

**Joanna Russ**

Joanna Russ was born on February 22, 1937, in New York City. She is an American writer and feminist. She is the author of a number of works of science fiction, fantasy and feminist literary criticism and is best known for *The Female Man*, a novel combining utopian fiction and satire. In this webpage, we will take a quick look at *How to Suppress Women's Writing*. It is a book that explains in a sometimes ironic way how women were kept silent, thus how to minimise women writing.

*How to Suppress Women's Writing* is a book by Joanna Russ, published in 1983. Written in the sarcastic style of a guidebook, it explains how the author believes that women and minorities are prevented from producing written works. Feminist scholars and scholars who write about civil rights generally received the book positively. It is highly regarded by these scholars for its cutting humour and wit, as well as its disarming and novel presentation of the problems of sexism and racism in the arts and in writing.

In history, there were always measures put into place to prohibit people, especially women, from learning and writing. In the middle age, peasants were illiterate and could not write. Lords and kings had better control over them. Then, people started to write, but within the society, women were still unable to write. Men were taking all initiatives, forcing women to stay home and being kept busy raising children and taking care of the house. Women have been unable to express themselves for a very long time because of the family responsibilities.

There were no explicit rules saying that a woman could or could not write. However, this did not mean that woman had the freedom to write as they wished. Social pressure put on these women forced them to “behave” in ways the patriarchal society judged as being right. A

number of values coming from society, the family, and religion, gave power to men and asked women to remain quiet and not be involved socially.

Women who tried to write were technically able to write but had to deal with criticism and judgment. A woman could be called crazy for expressing herself. Women were not supposed to express themselves, either about what they felt or what they believed in. If women were writing about a controversial subject, they would be criticized by society. They were judged as being immoral. Women were also prohibited from exploring nude art or from talking about homosexuality, being the main immoral subjects, considered a threat to society.

Also, people could say that a book was not written by a female author, but by man. Sometimes people would say that the woman started to write but a man must have finished writing the book. As we have seen in class, many authors even had to use a male pseudonym to have their book published, like Emily Bronte. It was also believed that women could not think for themselves, that they were unable to produce art. For example, the selected topic could be seen as uninteresting. Women in passion, the description of the female body, the family, are all subjects that were unappealing to the patriarchy.

One more challenge for women writers was to be self-sufficient financially. There was not much money to be earned as a writer. Only a few people could rely only on their writing to live well financially... and women always earned less than men. So a woman writer needed to be able to have support from her husband. And again, having a husband meant having a family, which meant having more responsibilities, resulting into a lack of free time to write.

Here are some of the methods that the author developed which have been described on [everything2.com](http://everything2.com):

1. Denial of Agency: a man wrote the text, a woman could not be able to accomplish this...
2. Pollution of Agency: not actually art, not interesting
3. The Double Standard of Content: Some themes are more valuable, such as war compared to home life
4. False Categorizing: women artists are categorized as the wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, or lovers of male artists. If a woman writes, and that the subject is related to children in literature for instance, the subject is considered as not being serious.
5. Isolation: the myth of isolated achievement: only one work, or a short series of poems is considered great. Works related to feminism or politics are considered irrelevant if the author is not male.
6. Lack of models: There is no true model of a woman in writing community to inspire young women writers.

For further information, here are some links you might find interesting.

*How to Suppress Women's Writing* : excerpts from the book

<http://www.utexas.edu/utpress/excerpts/exrushow.html>

Coalescent, The cohering of disparate parts

<http://coalescent.livejournal.com/289848.html>

Everything2, How to Suppress Women's Writing

<http://everything2.com/title/How%2520to%2520Suppress%2520Women%2527s%2520Writing>