



# So You Want to Write a Book

Advice for  
The Would-Be Author  
by Michael Finley

# So You Want to Write a Book

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Suddenly you have a hankering to leave your mark on the world, to tell your story. You're not a writer, but you have a great story. It's personal history, or the story of a successful endeavor, or the solution to a philosophical question that bugged you all your life. Whatever, it's your story, and now you want to see it find the light of day.

All you need, you tell yourself, is to find someone to put it all down for you.

I am someone who does just that -- a professional ghostwriter. I have done it every way you can imagine: my name has appeared on covers, and it has not appeared on covers. The books have been published by mainline publishers, and they have been published privately. They have gone on to success and readership, and they have gathered dust in heavy boxes.

What kinds of projects have I been involved in? These were some of my favorites:

- *Demass*, by M. M. Stuckey. Published by Productivity Press. Mel Stuckey is an exciting, Ross Perot-like software executive who had an idea for making large "dinosaur" companies function more effectively. He and I spent six months building a very interesting case for a kind downsizing that helps people instead of laying them off. It began as a vanity project, but was so good we located a third-party publisher.
- *When No One Else Can Help*, by Lucy Idol. Lucy started a school in Ohio in 1954 for severely retarded people. Fifty years later, she wanted to tell the world what it was like. We wrote it in the first person, all the way.

It is a history book that is also a successful fundraiser -- donors are laying down \$50 for a copy of this 100-page self-published booklet.

- *I, Bert Stern*. This is my favorite, though it was never published. A disbarred lawyer hired me to write a book pillorying the partners who betrayed him. What made it great? It was a novel, written in breathless Sydney Sheldon-style, complete with sex scenes in which Bert had sex with his betrayers' wives. When I handed him the manuscript, Bert burst into tears and said it was the most healing experience of his life.

It is a complicated, human, hyper-emotional thing, writing a book and finding an audience for it. So I have written this "think sheet" showing the sequence of most important decisions to be made, and the choices available at each step.

### **Should the book be written at all?**

This is the most important decision of all, and to be successful, you must make it before any other. Most books fail at this preliminary first step. Is your idea properly a *book idea*? Does it have the heft, the weight, the need for detail, that a book project has? Or does it work just as well as an article or brochure (or video, etc.)

The devil here is literary glamour. Many times people have an article idea and want it to be a book, because they are seduced by the cultural respect books are accorded. "Oh, you wrote a book!" "You see that man over there, by the bar? He's an author!"

But this glamour comes at a high cost. Books are expensive projects, hair-tearing to write, exasperating to manage ... and remarkably easy for your intended audience to ignore. Every year 6,000 books are published in the U.S. alone. But fewer and fewer succeed (let's define success as making it to a second printing) every year. A book today is like first class transportation -- a luxury for those who can afford it.

So the question is: Is the book such a worthy idea that you are willing to undergo great suffering for it? Only you can answer this question, because only you know your bank account, how much time you can throw at a project, and what your threshold is for psychological pain.

Do not underestimate this question. Sometimes the best book, given the expense of making one, is no book at all.

## Assuming you have chosen to go forward on the book idea, how shall the book be published?

There are many ways to publish a book, but the main choice here is between getting someone else to publish it, preferably a New York trade publisher, or paying to publish it yourself. It is a major fork in the road:

TRADE PUBLISHER	SELF-PUBLISH
PLUS: Glamour, "Third Party Approval"	MINUS: Taint of vanity publishing. You're all alone. No one will write a review about you in the <i>Times</i> .
They pay you.	No payment; in fact, you will have to shell out thousands.
You are doing something only you are good at, telling your story.	You are doing something you barely understand, publishing, distributing, and marketing books.
MINUS: You must compromise with publisher.	PLUS: You have tons of control. You can write whatever you like. (And have only yourself to blame when things go wrong.)
They are hard to get, and they don't care if your book drops through a hole in the earth.	Anyone can do it. And profit margins can be much better than publisher's royalties.

## Where does the money come from?

Who manages the risk for its failure? We all feel we have the right to tell our stories, that this is a "free country." The truth is that freedom of the press extends only to those that have presses. And it even costs them plenty.

These are the three traditional modes of financing a book project:

- Trade publishers underwrite books with advances against royalties: a sum of money they pay in advance that they fully expect the book to earn upon being published. This system has seen several hundred

years of success, but is under attack today. Publishers feel they are publishing too many books that don't carry their weight – unprofitable “midlist” titles. Publishers want to publish only best-sellers, and seek our gimmicks – celebrity authors and authors with marketing expertise – to assure profitability.

- Some publishers are experimenting, moving away from royalties and toward "writer for hire" contracts -- lump sum payments. Others pay no advance at all, figuring that the only authors they want to deal with – businesses, really -- are well-heeled and can subsidize their own success.
- Authors self-publish. They may start their own desktop publishing companies, creating books with a laser printer, which they pass on to printers to duplicate and bind. Or they subcontract the entire job to a publication manager.
- Authors are likewise experimenting. Web-based books save money, trees, and postage. Privately published books can be targeted at specific audiences, and can sometime charge a premium price (like investment newsletters that only a few hundred people buy, but don't mind paying \$5000 annually for).

