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1

So You Want to Be a Writer

Whether a boy will grow up to be a firefighter or a physician, an architect or a teacher, his success will probably depend on his ability to communicate through written language.

William Pollack, Real Boys

Being a writer is like being an actor. The Al Pacinos and Meryl Streeps paid their dues by working other jobs, showing up for auditions, and grabbing whatever experience they could to shape their resumes. They even worked for free.

One of the most successful modern writers, J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, was an unemployed single mother living on public assistance when she wrote Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone. She penned the bulk of her novel at a café table during her daughter’s naps. The manuscript was rejected by at least one agent before another company took it on, and then it was sent to several publishers before Bloomsbury accepted it and ended up with a huge phenomenon on its hands.

Unfortunately, despite the example of J.K. Rowling, there is no get-rich-quick scheme for becoming a writer. It’s about the
process. Sometimes it’s a matter of just getting started. For many, that’s the biggest challenge of all.

If you want to be a writer, there’s only one thing to do. Write. Write every day. Start a journal. Don’t worry about style and flow at the beginning. Just get in the habit of writing.

Write what you know. Coming up with book ideas starts in your own backyard. Jill Lublin is the co-author of Guerrilla Publicity and Networking Magic. She is a renowned strategist and international speaker, CEO of the strategic consulting firm Promising Promotion, and the founder of GoodNews Media, a company specializing in positive news. She is currently the host of the nationally syndicated radio show Do the Dream, on which she interviews celebrities who have achieved their dreams. Jill also has a television pilot, GoodNews TV.

“I came up with the idea for my book because I was an expert in publicity and actually doing it for people for over 20 years,” says Jill. “I wanted to put all my information into a book form to make it simple for other businesspeople, entrepreneurs, speakers, and authors to do their own publicity without spending a fortune.”

Sometimes book ideas are clear in the author’s mind. Other times, “writer’s block” sets in. There are several books that can help you get started. For example, books like What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter and A Writer’s Workbook: Daily Exercises for the Writing Life by Caroline Sharp contain simple exercises to help you tap into your own experiences and use your creativity to write in descriptive detail. (See Appendix 1 for more detail on these books and other publishing and writing resources.)

Even if you have an idea for a book, you may not know how to get started. To get unstuck, read. Read both fiction and nonfiction, regardless of which direction you intend to go in your own writing. Reading allows you to become more creative with your thoughts and expression. It gives you ideas.

Take note of other writers’ styles when you read. Look at their opening lines. Do they grab your attention with the first sentence or do you have to read to page 100 before you can get into the story? How do they close a chapter? How do they shape their introduction?
Keep notebooks handy, especially beside your bed or in the car. When an idea comes to you, you must write it down immediately — even if it’s 3 a.m. If you don’t, it’s gone. You’ll never get it back. Some of my best ideas have come in the middle of the night or in the shower. It can be an opening sentence, a title, or an idea for a book. It’s tough when it happens in the shower. I’ll repeat it over and over until I get out, and then I’ll write it down, even if I’m dripping wet.

A pocket tape recorder works well in lieu of a notepad. Such a recorder costs between $40 and $60 and the microcassette tapes are quite inexpensive. Keep it with you everywhere to record ideas as they occur to you.

When you do have an idea for a book, don’t wait until you have it all mapped out before you start writing. Keep in mind that, just as movies aren’t filmed in sequence, books aren’t generally researched or written in chapter order. Just make sure you get everything down “on paper” first. As you’re researching a particular part of the book, or thinking about a particular scene in a novel, you might have a brain wave about how to present it. Start writing. You can’t be sure of remembering the bright idea when you get to that part of the book.

If writing stuff down seems overwhelming, or if your hectic schedule makes it difficult to sit down at your computer, use a pocket tape recorder and dictate the chapters into it. Stockpile the tapes until you’re ready to transcribe. You may have to do more than the usual amount of editing, but what matters is getting started.

