

11 Questions You Need to Answer Before You Start Writing Your Book

About the Author

Michael J. Dowling is a ghostwriter and editor who helps individuals and organizations write and publish books and white papers to advance their ideas and enhance their reputations.

By Michael J. Dowling

What a thrill it is to hold a book you've written in your hands! There's even some glamour and prestige attached to becoming an author. New opportunities open up to you. People see you in a new light.

As a freelance professional ghostwriter and editor, I've enjoyed helping lots of clients write books. It's always an exciting adventure. If you've got an idea for a book, I can understand why you're eager to get started.

But before you launch into the writing process, I suggest that you answer the eleven questions below. Why? Because you need to be sure that your book concept makes sense. I don't want you to waste your time and money.

Frankly, I've lost some business in the past by asking my potential clients these questions. A few scraped their book projects because they weren't satisfied with their answers. Others reconsidered their initial ideas and later came back to me with improved concepts. But regardless of the ultimate outcome, all of my clients and potential clients have thanked me for taking them through this process.

Answering these questions puts you in a win-win position. If you confirm that your book concept is sound, you can move ahead with confidence. On the other hand, if you realize that your initial idea has weaknesses, you can make the necessary changes and proceed, or you can drop the whole idea and save yourself time, money, and frustration.

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The Eleven Questions

1. Why do you want to write this book?

List your reasons. Below are several possibilities to jumpstart your thinking:

You see, writing a book is not only the best way, it is the indisputably essential way, to establish your credibility in your field of expertise. Using authorship as a marketing strategy brings you an on-going flow of clients who are deliberately and purposefully seeking you.

Elsom Eldridge Jr. and Mark L. Eldridge, authors of
How to Position Yourself as the Obvious Expert

- To increase your visibility and credibility in the marketplace
- To market your product or service
- To promote branding
- To establish your reputation as a subject-matter expert
- To open up speaking opportunities
- To enjoy the satisfaction of writing about a subject that interests you
- To advance a cause you believe in
- To give other people pleasure
- To serve other people by giving them valuable information
- To express your creativity
- To do something you've always wanted to do

Clarifying your personal goals strengthens your motivation. Strong motivation increases your probability of success.

2. What is the intended purpose of your book?

Question #1 above focused on *your* needs. Now it's time to address your *readers'* needs.

In order to be successful, your book must have intrinsic value. It must give your readers something they want and need. Clarify your book's purpose by answering questions such as the following:

- What benefits will people derive from reading your book?
- What specific needs will your book satisfy?

- What price do you think people will be willing to pay for your book? (Even if you intend to give your book away, you should be able to ascribe a monetary value to it. If it's not worth buying, it's probably not worth reading.)

To test your answers, conduct some informal market research. Tell people about your book idea and watch their reactions. Do they get genuinely excited, or do their eyes glaze over? Would they pay money for it right now if it were available? If their reactions are ho-hum, rethink your concept. Keep in mind that people will tend to tell you what they think you want to hear.

Having your name on a book can be an immense boost for your business. The added prestige of being an information-product developer lends you the kind of credibility that allows you to increase your hourly rates and project fees.

Information products also let prospects sample your approach, your expertise, and your skills before they hire you. Businesses that produce and market information products regularly report that prospects not only buy those products, but also are more likely to inquire about additional products and services.

Steven Van Yoder, author,
Get Slightly Famous: Become a Celebrity in Your Field and Attract More Business with Less Effort

3. Who is your target audience?

Develop a detailed profile of the type of people who will be most interested in reading your book. Be as specific as you can in terms of age, sex, vocation, interests, needs, station in life, income level, education, and other relevant parameters. When you can clearly picture your typical reader, you will be better able to focus your writing and marketing efforts. If you can't define your audience, your book's concept probably needs more work.

4. What qualifies you to write this book?

Why are you the best author for this book? What specific knowledge and experiences do you have that your readers will find particularly interesting or valuable? What "platform" (i.e., what position, reputation, or other advantages) do you have with respect to the subject matter of your book that will give you credibility as the author?

5. What competition exists for your book?

Will your book fill an identifiable niche, or will it duplicate other similar books already on the market? If you don't write this book, who will suffer loss? Conduct some research before you start writing. It would be a shame to invest time and effort in your book, only to later discover that an alternative resource already exists that makes it unnecessary.

Even if some other books exist that are similar to your idea, you may still want to proceed. Perhaps you can cover the material in a different way or fill in some information that others have left out. Knowing your competition will help you refine your vision and improve your execution.

6. Will you look for a publisher, or will you self-publish?

Don't wait until your book is written to start thinking about marketing and distribution.

Publishers are in business to make money. They are looking for books with large sales potential, well-defined markets, and authors who have a platform (i.e., a high-profile name or position). If your book concept matches these criteria, you might find it worthwhile to look for a publisher.

On the other hand, due to recent advances in printing technology and the dramatic changes in book marketing wrought by the Internet, more and more authors are choosing to self-publish their books. Self-publishing allows you to control the schedule, so you'll get your book into the hands of readers more quickly.

