

How to write and publish your first book

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To Liza and Sally

The world will someday be reading your books ...

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7 questions you must answer before you write your book

▶ Failure to answer these questions can result in disappointment and 100s of hours of wasted effort

Writing and publishing a book can be a rewarding or frustrating experience depending on how you approach it. These seven questions will help you avoid frustration, and focus your energies on the steps that will bring you the best results for your investment of time, money and effort.

#1 / How do you define success with your book?

People write books for wildly different reasons; you need to be clear on yours. Are you writing because you want to see your name in print? Are you putting together a book to raise your credibility with your (potential) clients? Will the book be a failure if it fails to sell 100,000 copies? Do you mainly want to share an important message with family and friends? Do you want the prestige that comes from being published by a major publishing house? Are you seeking to start a movement or influence an election? How you define success will determine every step you take in writing and publishing your book.

Your notes:

#2 / How does this book fit into the big picture for you?

Does this book extend your career or ministry? Will you, for example, take this book with you on speaking engagements to reinforce and extend your message? Will you require your students to purchase it as a textbook for the course you offer? This is important to consider. If you are an established expert on microbiology and you write a book on microbiology, you have the contacts and the credentials to get your book into the hands of many people. But if you write a book on stamp collecting, you may need to start from scratch, requiring you to make a much greater investment of time and money to get the same results.

You will also want to consider whether your book will fit into a series or package of resources. It requires much more effort and expense to find a new customer for a new book, than it does to sell a second book to the same customer.

Your notes:

#3 / Who is your reader?

New authors frequently make the mistake of thinking everyone will be interested in their book. Bad idea. When you market to everyone, you interest no one. But when you identify a specific reader, e.g., single moms in their 30s, professional chefs, backyard mechanics, you give definition to the marketing process and make it much, much easier to sell your book. You should know who your reader is before you write your book. It helps you include and exclude material based on your reader's interests. Yes, you might have secondary audiences for your book. That's fine. Begin by marketing to your #1 target reader. Once you've achieved success there, you can branch out and begin tackling other groups.

Your notes:

#4 / Why will your reader want to own and read your book?

What motivates your reader? Will your reader get excited about your book because it will show her how to save money at the grocery store? Will she learn how to ask for a raise? Will your conflict resolution strategies empower your reader to enjoy a more satisfying marriage? What are your benefits? What does the book do for your reader, and why does your reader care? If you don't know the answers to these questions, it might be good to organize an informal focus group (invite a few friends over who represent this reader group) to talk about this so that you can hear the benefits expressed in the reader's own words. Take careful notes; this will be the foundation for your marketing campaign. By the way, even if your publisher takes care of marketing your book (a rarity for new authors), you need to have answers to these questions so that you can understand and contribute to your publisher's marketing efforts. Even if your book is fiction, you should have some idea who reads the type of fiction you are writing and why they read it. What does it do for them? If you don't know, start asking.

Your notes:

#5 / How do you want your reader to respond?

What action do you want your reader to take as a result of reading this book? Examples: Plan a short term missions trip. Invest in gold. Enroll in your course on real estate development. Change the way he thinks about marriage. Will you include any type of response device such as an order form in your book itself?

Your notes:

#6 / How will you get this book into the hands of your readers?

Examples: Offer the book as a premium for ministry donations of \$50 or more. Promote it to your email list. Back table sales at speaking events. Make it an add on sale on your sales route. (Also consider: What is your marketing strategy? How will you use your email list, bookstores, website, speaking engagements, joint ventures, ministry premiums, radio and TV interviews, press releases, volume sales, corporate sales, secondary rights to promote your book? What kind of sales do you project? Upon what do you base your projections? Have you published other (similar) books in the past?)

Your notes:

#7 / How are you going to meet your goals?

