

# Sell Your Nonfiction Book

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# Introduction

Writing nonfiction books is fun. I've published six of them, three in multiple editions.

But I couldn't make a living at it; hardly anyone can.

The arithmetic is just about impossible. Suppose you could write 2,000 words a day of finished, publishable nonfiction — about eight double-spaced pages of manuscript. Writing for 30 days without a break, you could complete a 60,000-word regional history or family memoir.

For that book, if it's your first and you're not a famous person, you might expect an advance of perhaps \$5,000 (or much, much less) from an American publisher. A Canadian hardcover publisher would pay perhaps half that. In both countries, some publishers pay no advance at all.

But even if you did get an advance, you wouldn't get your money at the end of the month. You'd get it months after your publisher accepted the manuscript (which would be months after you submitted it). You'd get it in installments — probably a third on signing the contract, a third on acceptance of the revised manuscript, and a third on publication.

If the book sold extremely well, you might see more money in a year or two. Otherwise, the advance would be it.

Well, suppose you launch straight into your next book, finish it in a month, and sell it also. And keep doing it every month, for years.

Some writers do just that. After a few years, if they attract enough readers, they will indeed start bringing in enough income every month to

allow them to write full-time. Their advances may increase dramatically, perhaps to \$25,000 a book or even more. Then they can afford to slow down and take more time.

Only a tiny fraction of published authors succeed this way. And if they don't enjoy what they write, they're no better off than when they made a living flipping hamburgers.

In any case, most publishers don't want to bring out a title a month from a single author, so you'd have to publish under pen names, or deal with several publishers, or both. You'd spend as much time keeping track of your contracts as you'd spend writing.

You could also make a case that full-time writing can isolate an author from the stimulus of the world of ordinary work; pretty soon you might be able to write only about the sufferings of the full-time writer.

Even if you're fated to become a fabulously wealthy author someday, right now you've got to pay the rent and buy the groceries. So you've got a day job. You probably have friends, a spouse or partner, kids, a social life, a dental appointment. They all make demands on your time. If you take three months off, lock yourself in your study, and bash away at your book, your friends and family pay a certain price whether they want to or not.

I know exactly the predicament you're in, because I've been in it all my writing life. For 40 years I held a full-time day job as a college instructor, and I also write and edit for an online magazine. My wife and I share the housework, we raised our kids together, and we've dealt with all the usual crises and demands on our time. Whether I find inspiration or not, the dogs need a walk and the grass needs mowing.

Nevertheless, this is my 21st published book since 1968, including 6 nonfiction books, 3 textbooks, a children's book, and 11 novels — plus over 600 articles. I've done it by writing a little bit for a short time almost every day. It adds up with surprising speed.

Better said, it adds up if you don't make time-consuming mistakes. You can write 5,000 words a day and be no further ahead if you look at it the next morning and decide to scrap it all as hopeless. If you take a couple of years to write an unpublishable book, you're not really better off than the day you started.

The key to successful writing for the novice is to reduce wasted effort to a minimum by *doing things right the first time*.

A simple example: You write a pretty fair self-help or technical book, but it's in the form of a single-spaced manuscript full of grammatical errors and bad punctuation. The editors who see this manuscript will rightly decide that you have passed on too much work to them. They have plenty of other equally good submissions to choose from, by writers who've bothered to proofread and format their manuscripts properly. So why should they spend extra time cleaning up your mess?

A less obvious example: You write a highly literate popular-science book and send it to a string of prestigious publishers. But they don't publish popular science, don't know the market, and aren't about to plunge into it with an unknown author like you. Your book gets nowhere.

An all-too-obvious example: You decide to write a memoir about your amazing family; you write 20 pages, and bog down. Three weeks later you go back, rewrite the 20 pages, and bog down again. And so it goes for months or years.

A twenty-first century example: You have a great idea for a book but it requires a lot of research — into your family history, or your unit's experience in Afghanistan, or how people cope with Lou Gehrig's Disease. You have no idea how to find that information. Worse yet, you hear that book publishers are in big economic trouble and won't consider anything but a "blockbuster" book.

If you know what you're doing, and you plan properly, you can write a book in an hour or two a day, including highly efficient online research. You can complete it within a year, market it before it's even finished, and send it out with reasonable hopes of seeing it in print within a few months. If need be, you can publish it yourself — and maybe get a regular publisher to sell it for you. You can do so without sacrificing your regular income, your family, or other activities.

I know you can, because I've done it. This book shows you how.

