

# CREATING YOUR LITERARY COMMUNITY

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*Heather Villa*



When I wrote feature articles for a business journal, I searched for the *why* behind ingenious products and services. For one assignment, I attended an electric vehicle (EV) gathering, held at a library. This free event, open to the public, was co-sponsored by an EV association and a national laboratory. There, I met an organized group of united enthusiasts, each playing necessary but different roles in the promotion of a revolutionary mode of transportation. Zealous supporters, curious onlookers, and a scientist directly connected to the technology had flocked to the event to discuss their shared passion. More than a dozen EVs lined the patio. Attendees had the chance to see batteries under the hoods and chat with the owners.

In conversing with the various participants, I gained the information I needed to write a compelling article, plus, journalistic objectivity aside, the desire to purchase an EV. But I actually left with something much more valuable: *the* business model for establishing literary success. It doesn't start with tweets, Facebook campaigns, or blog posts. It starts with *community*.

As much as you love the story you've written, your words are still a product. Products need people who believe in the value of innovation, and your writing is no exception. Whether you pen short stories, novels, or experimental flash fiction, to gain influence as an author, you need to target early adopters. Your initial market begins with one passionate supporter, followed by another. As entrepreneur and TED speaker Derek Sivers puts it, "Three is a crowd, and a crowd is news."

Afeez Alade-Kolawole, founder of TryMyEV, a London-based group offering non-EV owners EV driving experiences, explains, “To grow a community you need people who are enlightened and willing to share the solution to a problem, hence creating what then becomes a movement and ultimately a community.”

You have the ability to build a literary network that will champion you and your written words. Here’s how to do it.

## 1. BELIEVE IN YOURSELF: ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR POTENTIAL AS A WRITER

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Belief in your literary potential is necessary to build a community. Consider what Tesla Inc.’s CEO, Elon Musk, says: “The first step is to establish that something is possible; then probability will occur.”

Vulnerability is essential to exposing your aspiration. Avoid the temptation to hide until you think you’ve perfected your craft. Begin by sharing your writing with someone. Not everyone will be interested in what you write, but someone will.

You should also consider your target market. The idea isn’t to write a story with broad appeal, but one that will attract and be accessible to a specific audience.

Similarly, EVs don’t appeal to every driver. But here’s what I discovered at the EV gathering: The attendees were attracted to alternative transportation, a technology backed by passionate innovators—a technology that evolves as ideas are shared.

When you trust yourself to show your written words to early adopters, you’ll gain the support needed to nurture your abilities and foster continued belief in yourself.

## 2. INTERACT WITH WRITERS: LEARN FROM OTHERS WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE YOU, AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

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Writers need other writers. As I prepared to pitch my novel to a literary agent at a writers conference, an attendee offered to let me practice with her. Reluctantly, I agreed. *Why would someone want to help me?* I wondered. About twenty seconds into the pitch, the attendee interrupted me and asked, “What would happen if your protagonist acted in the opposite way?” *That would change everything,* I thought to myself. I also realized she was right. The proposed question led to necessary revisions and a friendship with an established author. My new friend and I happened to live in the same city, and we later joined a writers’ group that had been promoted at the conference. While the conference was life changing, the group has transformed the way I write. By conversing and sharing ideas with agented and published novelists, I became an active participant. Our confessed struggles were real, but so were our eventual victories.

Trailblazing is a common thread that writers and EV enthusiasts share. Writers must be risk-takers who tirelessly work together in order to gain influence beyond themselves. Alade-Kolawole points out that current EV owners are pioneers, and he extends his vision beyond the United Kingdom.

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### 3. CONSIDER EDITORIAL ADVICE: REFINE YOUR WORK

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The vision of a healthy community should include a transformative process. The advancements in EV battery technology, structural design, and even affordability respond to what consumers expect.

The same holds true for written words. That's why it's important to seek feedback from beta readers, critique partners, and editors. The key is to find someone who is immersed in your genre and is bold enough to challenge your work. A word of caution: Revisions may take longer and be more difficult than writing your first drafts, especially if you're simultaneously analyzing someone else's work. But this process also comes with its own rewards: Working alongside someone who understands what you're going through allows you to grow as a writer.

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### 4. SHOW GENEROSITY TO OTHER WRITERS: LEND SUPPORT

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If you admire an author, let him or her know—through a heartfelt e-mail, a book review, or a blog post. On social media platforms, tell others about novel or short stories you adore. Public praise highlights the significance of a community, which is much more valuable than a writer's individual promotional efforts for their own work.

As Alade-Kolawole seeks to move EV ownership beyond early adopters, he believes that growth happens through interaction from person to person and adds, "The importance of a community is [that] it facilitates knowledge sharing."

That's why a supportive network working together to promote an idea is essential to the advancement of any movement, including a literary one.

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### 5. EXPRESS GRATITUDE TO PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE IN YOU: REMEMBER THAT SUCCESS IS NEVER A SOLO VENTURE

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In the early stages of your writing career, your biggest supporters might include family and friends who respect the time you need to write. As you progress, you will probably add critique partners and beta readers to your network. Later your community may include an agent and editor, followed by a publisher and possibly publicists, librarians, booksellers, and teachers. And, of course, every writer's community includes her readers.

Throughout your literary journey, mail handwritten notes, send e-mails, or make phone calls to express gratitude to your supporters. Furthermore, as you write a novel, make notes of people who champion you. That way you won't forget to thank someone in your book's acknowledgments.

A few days following the EV gathering, I received an e-mail from the president of the organization thanking me for attending and inviting me to the next meeting. While I didn't become an EV club member, I appreciated the gesture.

The life of a writer is often solitary, but relationships are crucial. Building your network and marketing your writing will take time and effort, as it should. But by following these steps, you'll ultimately create an alliance of writers who believe in and *trust* each other, so much so that the energy will be contagious and *your* fan base will extend beyond early adopters. Alade-Kolawole summarizes this idea perfectly: "A community only grows if we all contribute."

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