Don’t forget to back up everything you write on your computer. It’s nearly impossible to rewrite from memory. Back up onto two separate disks and print off a hard copy. One of the disks should be stored off-site. After all, what good is a backup if the house burns down or a hurricane hits? You might even take the step of e-mailing the manuscript to yourself every time you update it. That way, if the worst happens, you can access your e-mail off-site.

Also, be sure to save your work as you go. I usually save after every paragraph or couple of sentences. It’s not that tedious when you think about what might happen should the power suddenly go off. Call it preventive medicine. That extra second it takes to mouse your pointer to the Save icon or hit Ctrl+S will save you endless grief.
Besides backing up your work, you must protect your intellectual property at all times by having the most up-to-date antivirus software protection, firewall protection, and spyware protection. Even with the most up-to-date protection, gremlins can still get in, so it’s important to scan your computer regularly for worms, viruses, and other nasties.

**Have Something to Say That Readers Want to Hear**

Why are you writing a book? What do you want it to accomplish? How do you want to be remembered?

This is something you need to address before you begin. Remember, you’re looking at hundreds of hours and perhaps one or two years of time invested, with no guarantees that anyone will read the resulting manuscript.

*Never* write a book for the sake of writing a book. Who cares? Who is going to read it? Everyone wants to write a book. What makes yours special? What do you have to offer the world? What experiences can you share that might help or encourage others? What is your expertise? Why would someone be interested in your story?

Your book must have something to offer readers because, in reality, it’s about them, not you. What do they want to read? What do they need? Your book could be entertaining, funny, a good story. It could offer tips on business, inspiration, or expert commentary on a topical subject. But you won’t sell a single copy if it doesn’t appeal to readers. It doesn’t matter what the book is about, it has to be written for the reader. Perhaps the best measure is to ask yourself, if someone else wrote the same book, would I read it?

**Write What You Know — Or Do Your Research**

According to Richard North Patterson, author of *No Safe Place*:

Writing is akin to method acting. Before a writer can render a fully convincing world, he must inhabit that world and every major character that lives there.
Whether your book is science fiction, nonfiction, or a children’s book, make it believable. Do your homework. Since Starbucks was established in 1971, you wouldn’t use it as a backdrop for a story about the 1950s rock ‘n’ roller Buddy Holly who died in 1959. If you are writing about something that happened during the US Civil War, research what it was like to live in those times. What did people wear? What did they eat? How did they make a living?

If you are writing nonfiction, use real-life examples, statistics, and expert testimony to bring your argument to life.

Write what you know. Write what you’re passionate about. When you do, it comes across to the reader.

Make your book personal in the sense that it’s your work, even if it’s filled with expert interviews. Quotations can strengthen your argument, but if you put a quote from a famous person in every paragraph, the reader might get the impression you’re just filling up space. Make sure material you use from other people — whether it’s drawn from conversation, formal interviews, books, or articles — is relevant to your subject and to the point you’re making.

Depending on the circumstances under which your book is being published, if you feel you must quote more than one or two lines from another author’s writing, you will have to request permission to use the material from that author’s publisher. (See Sample 1 for an example of a letter requesting permission to reprint.) You may or may not get an answer. If you don’t receive a response, or if permission is denied, go to Plan B: get creative and use your own words.

There is a difference between borrowing ideas and plagiarism. Plagiarism is passing off someone else’s creation as your own. Obviously, writers quote other writers’ works all the time. The difference is that they also credit those writers and indicate where the material came from. Plagiarism is serious business. Make sure, if you use another writer’s quote, that you cite the source (the author and where it came from). Theft of someone else’s written work is a one-way ticket to the reject pile, if not to the courtroom.

Many people can come up with the same idea at the same time, but not all of them will act on it. Ideas cannot be copyrighted until they are put into a physical form. Then it’s the physical form that’s copyrightable (the text, song, movie, etc.), not the idea. (That’s why there are so many books and movies with the same basic theme, but all worked out in different ways.)
SAMPLE 1
SAMPLE PERMISSION REQUEST LETTER

July 30, 20--

Permissions Manager
All-Star Publishing
111 First Place Road
New York, NY 11110

Dear Permissions Manager:

I’d like to request permission to (reprint, republish, copy, distribute, or use) the following material:

- Title, Author, Copyright Date, ISBN if applicable
- Pages as they appear in the publication
- Text, distinguishing characteristics if image, URL for web page content, etc.

