

## HOW I WRITE A BOOK FOR PUBLICATION

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From time to time I receive requests from friends to tell them how I go about writing books. I have decided to put a few thoughts in writing for what they might be worth. I have never taught writing, so I do not know how many different approaches to writing a book there might be. I suppose someone has come up with a taxonomy, but I am not inclined to research it. Meanwhile, I will be personal and just tell my own story with whatever points come to mind.

- **There is a gift involved.** I have an advantage over many fellow authors in that I do not have to rewrite. I have been told by experts that this is unusual because most authors do rewrite extensively. I mention it because I must admit that writing is easier for me than it is for most, and that's probably why I have been able to turn out so many books. I don't know how to teach this skill. It would be like asking Tiger Woods to teach you to putt like he does.
- **You can't write what you don't know.** I do not identify myself primarily as a writer, but as a teacher. Writing to me is simply one delivery system, among others, for teaching. There are professional writers, like a *Time* magazine reporter for example, who research a topic for the express purpose of writing something on it, but I am not one of those. As a teacher I specialize in a limited number of fields (missions, church growth, prayer, spiritual warfare, and apostolic/workplace ministries) and I try to keep on the cutting edge of research in these fields. That more than consumes my available time. My writing is limited to what my research in those fields uncovers.
- **You learn through strict time management.** I learn first of all by reading. I subscribe to many periodicals and I continually secure the new books in my fields. I read all of my second class mail on airplanes. I am mostly print-oriented, so I do not spend much time with audio or video tapes, I do not use the Internet on my computer, and I do not ordinarily watch television. I stay in hotel rooms almost half of my nights, and I might go weeks or months without ever turning a hotel TV on. My news comes from newspapers and news magazines because with them I can decide what I am interested in spending my time on. With television, someone else decides my agenda for me. I also spend as much time as I can with people who know more about certain things than I do. I am very disciplined in time management, and I can turn out as much work in an airplane and in airports as I could if I were home.
- **Practice speed reading.** Having a predetermined mental agenda helps in speed reading. I can read many books in 30 minutes because in most books there is relatively little new content that will help me develop my particular agenda. I have developed a skill in sorting out the writer's agenda from mine and spending time only on what contributes to my agenda. Does that mean that I miss a lot of interesting material? Yes, but I find it much more productive to invest my time on *relevant* material than to waste time with *interesting* material.

- **Collect ideas.** As I learn, I am constantly on the lookout for new ideas. I always carry pencil and paper to jot them down as they appear. Some of these ideas will be topics for new books, others will be chapters, others sections within chapters. Since books are so full of ideas, I develop a library on each new subject that I add to my agenda by actually purchasing the relevant books and dedicating a new book shelf to those books. I constantly tear articles out of magazines. After I read a book I photocopy pages with helpful material and quotes. I use vertical files to store notes, photocopies, articles, and other things that relate to my subject. When it comes time to write a book, I usually have a fat file on each proposed chapter. I researched the New Apostolic Reformation for five years before I did a book on it, and at this point I have now published six books in the field. I researched ministry in the workplace for four years before I wrote *The Church in the Workplace*.
- **There's no use writing what won't be published.** Try to stay ahead of the pack. Don't set out to research what has been done before, but give your time to cutting-edge ideas. Many Christian leaders are preoccupied with the past instead of the future. I try to research and write on things that others have not thought much about. I try to keep a number of new ideas in the incubator, allowing them to hatch in sequence. I try to be sensitive to God's timing as to when they should hatch into a new book. In all cases be sure that you are saying something in your book that people will want to read. The only thing that justifies a publisher doing your book is the expectation that enough people will buy the book in order to pay the bills and show a profit.
- **Develop your outline.** Divide your topic into logical sections which will eventually become chapters. Then, to the extent possible, develop several subpoints for each chapter. I like to teach from my outlines at least once before writing the thoughts because feedback from my students helps knock off the rough edges.
- **Determine the length of your book.** With the electronic age and T.V. sound bites, the attention span of American readers is shorter than it used to be. Some works of fiction by skillful writers are an exception to this. But in my non-fiction religious market, books are getting shorter. I used to write books of 60,000-70,000 words ( $\pm$  200 pp.), but now I'm shooting for 25,000 to 45,000 words. It is important to scope the size of the book ahead of time to avoid overkill on research or including material in certain chapters that you will later need to delete. Beginning writers almost always write too much. Think two books or three books instead of one.
- **Assign chapter lengths.** Go back to your outline and assign a certain number of words for each chapter which total the number of words you desire in the whole book. Then do the same, if possible, for your chapter subpoints. When you write, make each chapter a separate document on your computer so you can constantly check up on your word count. If you discipline yourself in this process you will save incredible amounts of time and grief. The writing will be much more manageable because you will only have to write 300 or 500 or 1000 words on a given subpoint—a piece of

cake. The preparation takes time, but it is time well invested, so try not to take short cuts.