Do you know what steps you will take to achieve your goals? Do you know what to include and what not to include in your book? Do you have a clearly understand how you will frame your main message? (This is different than a topic. Marriage is a topic. “Your marriage will improve if you pray together with your spouse daily” is a main message.) Do you know what book features you will need to accomplish your goals? About how long will the book be? How many pages? What will the book look like? Will the book require any special features or formatting? Illustrations, charts, diagrams, footnotes, index, bibliography, photographs, etc. What publishing arrangements will you make? Will you self publish or work with a traditional publisher? Will you go with hard cover, paperback, digital download or audio book? What is your level of competence with each of these areas? How much time—realistically—do you have to do this? What do you want to do yourself, and what do you want to hire out? What source material will your writer use to create your book? Recordings of presentations? Interviews? Written or online materials? Other research?

Your notes:

Avoid these common mistakes made by first-time authors

Mistake: Writing the book before creating the plan

This is probably the most common mistake first-time authors make. Writing a book is a big job. It's so easy to become so focused on that job, that you never take the time to step back and look at the big picture. Why are you writing this book? What do you want to accomplish with it? How will you define success? Who is your reader? What is your reader looking for and why? How will you reach your reader? These kinds of questions influence the decisions you will make as you are writing the book. You don't want to finish writing your book only to discover that you've written the wrong book. As the old saying goes, "Measure twice, cut once." In the same way, plan first, then write the book.

Mistake: Signing contracts you should never sign

After putting all this work into a book, many first-time authors sign contracts with "publishers" who are little more than rip off artists. The contract gives the author a certain number of books at an inflated price. It often takes away the author's rights to their own copyrighted material. Sometimes the contract even locks the author in for any other books he or she writes.

Avoid this mistake by doing your homework, getting good advice, and not allowing yourself to get drawn in by a high-pressure sales presentation. You can publish your book for free, if you know how. Even if you don't know or don't want to do it yourself, there's no reason to spend thousands of dollars getting your book published.

Know what you're signing, and don't sign away your rights unless you are advised to do so by an experienced agent or other professional who is acting with your best interests in mind.

Mistake: Selling one book at a time

Here's the problem with selling one book at a time: It's too time-consuming and it's too expensive. It's much easier to sell multiple products and services to a single customer than it is to sell the same product to multiple customers. Have a plan that allows you to sell again and again to the same customer.

Mistake: Failing to write for the reader

When you write a journal, you write for yourself. But when you write a book, you write for someone else. You are providing a service to your reader. You may be entertaining, or informing, or persuading, or inspiring, but you are writing for your reader. Word choice, syntax, format, visuals—all of that matters because it matters to your reader. Your book succeeds when it succeeds with your reader. Many first-time authors overlook the importance of writing for their readers, and, as a result, their books don't get the traction they need.

Mistake: Failure to build a platform

If success for you is spelled out in sales or the influence your book needs to have, you need to work on developing a platform—that is, a growing group of people that look to you to provide entertainment, expertise or information. I recommend the book *Platform* by Michael Hyatt as a great first resource for this.

Mistake: Failing to think outside the box

Do you really need to work with a traditional publisher? Do you really need to sell your book in a bookstore? Do you really need to order an inventory of self-published books? Do you really need to sell your book at all? Could your book be a bridge to something else

—more and better clients, another more expensive product or service, a series of books? Do you have a plan in place if your book doesn't sell well?

Mistake: Poorly designed book interior

If you self publish, you'll probably design your own book's interior. Most beginning authors get it wrong. The margins you use, the font you use, the spacing you use, whether you justify the margins—all of these things matter. Research shows these things profoundly affect how people respond to your message or whether they even understand what you've written. Read *Type and Layout* by Colin Wheildon.

Mistake: Assuming books get published and sell because they are well written

Sorry. Wish it were true. Books should be well written. If everything else is equal, then a well-written book will do better than a poorly-written one. But everything else is not equal. The single most important factor is platform—that is, the number of people you influence. The more people you already influence, the more likely your book will become a best seller. If the president of the United States writes a book, almost any major publisher would jump at the chance to publish it, and the book will sell hundreds of thousands, even millions of copies. If your neighbor down the street writes a much better book, that author will need to work much, much harder to get the same kind of sales. The playing field is not level. Every serious author needs to be thinking about platform. If you work with an agent and/or a traditional publisher, be prepared to answer questions about platform. How many people can you influence to buy and read your book? How will you do it, and why will they go along with it?

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