

# Chapter 1

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## SO, YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT WRITING A BOOK...

You've thought about writing a novel, perhaps many times throughout your life. You've imagined how the characters will look and how certain scenes will play out. You fall asleep with a smile on your face as you picture your story being acted out on the big screen. Friends and family are encouraging, and now you have finally committed yourself to doing it. You carve out a writing sanctuary in your house, buy a new computer and ergonomic chair, dust off the thesaurus, and are ready to start.

Not so fast—I know you're eager to begin writing, but there are a few important things to consider first, and I can assure you that taking the time to do them will pay off tremendously. Furthermore, you are more likely to actually finish your novel if you have done the preliminary work. So, bear with me while I outline a plan to put you on the right path. Be patient—you'll get to the writing part soon enough. Think of it as the blueprint for building a house—without one, it could be done, but the end product wouldn't likely be well constructed and there wouldn't be much in the way of sales value.

I can't tell you how many times I have heard an aspiring writer say, "I have lots of ideas, but I don't know where to start." And the response most often heard is, "Just begin to write." The "just do it" approach may work for some, but there are methods you can use that will make the process more efficient before you invest hundreds of hours in writing a first draft. The idea you have, while a great accomplishment in itself, is just the first step in writing your book. And, by the way, if you don't have an idea yet, there are many story-idea and plot-generator guidelines available online (see the "Suggested Reading" section at the end of this chapter).

Not every writer will take the same approach—what works well for some may be cumbersome for others. For example, the right place for me to start writing is at the beginning, but that's not true for all writers. Some writers will craft the ending first and work backward. Some in the middle. You'll know early on whether the method you have chosen is working for you. If you choose one that's holding you back, try something else. There is no one right way.

And remember what Somerset Maugham said.

*There are three rules for writing the novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.*

Your book is an extension of you, and the same amount of care should be given to publishing it as is given to any other major aspect of your life. With that said, and at the risk of imposing a sense of doom and gloom on your writing dream, I would be remiss if I didn't point out these five reasons for *not* writing a novel.

Do *not* write a novel if:

1. You need to support yourself on the royalties. Without proper education and training, the vast majority of first-time authors sell fewer than 100 books—total. That's under \$400 in royalties for most printed books. Not \$400 a month or a year. \$400 total.
2. You cannot afford to hire a professional editor (\$0.01–\$0.10/word depending on the condition of your manuscript, level of editing you choose, and editor experience). A good editor will ensure your writing is clear, credible, and marketable.
3. You are not ready to spend as much time promoting and marketing your book as you did to write it.
4. You don't have a thick skin.
5. Your main goal is to become an overnight sensation and appear on *Good Morning America* as this year's newest best-selling author.

## Educate Yourself

Now that that's out of the way, before you start putting one word after another to make those intriguing thoughts of yours turn into chapters of a book, I suggest you read, read, and then read some more. Read books in your genre and make notes on what you liked about them, what you didn't like about them, and then emulate what you think the authors did well. Maybe your favorite author created a compelling character, one you will remember for a long time. Analyze and understand how he or she did that. Or maybe another author made you feel like you were on the journey right along with the protagonist. How was that accomplished? If you can figure these things out, you will be on your way to writing a successful book yourself.

You may also want to consider taking some writing classes. There are scads of opportunities out there to learn the craft of writing—trade associations, conferences, webinars, Internet articles, websites, online discussion groups, colleges, and universities. (See the “Additional Resources” section at the end of this book.)

There are numerous reference books available that will help you produce a well-written, compelling novel, but these two are on my list of must-have books (besides this one, of course).

*The Chicago Manual of Style*—most U.S. editors, proofreaders, copywriters, and publishers use this reference guide for rules on grammar, spelling, punctuation, and so much more. It is available in hardcover, or you can subscribe to the electronic version by visiting <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org>.

*The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E. B. White—the best little reference book you'll ever find on word and punctuation usage; sentence and paragraph structure; misused words and expressions; and more.

## Your Writing Routine

Writing requires discipline, and whether you are going to make writing a full-time project or something to do in your spare time, establishing a writing routine will help you keep moving forward. If you say, "I'll fit it in when I can," chances are you won't finish the project. My writing is a full-time job, and what works for me, what I find to be most productive, is to leave mornings open for responding to e-mails, checking in on social media, participating in online discussions, and promoting my books—all things related to writing books other than the actual writing. This leaves the afternoons open for writing.