# **PART 1: PLANNING**



# 1

## Developing Efficient Work Habits

Different writers face different advantages and drawbacks in forming good writing habits. The circumstances of your personal life may make it easy or hard to find writing time, but time itself is not the real issue — it's *habit*.

Writing must be something you do regularly, like brushing your teeth. Wait for inspiration and you'll wait even longer for a complete, published book. The efficient writer exploits opportunity, but the best writing habits flourish in routine.

### Establishing a Routine

Set aside some time every day when you can work undisturbed for an hour or two. Times like first thing in the morning, during lunch, or after dinner are ideal. Choose a time when you can set aside other demands. Ideally, it should be at the same time each day.



Your family and friends will soon build their own routines around yours. If you are lucky, they will begin to notice your unscheduled appearances during your allotted writing time, and will send you packing back to your desk.

Keep your writing equipment (paper, pens, software manuals, etc.) in your writing place, close at hand. Try to find a writing time when few people phone or visit. Many authors have written books between 5:00 a.m. and waking their kids up. If a cup of coffee and some background music make you feel less lonely, by all means enjoy them.

Use household chores as thinking time. This is a perfect chance to review what you've done so far and to consider where your writing should go next. Walking the dog or vacuuming the carpet can provide more ideas than you expect.

This is really just “controlled daydreaming.” Let your mind free-wheel in a particular direction. Think about what the opening should be in the next chapter, or how to present both sides of a controversy. The process won't happen with nearly the same ease if you just sit and stare at the wall. You need to be up and moving in some automatic pattern in order to get your best thinking done. Being productive yields productivity!

Don't lean on others for editorial advice and encouragement, particularly those with whom you're emotionally involved. Spouses, friends, and roommates rarely have both the editorial skill and the tact to express their thoughts without infuriating you or breaking your heart. Empty praise will get you nowhere; unconstructive criticism can destroy your book in an instant.

Instead, be your own editor: set aside regular times to write yourself letters discussing your own work, articulating what's good and less good about it. In the process, you'll be able to solve small problems that could otherwise grow into full-blown writer's block.

On a computer, the letters can form a continuous journal, recording your reactions to the evolving work. Checking back to the first journal entries can help keep you on track of — or dramatically show how far you've moved from — your original concept.

Writing a letter to yourself is especially helpful if you're beginning to have anxiety about the book. Sometimes we try to suppress that anxiety, which only makes it worse. Anxiety turns to frustration and despair, and finally we abandon the whole project.

If you can actually write down what bothers you about your subject or your style, the answer to the problem often suggests itself. The act of turning our chaotic thoughts into orderly sentences seems to lead to much quicker and more satisfying solutions.

Here's a slightly scandalous tip: Don't respect text just because it's on the page. Just because you've written something doesn't mean it has a right to exist. If your internal editor can find a better way to say something, junk the original version and go with the new one. If you can't find a better way, and the passage really isn't good, junk it anyway and try again.

In addition to these self-addressed letters, keep a daily log of your progress. Word processors' word-count functions are powerful encouragers. The log can give you a sense of accomplishment, especially on big projects, and can enable you to set realistic completion deadlines.

For example, if you know you can write 500 words in an hour, and you write three hours a week, you can have a completed book manuscript of 75,000 words in 50 weeks. If you write ten hours a week, the manuscript will be complete in 15 weeks.

Compile a "project bible." This is a list of facts, names, and so on that you expect to be using for constant reference. If you have some important research findings you plan to use, put them in the bible along with their sources. If you don't have a laptop, the best format for this bible may be a loose-leaf binder you can carry with you. (A word of caution: If your bible gets too big to carry easily, its purpose is defeated.)

## Taking Advantage of Opportunity

If you decide you just can't write unless you're enthroned at your computer with Mozart on your iPod and no one else in the house, you're only making life harder for yourself.

Your routine will always contain “dead time” when you’re away from home (or at least away from your workplace) with no other task at hand. You might be waiting in a doctor’s office, on a bus, or trapped in a large, dull meeting.

By carrying your notebook bible, you can use that dead time constructively by recording at least a few lines of a rough draft. You might instead jot down some background notes about your project or a self-editing idea that’s just occurred to you. You can then use these when you’re back at your desk producing finished text.

These are general habits that will help you at all stages of the book-writing process. But you may also find that you need to understand those stages and adapt your habits to each of them. You won’t do yourself any good if you plunge into the writing phase before you’ve worked out a decent outline.

In the following chapters, we’ll take a look at the stages of planning your book, and then consider some techniques to maximize your efficiency in each of them.