

Stairway to Earth

HOW TO WRITE A SERIOUS BOOK

By Bill Birchard

SAQs for New Authors

Ten questions nonfiction authors *should* ask as they start to write a book.

1. Why should I write a book?

Before you start, write down why you want to be a book author. It's easy to assume your goal is to make money, but (as I say in the FAQ), many books don't earn much. So make sure you clarify your objectives. Perhaps you want to enhance your reputation, build your business, or create marketing collateral. Or perhaps you want to contribute to the world of knowledge, do something in the public interest, and cement your legacy. If you clarify your objectives, you'll take a more appropriate approach to your manuscript.

2. Will my book distinguish itself from others in the market?

If another author already sells a good book on your topic, what will you add that's fresh or different? How will you contribute in a new way? Two or three books on the same topic may all sell well, but often one author takes most of the market. Consider this analogy: If you're going to open another drugstore, how will you compete with Walgreen, CVS, Wal-Mart, and Rite Aid? You need a novel product line, format, and brand.

3. Do I have enough to say for a book?

If you're an expert in your field, you probably have lots to say. Still, ask yourself if you have six to 10 chapters of new insights, one building on the other. Sometimes your message would fit better in an article. If you feel you don't have enough information, but you still want to do a book, look at alternatives for developing your ideas and bring in more content to support your argument.

4. Have I narrowed my message enough to target a specific book-buying audience?

Many authors naturally feel that everyone will share their passion for a subject. If you feel this way, beware. Even if that's true, you can't sell books that way. You have to sell to a core group of people who actually buy books of your kind. Who are they? If you address them directly with a honed message, their enthusiasm will help you sell to a broader market.

5. Am I passionate about my book's message?

Writing a book demands a long-term sustained effort. It's hard! Do you have the passion and energy to follow through? Don't take the job of writing a book lightly.

6. Will my message be timely in 2+ years?

Books take a long time to write and publish. Look ahead two years. Will your message be timely? Will your audience still want the book? Shape your approach so that it plays well to people's future interests.

7. Can my message be made into a step-by-step argument?

All good books take readers on a journey of increasing insight. Every chapter of the book adds a chapter in the reader's self-education and self-enlightenment. To make sure you deliver on the reader's expectations, turn your collection of messages into a sequence that builds continuously from minor, narrow insights to major, complex ones. Each chapter should give the reader a piece of a puzzle of new learning. The last few chapters should complete a picture that is greater than its parts.

8. What is the upfront investment needed for a book?

If you have plenty of raw material, you can build a book manuscript for almost no out-of-pocket expense. But a book does take hundreds of hours of time. If you have a day job, what help will you need to do your book? Do you need to pay for travel and research? Or hire editors or ghost writers? Work this into your calculations. A serious nonfiction book of, say, 60,000 words, takes perhaps 2,000 hours of time (one working year).

9. Can someone with my authority get a publisher?

Most authors can position themselves to get a publisher if they put together a great book proposal and demonstrate authority in their subject. But to actually land a contract, you also need to show publishers something else: you control a "platform" for sales and marketing. Can you spearhead the effort to market your book—with speaking engagements, workshops, web-marketing tools (websites, social media), bulk-purchase programs by your company, and so on. Conceive (or build) your platform as you conceive your book.

10. Do books matter anymore?

Books have a cachet that's hard to beat. People attribute to authors an aura, stature, and intellectual prowess that few other accomplishments in professional life can match. People's perception of books means that books matter a lot, for personal, professional, and social reasons. Consider this, though: Authors have many choices to get their message out. Weigh the cost, work, and risk of writing a book against the competing alternatives in today's media market. Maybe a blog, white paper, or website with ebook downloads would work better.

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