

Stairway to Earth

HOW TO WRITE A SERIOUS BOOK

By Bill Birchard

FAQs for New Authors

What are the 10 questions most frequently asked by new authors who want to write a nonfiction trade book?

1) How do I get started?

Start by sharpening the headline message of your book. If you're like most people, you've probably been telling friends and colleagues what your book is about. Now you need to figure out what your book will *say*. Telling people what your book is about is telling them the *subject*. Telling them what it says is telling them the *message*. The message is your main insight, and it is your readers' key takeaway. Try to state it in one sentence.

2) How soon can I publish a book?

Publishers have the technology to package and publish books in a few weeks (or days). But unless you're a bestselling author, you won't get put on this fast track. You'll get a spot in the standard nine-month turnaround plan. That is, your book will come out nine months *after you finish the manuscript*. There are many reasons for this, some of which are actually logical.

3) I already have an outline...what do I do next?

Back up. Did you figure out your top-line message first? And if so, does your outline reflect an argument to deliver it? Does each chapter build on the previous ones to deliver persuasive support for your overall message? Many outlines are lists of subjects. They don't indicate how each chapter adds a new "aha" to the previous one. Be sure your outline supports both the top-line message and all the subordinate messages that follow.

4) How much time will it take to write a book?

Most authors take six to eighteen months to write a serious nonfiction manuscript. Some take much more, and some a bit less. A good rule of thumb is that it will take two years from starting to shipping, writing plus publishing. Unless you self-publish, you may be fooling yourself if you think you'll finish quicker. And if you self-publish, getting your book on the shelves at Barnes & Noble and other bookstores could be hard or impossible.

5) Should I self-publish?

That all depends on your goals. I generally help people write for publishers. Many authors prefer the vetting and imprimatur that comes with a mainstream publishing house. They also want someone else to handle all the production and distribution. I self-published *Stairway to Earth*, which allowed me to test production and distribution through new technology, and to market the book with the help of social media.

6) How much money can I make?

The truth is simple: Most books don't make much (if any) money. Of course, you may be an exception. With luck and skill, maybe you can break into the major leagues—but I don't suggest you bet on it. The right question for most authors to ask is this: How does my book fit into my professional project portfolio in a way that contributes to my career and life aspirations? Indirectly, the answer will still often be money.

7) How long should my book be?

The standard serious nonfiction trade book runs 35,000 to 80,000 words. ("Trade book" is industry jargon for books sold through bookstores, known as "the trade.") But there are no fixed rules on length, as you can see from browsing at your local bookstore. If you word-process about 300 words per page, assume you need to write 120 to 275 pages.

8) After I know my message, what is the most important next step?

I tell authors that the most important document early on is a précis. I use the term "précis" to mean a one-page (300-word) elaboration of the message. The précis explains the issue addressed, the solutions proposed, and the benefits you offer. Nothing is more important in book development than a succinct vision of your book. Before he painted the roof of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo made small-scale sketches. You should, too.

9) I have so much material...how do I get control of it?

If you've accumulated most of your material on paper, the simplest approach is to label a file folder for each chapter and then stuff all your material in the appropriate folders. As you write each chapter, pull out its folder and start reading...and then writing.

If you haven't begun yet, I suggest creating digital files for every piece of research. Put each item in an electronic database and tag it with keywords and chapter numbers. When you're ready to write, you can then instantly search and retrieve the relevant pieces of material. The data logging and tagging takes discipline during research, but it makes writing go so much faster.

10) How can I make sure I write a bestseller?

Nobody asks me this question, but everyone wants the answer. Again, it's simple: There is no guaranteed way to write a bestseller. In the same way that movie studios cannot guarantee a blockbuster film, publishing houses cannot guarantee a bestselling book. That said, you *can*, by following a systematic process, write an excellent book, a volume that can contribute immeasurably to your business, career, and personal goals.

For more information on how to write a book, visit stairwaytoearth.com. If you want to dig deeply into book writing, [buy Bill's book](http://buybill'sbook.com).

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