The material will appear in my upcoming book, *Self-Publishing for Everyone*, which will be published in October 20-- by My Publishing Company. I plan to limit the use of your material to (the book’s text, marketing/promotional materials, etc.) and will not use it any other way.

I’m hoping you will grant me permission to use this material for my book or put me in touch with the person who would authorize this request. I would appreciate receiving your response to this permission request by August 31, 20--

Sincerely,

I.M.A. Writer
Find a Niche

You don’t want your book to be like everyone else’s. Perhaps you have an idea of the type of book you want to write, you know why you want to write it, but you haven’t quite mastered the theme. Most of the time, we find our book topics from our own experiences and in the people we know.

Warren Redman is a professional speaker, coach, trainer, and president of the Centre for Inner Balancing. He has written 15 books, 3 of them self-published, including *The 9 Steps to Emotional Fitness* and *Achieving Personal Success*:

All my books have arisen from my experience and the development of ideas, concepts, and practices that worked for me. The book writing was a natural progression and continuation of my learning and desire to share that learning with a wider audience.

Tom Douglas is an award-winning journalist and author who once worked as communications advisor for Veterans Affairs Canada. He has produced four books, one self-published and three with Altitude Publishing. His book *Canadian Spies* has sold over 19,000 copies. He describes how he came up with his topics:

I wrote a feature about my mother trying to find Christmas presents that my inebriated father had mistakenly thrown out in the garbage. The local Ontario Provincial Police constable took her to the garbage dump, where she rooted around with her bare hands. She didn’t find them, but the story had a definitely happy ending. I submitted it to the *Toronto Star* and they ran it as a Christmas article one year. The next year I submitted a second Christmas story about a German refugee giving me his old lead toy soldiers as an exchange gift in grade three. My wife, Gail, encouraged me to set down other childhood memories in print, hence the book *Some Sunny Day*. When I couldn’t get a publisher to take on the manuscript, I went to Booklocker.com in the United States, and they published it at my expense. I sold about 500 copies to friends, relatives, and attendees at several book readings.
The *Toronto Star* was also instrumental in my publishing *Canadian Spies* with Altitude. I had met some French-Canadian veterans in 1984 when I was communications assistant to the minister of Veterans Affairs. We traveled to Brittany together for a ceremony where the French government honored these heroes for risking their lives to save downed Allied airmen. When a radio personality criticized French-Canadians as being cowardly, in an article picked up by the *Star*, I wrote a letter to the editor about the exploits of the men I had met. I pitched the story to Altitude Publishing, and they bought it.

*D-Day* was a natural follow-up. It was a tribute to my dad and the others who served in World War II. Also, to reveal my crass side, it was written to capitalize on [the] 60th anniversary of D-Day.

*Great Canadian War Heroes* resulted from a request by Altitude to keep my successful run of military books going.

While Tom Douglas wrote from his personal experiences and passions, Lyle Manery used his business experience to pen a book. Both kept the reader in mind. Lyle Manery is a chartered life underwriter, chartered financial consultant, speaker, coach, life member of the Million Dollar Round Table, and two-time Top of the Table member. He has authored 11 books, including *Laughing at Life* and *The Ultimate Tax Shelter*. His self-published book, *No Salesman Will Call?*, sold over 5,000 copies:

In 1992–93, there was a company that advertised on TV in an attempt to sell direct to the public. They finished each advertisement with, “No commissioned salesperson will call.” That irritated me. The prospective buyer would have to talk with someone, and that person would get paid to make sales. That company was denigrating commissioned salespeople, even though they are better qualified. Hence, the title.