7. When will you make time to write your book?

Think about your weekly schedule. When are the best times during the week for you to conduct research and organize your thoughts? Be prepared to schedule these times on your calendar as appointments.

Writing a book on your own requires considerable dedication and time. A ghostwriter can greatly simplify the process and add helpful structure and accountability. We'll talk more about this option in question 11.

8. How will you promote and distribute your book?

If you self-publish, you'll be responsible for the promotion and distribution of your book. Identify your distribution options and decide which ones will work best for you. To spark your thinking, here are some possibilities to consider:

- Give your book away to customers and potential customers as a marketing tool.
- Sell autographed copies when you give talks or conduct seminars.
- Make your book available on your website.
- Promote your book to people on your mailing list.

- Advertise your book in journals and other publications that reach your target audience.
- Sell your book on Amazon.com and other on-line stores.
- Sell your book through bookstores and other wholesale outlets.

Be realistic as you develop your distribution plans, and be conservative when determining your print quantities. Don't bite off more than you can chew.

I tell virtually every self-employed professional, as well as many small-business owners, to define their niche specialty, write a book about it, and get it published.

Robert W. Bly, author and copywriter

If you use a traditional publisher, production and distribution will be handled for you, but you will still need to expend effort marketing your book. One good resource for learning about book marketing and promotion is *1001 Ways to Market Your Book* by John Kremer.

9. How will you handle cover design, internal layout, printing, and other important aspects of the publishing process?

If you self-publish, don't skimp on the production of your book. Poor design will make you look like an amateur, no matter how good the content. The cover design and internal layout are extremely important and should be done by an experienced professional.

Many individuals and firms provide publishing services. You can find them by searching the Internet, referring to self-publishing reference books, such as *Dan Poynter's Self-Publishing Manual*, and by networking within the publishing industry. As part of my ghostwriting services, I offer to coordinate these activities for my clients.

10. What return on investment do you desire from your book project?

The return on investment you can expect will depend largely on the purpose of your book. For example, if you use your book as a marketing tool, it could potentially produce a large return on investment. One new customer or client gained as a result of your book could repay your investment many times over.

For some books, the payoff is primarily intangible. For example, you can use a book about the history of your business to

celebrate an important company anniversary, enhance employee morale, promote your image in the community, and strengthen positive relationships with customers, vendors, and stockholders.

In conjunction with a book project and with a modest amount of additional effort and expense, it's often possible to create one or more related white papers or articles. The promotional value of such spin-offs can increase your return on investment substantially.

The cost of writing and self-publishing a book varies widely, depending on the number of pages, amount of research required, number of copies printed, cover design, and other factors. My proposals to potential clients include cost estimates.

Many self-published authors sell their books at seminars they conduct, at conferences they attend, and on their websites. Over time, the profits from these sales can offset a substantial portion of the original investment.

The book you helped me write two years ago has been directly responsible for bringing in two consulting contracts worth approximately \$100,000. It's one of the best investments I ever made!

Marty Harshberger
Executive Consultant
Saltillo, MS

11. Will you hire a ghostwriter to help you?

You know your subject better than anyone. But perhaps writing isn't your major strength. And no doubt other high priority matters are vying for your attention. A competent professional writer will leverage your talents and free up your time, so you can concentrate on what you do best. The results you achieve together will far exceed anything you could accomplish alone.

With the writing burden off your shoulders, you'll have more time to think about the content of your book, which means you'll probably be happier with the final result. And you'll enjoy the writing process more, because you won't be so distracted from your day-to-day responsibilities. A good professional ghostwriter will help you produce a publication you'll be proud of – quickly, efficiently, and with surprisingly little disruption from your normal routine.

A weekly one-hour phone call with your ghostwriter can keep your project moving along nicely. Your ghostwriter can record your thoughts, asking questions as necessary. Then he'll take your ideas, along with any other background information you provide, and create draft chapters for your review. Between calls, you'll review your ghostwriter's drafts and organize content for your next phone call. If you're planning to self-

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publish your book, some ghostwriters can help guide you through the process.

If you decide to use a ghostwriter, make sure you choose the right one. A hiring mistake could cause you considerable headaches. I recommend reading “5 Key Qualities to Look for When Hiring a Professional Writer (So You Don’t Make a Costly Mistake!),” which is available on my website.

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About the Author

Michael J. Dowling produces clear, concise, creative, and convincing books, white papers, and other print communications for individuals and organizations. He specializes in ghostwriting, editing, book shepherding, and self-publishing.

Mike's clients include successful business leaders, executive coaches, professional consultants, entrepreneurs, and other professionals. By offering turn-key services from idea conceptualization to book publication and distribution, he makes the writing and self-publishing process understandable, enjoyable, cost-effective, and time-efficient for his clients,

Mike has an MBA from Columbia Business School, where he was one of three Harriman Scholars. He is the author or ghostwriter of numerous books and articles.

Learn more about Mike's services and read samples of his writing and testimonials from his clients at <http://www.michaeljdowling.com>.

Sign up for *The Write Stuff*, Mike's monthly e-newsletter of profitable advice about writing, at <http://michaeljdowling.com/newsletter.html>.