Most writers will tell you that in order to keep their perspective fresh, they need a break every three to four hours. That goes for me too, as I have found that taking breaks that involve something unrelated to what I'm writing helps to clear my head and keep the creative juices fresh and flowing.

Distractions are counterproductive for most writers, so it's important to keep them to a minimum. Choose a quiet area of your home to write—away from family members, pets, and other diversions. Unless it's beneficial to you, turn off the TV, stereo, and phone while you're writing so you can focus all your attention on your craft.

Writing and editing require different skill sets. To achieve optimal productivity, I recommend keeping them separate. I find it best to write a complete first draft of the book before doing any self-editing—it keeps my creativity flowing freely for an extended period of time before I start the arduous task of making improvements. If you're like me—and like most writers—you'll spend more time self-editing than you did writing the initial manuscript.

I also find it useful to take a break between finishing the first draft and starting the self-editing process. Too many times upon rereading some sections with the benefit of a fresh perspective, I find myself saying, "I can't believe I actually wrote that!"

I learned the hard way that if you intend to write full-time, it is imperative to take frequent exercise breaks. If you don't, you could end up with serious back, neck, and shoulder problems. In addition, according to the Mayo Clinic website, sitting for long periods of time is linked with a number of other health concerns, including obesity and metabolic syndrome—a cluster of conditions that includes increased blood pressure, high blood sugar, excess body fat around the waist, and abnormal cholesterol levels. It has also been reported that too much sitting increases the risk of death from cardiovascular disease and cancer. One study compared adults who spent less than two hours a day in front of the TV or other screen-based entertainment with those who logged more than four hours a day of recreational screen time. Those with greater screen time had a nearly 50 percent increased risk of death from any

cause and about a 125 percent increased risk of events associated with cardiovascular disease, such as chest pain (angina) or heart attack.

You may want to try a height-adjustable desk. Switching between sitting and standing throughout the day while I write has reduced back and neck pain and enabled me to work more hours per day.

## Know Your Audience

Forget the notion that you can write a book everyone will love. That has never happened and never will. Another myth is that the larger the target market, the more books you'll sell. In fact, the opposite is often true. The larger the target market, the more competition you are likely to face, and the more money and time you'll spend trying to get noticed. Furthermore, striving to appeal to a wide market can result in your writing being too general, and then it becomes very appealing to no one. It is advantageous to identify your target audience before you start writing because having a picture in your mind of who you are writing for will help you focus on creating the right content and then later make your marketing efforts more productive.

To appeal to a specific group of readers you must understand their needs, wants, and desires. Finding and narrowing your niche will help you reach and appeal to more of the people who will ultimately buy your book.

Sometimes understanding the demographics of your target audience will help you to find your niche. When determining reader demographics, you may want to consider the following:

- Gender – Are males or females more likely to read your book? Interesting fact—according to Amazon and Goodreads, the vast majority of all fiction is purchased by females.
- Age – Which age group(s) will be most interested in your book? Consider this breakdown by generation (from the Center for Genetic Kinetics):
  - Mature – older than 65
  - Boomers – born 1946–1964
  - Generation X – born 1965–1976
  - Generation Y – born 1977–1995 (also called Millennials)
  - Young adult – Ages 12–18
  - Children – younger than 12
- Education level – What level of education do you expect most of your readers will have? Some novels will appeal to readers regardless of their level of education, while others will appeal to a smaller group of people at a particular intellectual level. Be sensitive to the intellect of your target readers and write accordingly.

Think about your genre and your story line. Based on demographics, who will be the people most likely to buy your book? Then, keep them in mind as you write. If you market your book to one audience, but the content of your book appeals to a different audience, your book will be in trouble.

### Suggested Reading:

Crawford, Sara. Live Write Thrive (blog): *What Does It Take to Be a Real Writer?*

<https://www.livewritethrive.com/2019/09/16/what-does-it-take-to-be-a-real-writer/#more-10793>.

Jenkins, Jerry. Reedsy (blog): *How to Become an Author: The Ultimate Guide*. <https://blog.reedsy.com/how-to-become-an-author/>.

Sansevieri, Penny. Author Marketing Experts (blog): *10 Myths and Facts About Publishing a Book*.

<https://www.amarketingexpert.com/10-myths-and-facts-about-publishing-a-book/>.