Everything is in tension. If you do one thing here, it affects another aspect over there. Every dollar you invest has to be recouped. A generous deal with a ghostwriter may mean less profit for you. (Or, it may motivate the writer to do great work, and increase the size of the profit pie.) A generous deal from a publisher may spur you to do great work ... or it may spur you to go on a desperate bender. Hey, you're not a writer!

Depending on which fork in the road you took, your next question will be very different.

## **Hiring a writer**

Hiring a writer is hard. They aren't usually listed in the Yellow Pages. The only ones you've heard of, who've written celebrity biographies, are busy, and cost a lot. *Literary Market Place*, a reference you can find at your library, has a list. But you should probably look locally, because you will want someone you can meet with frequently, face to face. One way is to look at local magazines and newspapers, find a writer whose style you like,

and give that person a call. Sometimes you have to talk to ten people before you find someone who is not busy, who doesn't laugh at the money you are offering, and doesn't laugh at your idea, either. Expect to have a relationship with this person, because books are complex tasks often involving false starts, changed plans, and the rub of personalities against one another. If you don't like a person, or they give you the creeps, don't hire them.

What you need to settle early on are a host of questions:

*How do you pay the writer?* The dream ghostwriter (from the customer's point of view) wants to take equal risk with you and get paid on the other end, with a percentage of the gross. Dream on -- only a beginner will take this deal.

## Compensation

There are several common ways to compensate the writer:

- ✓ You can pay him or her a lump sum at the beginning of the project and an equal sum at the end (or monthly increments). This sum has to be motivating. It's no good to bottle up a writer with a low wage for an eight-month project -- he won't survive to finish the book.
- ✓ You can arrange for an hourly wage. This assures that the writer is not taken advantage of. But this turns the author into a meter-watcher. In practice, writers generally take less per hour for large projects than they do for hourly projects.
- ✓ You can feed the writer to a publisher. Whatever advance the book gets goes to the writer. This assumes the book has already been sold, which is a different problem.
- ✓ You can work out a hybrid deal: X dollars upfront, and an unknown number of dollars based on the book's performance post-publication. (These last two deals assume a trade publisher.)

## What does a ghostwriter do?

There are several approaches to ghostwriting.

- *"Standard Issue."* You pay him to tell your story, he writes what you say, he gets no credit on the cover.

- *"As Told To ..."* Writer shares credit. If you arrange this yourself, you may pay the writer less, because you are feeding his or her ego with the byline. But if the writer is an experienced pro assigned by the publisher, to enhance the deal, you may have to pay a lot.
- *"The Project Manager"* Ghostwriters often wind up running the entire project – planning, writing, editing, printing, marketing -- because they know what is involved, and you don't. They may help you get an agent, introduce you to publishers, or be the publication manager if you decide to print the book yourself. These kinds are very useful in marketing the book post-publication, too, because they know what promotional efforts will bear fruit, and which will die on the vine.
- *"The Amanuensis."* This writer is your muse. To the outsider this person merely seems to take notes and write them up, in the style that you dictated them. But these writers are more than that. Their value is that they create a respectful environment in which you can speak freely and be yourself -- your very best self. They draw out the best you have in you.
- *"The Creative."* A lone ranger. This person can't write until he makes *your* story *his*. The results can be spectacular, but the match must be good, or you will feel steamrollered by your subcontractor.
- *"The Hired Gun."* This person is a mercenary, a professional. The good news is he knows what he is doing. The outstanding question is, Does he care?

The writer relationship is everything. You will struggle at first, trying to get on the same page. Since you become team members almost instantly, it is likely to be awkward at first. The crying need is to get beyond "politeness" so you can honestly say what you like and don't like. Many projects fail despite great intentions, because writer and client can't find a common language ... or ... because the client does not understand that a first draft is usually pretty bad.

## Defining success

- **Ghostwriters** like money. But they also love interesting assignments. If you have a story they can sink their teeth into, they will work hard for you and your chances of success will be good.

- **Publishers** like books that sell themselves. If it takes a long time to explain, nothing happens. They are happiest when they feel they're walking down a "safe" path, with manageable risks -- but can still tell themselves they're on the cutting edge.
- **Authors** ... that's you. You've succeeded when you feel that you "got through." Making money is great, but for most people the passion is about finding a way to tell people the story that is burning inside you, and making contact with enough readers, that you can tell yourself the idea is still alive. And it is especially satisfying when you made good choices along the way, found good people to partner with, and saw your vision through to completion.



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## About the Author



Combine his ghostwriting, his collaborations with others, and his own work, Michael Finley has written over 100 hundred books. His specialty: topics relating to groups, culture and change. His website “Future Shoes” features a treasure trove of articles and essays about what we are becoming. Mike’s book with Harvey Robbins, *The New Why Teams Don’t Work*, won the Booz-Allen & Hamilton Global Business Book Award for “Best Management Book, 1995, The Americas.”

Along with Arthur C. Clarke, Bill Gates, Nicholas Negroponte, Alvin Toffler, Charles Handy, Al Gore, and Tony Blair, Mike was named a “Master of the Wired World” in 1998 by Financial Times Press.