Beyond that, there were a large number of books and articles being written which attacked the life insurance product, the companies that designed
the product, and the agents who sold it. Invariably, one point of attack made by each and every author was about commissions. These authors had no credentials to write about the life insurance industry or its products. Certainly, they did not have a right to generalize about the intentions of all agents.

Why do people accept the words from a CA [Chartered Accountant], just because he has an unrelated certificate? Why would anyone agree with just any pronouncement from a college professor of English or of business administration? These people do not necessarily know about everything merely because they know more than most people about something. Why does a celebrity, a doctor, a lawyer, an actor, or an author take on an air of importance in the public’s mind? What right do these people have to advise people on topics outside their areas of expertise?

In No Salesman Will Call?, I critiqued over 55 authors and writers whose books and articles were sheer nonsense. No one else was prepared to answer them — so I did it!

Ron and Adrianna Edwards are the principals of Focus Strategic Communications Incorporated, a full-service communications firm that offers book-packaging production and marketing services to the book publishing industry. They also function as literary agents. Between the two of them, they have nearly 50 years’ experience in publishing and marketing communications.

How do they come up with ideas for book projects?

There is no simple answer to this, but the short answer is that we look for gaps. Start by doing your homework. Study the catalogs of the publishers you are interested in working for and see what is missing. Then develop an idea to fill the gaps. The more radical or nontraditional your idea, the harder the sell will be. Publishers are a very conservative lot and are not, by and large, big risk takers. They want new and unique ideas but in a traditional, conservative vein.
To come up with your own niche, ask yourself the following questions:

- What do you do that is different from everyone else?
- What advice do you get asked for all the time?
- What are you most known for?
- What do you know for sure?
- If your book is about business, why do customers buy your service?
- What are your business’s strengths and weaknesses?
- What are some historic trends in an industry, profession, city, region, or other niche?
- How has a topic changed over the years? For example, how is medicine and the way it’s delivered to patients different today than it was in the 1950s?
- What are some of the challenges you faced while growing your business, raising your kids, learning to overcome a disability?
- How do your management skills impact your staff, your household environment, or your ability to cope with challenges?
- What is your role in the industry you work in?
- Why do people find you fascinating?
- What do you say to those just starting out in a new venture, from marriage to business to a hobby?
- What isn’t being said about the industry you work in?
- What is your undying passion?

Everybody has something they can write about. Perhaps the best question you can ask yourself is: What are people always coming to me for? Relationship advice? If that’s the case, you don’t have to be a psychologist to write a book on relationships. You could do it in the style of an advice columnist, with questions and answers on various relationship topics. Or you could interview several professionals and create a book on the best relationship advice from the experts. There are many ways you can make a book credible through exhaustive research.
Are people always asking you for business advice? You can use a book to elevate your business credibility. Imagine you’re soliciting a contract that could mean more lucrative jobs down the road. Maybe the potential client could raise your company to the next level, allowing you to expand and hire more people. The client must decide between you and another individual with exactly the same credentials and business experience. Your competitor leaves the interview saying, “Here’s a copy of my brochure. It talks about some of the things we discussed.” However, when your interview is finished, you say, “Here’s a copy of my book. It talks about some of the things we discussed.” Which candidate do you think the company will be inclined to hire?

The following book ideas are examples of finding a niche arising from your passion:

- Histories (write about your company, community, family, hobbies, etc.)
- Self-help books (if your company is a cleaning company, offer tips on how to get tough stains out of carpet; if you’re a parent, write about how to get the most out of your kids, how to shop on a budget, etc.)
- Business and management advice (Dan Seidman’s book *The Death of 20th Century Selling* is a hilarious look at 50 bad sales calls and how one can learn from them)
- Cookbooks (if your family and friends can’t get enough of your cooking, you might be able to put together a best-selling cookbook)
- Inspiration (what can others learn from your overcoming a challenge? What have you done that can save others money and grief?)

Anyone can write a book, but it takes some thought to write a book that other people will want to read. Look into your own experiences and expertise to come up with an angle, and once you do, you may find there is more than one book inside you.