- **Begin the search for a publisher.** The earlier you can locate a publisher for your book, the better. There are three general ways to publish a book:

(1) **Self-publishing.** You do the manuscript, format your pages, and find a printer who will print the quantity you desire. The advantage of this is that you know your book will be published. You own all the books and the proceeds are yours to keep. The trade-off is that your book may look unprofessional, you have to market the book, and you must invest the up-front capital necessary to publish it. Discerning readers often have a lower regard for a self-published book, referring to it as “vanity press.”

An alternative way of self-publishing is to contract a publisher who will walk you through this process, providing editorial assistance, graphic design and formatting, printing, and other services, depending on your budget. Two possibilities are Brentwood Christian Press (4000 Beallwood Ave., Columbus GA 31904, 800-334-8861, [Brentwood@aol.com](mailto:Brentwood@aol.com)), and Bethany Press International, (6820 West 115<sup>th</sup> St., Bloomington MN 55438, 952-914-7400, [info@BethanyPress.com](mailto:info@BethanyPress.com)).

(2) **Co-publishing.** An established publishing house agrees to publish your manuscript, providing you place a pre-publication order of a certain number of copies. Although there is no assurance beforehand that the publisher will accept your manuscript, the chances that they will are higher because they know they will sell enough copies (to you) to pay their bills. Your book will have a professional look, and the publisher will care for ISBN numbers and copyrights. Currently Creation House Press (600 Rinehart Rd., Lake Mary FL 32746; (407) 333-0600) is serving authors with co-publishing agreements. Keep in mind that you will need up-front capital, you will do most of the marketing, and that some readers will still put the “vanity press” label on your book.

(3) **Commercial publishing.** An established publisher accepts your manuscript, publishes your book at their expense, markets the book, and pays you a royalty on sales. Obviously, this is the preferred route, although it is not easy for a first-time author to break into the ranks of Christian publishing. Also keep in mind that this is a slower process because the publisher must do preliminary marketing through catalogs, etc., previous to the publication date. The way to locate a publisher is to make a list of publishers whom you know carry titles along the theme of your book. Then write a “query letter” accompanied by a book proposal. The proposal should contain the outline of your book in as much detail as possible, the size of the book, your vision for what the book will accomplish, and reasons why you feel that others will purchase the book. You can send this proposal to as many publishers at once as you wish. However, do not send the manuscript because you are allowed by convention to submit the manuscript to only one publisher at a time and sometimes a publisher will take months before they turn a manuscript down.

- **Go into a book-writing mode.** Block your telephone, don't read your mail, shut down your Internet, and don't take appointments. Just write! Protect your time! There's nothing wrong with having a full calendar, depending on who fills it. Don't let other people fill your calendar; fill it yourself. I will frequently declare a book-writing mode for a whole week, or maybe two. If you don't do it, at the end of the year you will wonder why your book isn't finished yet.
- **Write chapter by chapter in order.** It is important to remember what you have said in order not to be redundant on one hand or assume the reader knows something you haven't told them on the other. Chapters should flow from one to the next. When you begin a new chapter go over your subpoints because you might want to change them at that point. Check on your word count. You may have to cut some subpoints—save them for another book. I actually print out my chapter titles and all subtitles on a sheet that I pin to the wall behind my desk so that I can instantly remind myself of what I have written.
- **Subtitles.** Speaking of subtitles, I recommend at least one per page of single-spaced type, sometimes two. This makes reading your material easier. It also helps potential readers become familiar with what you are writing about if they are just flipping through the pages of your book. Some will decide to purchase your book just by looking at a subtitle or two that strikes their interest.
- **Edit as you go along.** Don't save your editing until the last. I always edit what I have written on one day the next day before I add new material. Then when you finish a chapter, edit that chapter and rewrite as much as you need to. Each chapter should more or less be considered a finished product. It is still necessary to final edit your whole book before you send it to the publisher, but this makes the final edit much more pleasant.
- **Do not demand perfection.** There are two schools of thought about releasing books. One demands that every avenue of research and double checking be exhausted before the book is published. No mistakes allowed. The other, which I have adopted, is to write what you know at the moment and get the ideas out there. If it turns out that you have made a mistake or that you subsequently change your opinion about something, no problem. Correct it in your next book!
- **Consider training.** One possibility for special training as an author is the Christian Writers Guild, led by Jerry Jenkins of "Left Behind" fame. You can request information from 1-866-495-5177.

If you want more detailed information from one who is a professional in the field, order *How to Write, Publish, and Market Your Own Bestseller* by James B. Richards online or from Strang communications, 600 Rinehart Red., Lake Mary FL 32746 (407-333-0600).

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