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So You Want to Write a Non-Fiction Book?

By Dick Conklin

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Have you ever thought about writing a non-fiction book? A book with your name on it can inform people on a topic while it enhances your career and provides a nice source of supplemental income.

Published works earn you the respect of co-workers, management, customers, and friends. Your expertise in a subject will be a matter of record, and you may receive other writing offers or speaking invitations. While your book may benefit from knowledge gained on the job, your professional career can also benefit from knowledge gained while researching the book.

Do you have what it takes?

Most non-fiction book authors didn't major in English or journalism. Publishers are looking for people who are knowledgeable about popular or leading-edge topics and can explain them to others. They are more than willing to work with first time authors, providing the editing and artwork support required to transform a rough manuscript into a finished product. If you are an expert (or are willing to become one) in a subject that others want to know more about --- you are already halfway there.

How does your company feel about it?

If the subject of your book is directly related to your job, your employer may have something to say about your plans to publish, so first check out any company guidelines or restrictions. Many companies ask to review job-related works before publication. Reviewers may include management, the communications or public relations department, and a corporate attorney.

Most employee writing projects are done outside of work in order to avoid ownership conflicts. To be safe, do everything on your own time: research, telephone calls, writing and printing. Use your home personal computer, not the one in your office. Carefully avoid using any company-confidential information. If you are writing about a still-unannounced product, make sure that your employer (or the product's owner) and the publisher are willing to sign a confidential disclosure agreement.

So You Want to Write a Non-Fiction Book?

Royalties, advances and taxes

Book sales depend on things like the popularity of the topic, reputation of the author, strength of competing books, promotions and advertising, and corporate sales. Some companies buy books in bulk for product promotions (a book sold with a product or used for marketing purposes) or for internal distribution. For example, IBM employees can order many computer books (for business use) through the company.

Royalties are paid twice a year and their rates are negotiable, ranging from 10 to 15 percent or more of the net receipts, not the jacket price. For example, let's say a book sells for \$35 and nets an average of \$15 per copy. A 10% royalty would yield a per-copy payment of \$1.50. Sell 10,000 books and you'll earn \$15,000. Some publishers will pay on a sliding scale: 10% for the first 10,000 copies sold, then

12% for the next 10,000, etc. Royalties from co-authored works are shared according to ratios set by the authors.

An advance on royalties is customary, and is also negotiable. Some publishers will also pay a one-time fee for certain expenses in preparing the book.

Withholding tax is not deducted by publishers, so it is up to you to send estimated taxes to the IRS. A tax accountant can provide guidance on this and other tax matters, such as deductible business expenses. Keep a chronological log of your activities, showing hours spent, milestones, and related expenses such as automobile mileage, telephone calls, and computer supplies.

Royalty income over the life of a book can range from less than \$5,000 to over \$50,000. The life of a technical book, such as one about computer hardware or software, is generally less than three years, but a popular title can be extended with revisions and subsequent editions. The highest sales are usually in the beginning, when book distributors make their initial purchases. A computer book may have a half-life of only six months to a year, and sales drop off rapidly as the information becomes obsolete. Eventually returns will exceed sales (book distributors get refunds on unsold inventory) and your royalties will drop below zero. If you have multiple books, negative royalties subtract from positive royalties. Otherwise you'll build up an amount that you theoretically "owe" your publisher, although these balances are rarely collected.

Before contacting any publishers, set some goals. What level of detail do I want to cover? How long should this book be? How long will it take to write? How much do I want to earn? What are the non-monetary benefits of this project? How much of my personal time do I want to devote to it?

Who is your audience?

Publishers will ask you for an outline and a sample chapter, but they'll also ask for your help in sizing up the potential market. Book sales depend on the subject matter, market demand, and the strength of competing books. A clear understanding of your potential readers is important. Non-fiction, especially technical publications, can be viewed as a pyramid. At the base of the pyramid are books about general and how-to subjects that appeal to a broad cross-section of readers. At the top are narrow,

So You Want to Write a Non-Fiction Book?

specialty topics of interest to a few. You may be an expert on gardening and well-qualified to write about it, but unless you are writing just for the fun of it, you'll want to aim at a wide readership.

Define your audience(s) carefully. For example, a book about a software product might have multiple subcategories of readers: (1) shoppers: people who are curious about the product but haven't yet purchased it, (2) new users who have just bought the product but haven't installed it or are just beginning to use it, and (3) experienced users who want to get more out of it. Will your book address all of these readers or just one or two segments? If it is a technical topic, will an introductory chapter extend its appeal to a less-technical audience? Or, if it is written primarily for novices, would a more advanced chapter at the end attract additional readers?

Some topics have a long shelf life while others peak early and decline quickly. For example, a book about basic computer architecture, if general enough, could sell for several years. With a few changes (such as questions at the end of each chapter) it might serve as a textbook. On the other hand, a book about next year's Folk Music Festivals might experience brisk sales, but only for a brief period. Read trade magazines and visit local bookstores. What's selling? What new topics are in demand? Which ones are overdone or obsolete?

The title of a book can be very important. A broad-based, general purpose book might be called the XYZ Handbook, XYZ Guidebook, or the Survival Guide to XYZ. The title can also identify the audience: XYZ for the Novice, Advanced XYZ, or Mastering XYZ. Don't restrict the book by naming it Understanding XYZ Version 3.2.1.

Timing is very important in technology subjects. The demand for information on a new product is very strong immediately after it is announced or shipped. If you write about a "hot" topic, it's important that you and your publisher move quickly to meet that demand.

