distractions and fully focus on developing my writing skills. While surfing the internet one fateful morning during the pandemic, I came across an essay competition organized by the Alfred Agunbiades' Foundation with the topic "The Nigeria of my dream". After reading the rules and requirements, I set out to conduct extensive research before scribbling down my essay draft. An effort was then made to re-read my essay and make corrections where necessary. With this done, I carefully typed my essay before submitting it to the organizers. On the 1st of October, when Nigeria was to celebrate her 60th independence anniversary, the foundation announced my name as one of the winners of her maiden essay competition. This was followed by the presentation of a 20,000-naira cash prize. My spirit was inspired never to give up on the path to my niche.

I took part in a different international essay contest in 2021 sponsored by the International Justice Initiative. The essay's theme was "Holocaust: How have concepts of genocide and human rights developed through time, and do contemporary social and political systems reflect these changes?" As an empathic writer, I used my words to advocate for the world's underprivileged. I was chosen as the overall competition global winner after evaluation by the organizers.

In June of the same year, the International Atomic Energy Agency organized a global essay-writing contest for young professionals globally. The essay's focus was on raising youth awareness of the opportunities available in the nuclear industry. Despite having a vague knowledge of the industry, I conducted extensive research to come up with a compelling essay. About a month later, I was notified that my essay had been shortlisted as one of the 30 best essays globally. This feat won for me the role of a panellist at her annual conference in Austria. After processing my passport and informing the Nigerian government of my achievement for the nation, I was denied a sponsored trip to Vienna for the conference. Though it was a bitter experience for me, I never allowed it to impede my writing journey.

Because of my persistence, I received a finalist prize in the Food For Thought essay competition, a runner-up award in the tripartite agro business competition, and a finalist award in the MANI essay competition regarding the connection between poverty and mental health, an honourable mention award in the Wise Ink writing, and an award for nature writing.

I became aware that I needed to oil my writing wheel in 2022 due to the frictional pebbles that were clogging it and preventing me from moving forward. I started taking online writing courses, listening to writing coaches advice, and watching YouTube writing lessons.

My quest further helped me to come across the Cmonionline writing community. I was encouraged to continue writing through her weekly writing prompts. One feature that amazed me about Cmonionline was the use of peer review, online defence, and feedback from the judges. All these provisions helped me to adjust my writing lapses to be well grounded in the art of writing. I also remember learning about the use of Grammarly, an online tool that helps writer's correct grammatical errors in a piece of writing.

While working on my dad's animal farm, there was a time, we unknowingly bought a sick turkey for introduction without observing quarantine. This caused a 98% loss as scores of birds were infected and died. This bitter experience has made us cautious about the type of animals we introduce to the farm. To overcome the loss, we employed the use of fast-growing breed stocks to increase the poultry population. This bitter experience has taught me about the need to be careful about plagiarism and copyright infringements capable of annihilating my writing career.

As a self-taught creative writer, I went beyond to impart this expertise to my students by setting up intra-school essay contests on hot-button topics like corruption, security, and education.

On one occasion, my pupils entered in for an essay competition organized by System specs with enthusiasm but when the result was announced, none of them was among the top prize-winners. This setback initially made them reluctant to apply for other writing competitions but after sharing my writing resilience story with them, they picked themselves up to give the 2022 Queen Elizabeth's common wealth essay a shot. When the result was released recently, my pupils won a gold, a silver, and two bronze medals from the competition. Two of my female pupils who participated in the 2022 Trust for Sustainable Living international essay contest on the theme of "How would eliminating inequality help in fighting climate change" were fortunate enough to receive honourable mention prizes because of their efforts. Another male student I mentored triumphed in the Classic FM national children's day essay competition in 2022 after writing and reciting his manifesto for Nigeria.

A colleague of mine who is an English tutor recently told me that my resilience nature have also impacted him to also bounce back from defeat and write his first novel. This I believe is a testament to the fact that though it is possible to acquire the trait of resilience from books and lectures, it is faster when one learns it while in direct contact with an experienced resilient manager or leader.

From my private research, I came to understand that there is a generational difference in abilities to bounce back. I also noticed that people from other regions of the world will likely give-up after experiencing the rigours that characterizes the Sahara desert migration route to Europe in comparison with their counterparts from West Africa whose cultural backgrounds coupled with their slave trade experience fuels in them, the passion to bounce back from setbacks. An African named Francis Ngannou for instance took a 14-month long trip from the Sahara Desert to Europe. He had to pass through 3000 miles from Cameroun to Nigeria to Niger to Algeria and then Morocco before getting there. He was turned back 12 times and arrested in Spain for 2 months after crossing the Ocean. His resilience paved way for him to become a professional mixed martial artist. No wonder, thousands of West-Africans have continued to embark upon the risky trip yearly in spite of warnings from the European Union. His story toughened my resilience to keep applying for Drucker essay award since 2019 and is a pointer to the fact that cultural differences occur in the abilities of people to bounce back.

On an organizational or personal level, it is very important to cultivate a resilience culture because failure to do it will make it difficult to recover from the array of complex challenges confronting humanity.

Finally, my journey through creative writing has proven to me that resilience is the top superpower one needs to develop in order to emerge stronger after a setback. Start developing your resilience today because challenges are inevitable in life.

Reference:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=Francis%20nganou&client+ms-opera-mini&channel=new>