Outline, outline, outline

The effort spent on your book outline is a good investment of time. Generally, the effort expended in creating, modifying, and remodifying an outline at the beginning of a writing project will save time later on. Use an outline program or your favorite text editor or word processor. The format isn't important, but the content is. List the major topics you plan to cover, then sub-topics, and so on. Add notes and comments that will help your publisher understand where you are going. Don't hesitate to move topics around to better organize your book — better now than after you start writing.

Read competing and related books to make sure you aren't missing any important topics. How are they organized? Visit online Internet discussion forums to see what people are saying on this subject. What are the most frequently asked questions? Each time you discover a new topic or sub-topic, add it to your outline.

Should you self-publish?

Every first time author considers self-publishing their book. It certainly sounds a lot simpler than finding a publisher. Also, your profit from each copy sold might be higher. And, there are many companies

So You Want to Write a Non-Fiction Book?

who will offer to publish your book — if you are willing to pay for the cost and distribute the book yourself. Is this a good idea?

Many first time authors have self-published their books and ended up with a garage full of books and no way to sell them. Bookstores prefer to deal with established publishers and book distributors, not individuals. If you can find a publisher who believes there is a strong market for your book and is willing to promote it, you are probably much better off, especially if you are a new author.

Should you use a literary agent?

An agent will shop your book among several publishers and keep a portion of your royalties (usually around 10 – 15 percent). If you find that you have little success finding a willing publisher, you may want to consider using an agent.

Choosing a publisher

Now that you've done your homework, it's time to find a publisher for your book. Visit local bookstores. Contact several publishers who have books in your area of speciality (they should be easy to find on the Web). Which ones advertise the most or have the most books on the best-seller lists?

A publisher's acquisitions editor will provide their guidelines for submitting a proposal, which will include your chapter outline and market information. If this is your first effort, they'll want to see

examples of your writing style and subject matter knowledge. A sample chapter is a good idea.

Once you have narrowed down your selection, agree on a submission date and the length and format of the manuscript. Artwork is important, and you should determine if the publisher will create figures from your sketches or if final camera-ready quality is expected. Most publishers will provide technical and grammatical reviewers for your manuscript, but it's a good idea to name some of your own.

Read the contract proposal carefully. It covers things like ownership and copyrights, royalties, certification of originality, promotional (free) copies, and the schedule. Publishers are understanding if you have to slip your schedule, but you should try to establish and meet a reasonable deadline for submission of the manuscript.

Finally — writing the book!

The duration of a writing project depends on two important aspects: how much of your personal time (evenings, weekends, vacation days) you choose to devote to it, and the manuscript submission date you agreed to. A book of 300 pages could take anywhere from a few months to a year to finish, depending on the amount of time you spend each week.

Since you will probably use your personal computer to create the manuscript, your publisher will expect machine-readable format as input to their system. Discuss their preferred file formats and styles. Some accept a straight text format, which is the "lowest common denominator" for file exchange between

So You Want to Write a Non-Fiction Book?

computers. Others may ask for formatted output from a word processor. Some may accept camera-ready pages — if you have a system that can create them — and compensate you for the extra work.

Keep a list of company and product names you reference in your work. Make sure you distinguish registered trademark names from simple trademarks.

Don't insert artwork directly into your text, unless you are producing camera-ready pages. Keep a folder of sketches, screen shots and other illustrations referenced in the manuscript. If you have a graphics program (and the talent to use it) or a screen capture program, send some sample files to your publisher. The captions for each figure should be stored in a separate file.

You can excerpt some material from other publications (such as an appendix from a technical manual) if you get the permission of the original publisher.

The final stages

Deadlines are a drag, but they are very important. A publisher must schedule expensive printing resources. Often a book has been announced well in advance, or committed for a yearly trade show. Give your reviewers enough time without impacting your schedule. Good reviewers add to the accuracy and quality of a book, so you should encourage and work closely with them.

Your publisher will probably ask you to create the book's index. When you receive the final page proofs, create a spreadsheet listing important topics in one column, with corresponding page numbers in another. Then sort the topics in alphabetical order. Edit the list so that all referenced page numbers follow each topic name.

Dick Conklin is a freelance writer and journalist. He has written five non-fiction books, was editor of two magazines, and is a newspaper columnist. He can be reached at conch@keysy.com or keysy.com/conch

Keeping your readers interested when writing non-fiction

By Gary R. Hess

Keeping your readers interested when writing non-fiction by Gary R. Hess

Writing non-fiction might be the easiest of all writings, but it's not always the easiest to keep your readers interested.

When writing non-fiction the best thing to do is research, even when the story is about you, research. Readers are generally well educated, and chances are, they will know when something is not quite right. As well, if you are writing a paper for a class or to educate about a certain subject, research is a must.

So You Want to Write a Non-Fiction Book?

On the other hand, be sure to not overdue it. Readers do not need to know why the sky is blue and why horses aren't used for glue anymore. Give them basic facts which relate to what you are trying to say.

Another necessity when writing non-fiction, or even fiction for that matter, is using plenty of details. Details, details, details!!! Readers love details.

Want to write about Susie's new hairstyle? Tell us what the color is, what the length is and how it lays. It allows the reader to visualize the characters and setting better. Since this is not a movie, this is what needs to be said.

As readers are the top priority when writing, the reader must know exactly what is going on. Do not leave the small things out. Do not let the reader wonder what happened between point A and point B, unless of course it's a murder mystery then things change but for the most part this holds true.

If you have done things story, essay, research project or whatever else you happen to be writing, will almost be ready. Just be sure to follow some guidelines along the way. Write it in some order, such as chronologically or "flash-back" style. Just don't lose track of your readers.

If all of these can be accomplished smoothly and researched properly your story is now complete. Jump up and down and pat yourself on the back because you have done it.

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