

I HAVE THIS IDEA ... : How to Get Published

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I have edited books and other publications for church leaders for more than 25 years. I've helped about 200 authors write books, and I've helped many more write proposals. I've worked closely with two publishers, and I've done freelance projects for more than a dozen others. But every publisher has its own culture, and I don't claim to be an expert on them all. What I'm offering you here are broad strokes and strategies about the publishing process.

PHASE 1: CONCEIVING A BOOK

William Zinsser, author of *On Writing Well*, once commented, "The hardest part of writing isn't the writing; it's the thinking." That thinking begins long before your first keystroke. Here are five key questions to help you get started.

1. What is your book about? (Or, What is your passion?)
 - The best books grow out of the author's passion.
2. Who is your audience?
 - You have both primary and secondary audiences.
 - You need to be clear about your audience from the start, because that will shape everything—content, writing style, publisher, design, marketing strategy, and more.
 - The audience must be large enough to make your project financially viable for the publisher.
3. What does your audience need?
 - Your audience doesn't need only information.
 - Your audience needs to solve a problem. (They need quarter-inch holes, not quarter-inch drills.)
4. What is your purpose?
 - Where do your passion and your audience's need intersect?

After answering these first four questions, you should be able to write a 15-word description of your book that captures the topic, audience, and purpose.

- My book is about __(what?)__
- and will help __(whom?)__
- __(do what?)__.

Then evaluate your idea. Toni Morrison says the one criterion for evaluating a book idea is captured in this question: Would I buy it? Ask members of your target audience the same question. If you frequently hear yes, go on to question 5.

5. What is the competition for this book?

- What is already out there? This question is going to arise several times during this process.
- What else has been written on this topic ... for this audience?
- How will your book be different?
- You don't want to write—and publishers won't publish—a book that's already been written. Your book needs to be new, as well as needed and timely.

Here is a simple strategy for researching the competition.

- Go to a good bookstore, and look through the books in the sections where you would expect to see your book shelved. (You can do this work online, too.)
- Note author, complete title, publication info, number of pages, hard/soft cover, price; one or two sentences about the book's topic, audience, and approach.
- Write one or two sentences about how your book would be different.
- Notice what works, so you can learn from it.
- Note titles that demonstrate the significance of your topic and support for your proposal, even if they won't compete.
- Even if there is no one has written anything like your book, you need to describe what *is* out there and clearly define the niche no one else has filled.

PHASE 2: FINDING A PUBLISHER

If at the end of the conception phase you think you have identified an original, useful, timely topic that you are eager to write about, you can move on to phase 2, finding a publisher.

Choosing Publishers to Approach

As you research the competition question, you'll be learning which publishers to approach.

- Which publishers handle this *topic* (Bible, theology, worship, curriculum, and so forth) for your intended *audience* (academics, clergy, lay leaders, or a combination)?
- Publishers have niches (subjects and audiences). They specialize in particular subjects and market to specific audiences, and they seldom step outside their traditional realms. So, you want to identify which publishers already handle publications similar to what you want to write.
- Go to their websites and find their author guidelines. Look for “author guidelines,” “submissions,” “potential authors,” or similar headings.
- Some publishers will work only with agents, not directly with authors. As you read publishers’ submission guidelines, notice whether they require an agent.

If you need to find an agent

- Join publishersmarketplace.com. I think it's about \$20 a month. It provides contact information for most of the active agents. It's searchable by keyword, so authors can look up agents who have dealt with particular topics.
- Look at the acknowledgements of books you love whose themes and/or writing style resonate with your own work. Usually an agent is thanked.

In either case, you should probably send a query letter—unless the publisher or agent tells you *not* to or describes a different process.

Both publishers and agents like to know they are being approached thoughtfully. A query letter that says, “I am approaching you because I noticed you represented XYZ, which is similar in some ways to my own work,” will get it above the fray. You can say something similar to a publisher.

Writing a Proposal

- Whether you are going to approach publishers directly or work with an agent, the next step is to develop a proposal. (You will probably work on this alongside the query letter—and the manuscript itself.)
- Follow the publisher’s (or agent’s) guidelines exactly.
 - Send *only* what the publisher asks for (a letter of inquiry, a proposal that conforms to their guidelines, sample material) and nothing more.
 - Send *everything* the publisher asks for (if a sample chapter is requested, don’t send only a letter of inquiry).
 - And send material in the *form* requested (probably as an e-mail attachment).
- Whatever they ask, do it!
 - Publishers want to know that a potential author can follow instructions (“difficult” authors are time-consuming and therefore expensive to work with).
 - You want to demonstrate from your first contact that you are willing and able to do what is needed—that you will be easy to deal with.
- A typical proposal includes the following:
 - Title: Think about using the title for marketing, speaking gigs, and other promotion. Keep in mind, the publisher will choose the title for your book, so don’t get too wedded to whatever you come up with.
 - Synopsis: Anticipate reviewers’ questions and answer them.
 - Your interpretation of the book’s significance, why it matters
 - Audience: Identify the primary and secondary audiences for this work and what needs of this readership your book meets.
 - Competition: List other books on this topic that are on the market and would compete for sales with your book, and explain how your book will differ from these books.
 - Why you are the person to write this book
 - Chapter outline: Write one paragraph per chapter.
 - Anticipated completion date
 - Estimated length (word count)
 - Special features, such as graphics
 - Sample chapter(s): Submit about 10 percent of the book (ca. 25 pages). Some publishers also want to see the introduction.
 - Resume or c.v. with complete contact information

Developing a Marketing Plan

Many publishers require a marketing plan as part of a proposal. As publishers deal with financial pressures, they increasingly expect authors to plan a major roll in marketing their own work. You need to convince publishers you can do it—that you are actively engaged in the field your book addresses and can actively collaborate with the publisher in the marketing and sales of your book through your personal networks.

You already have this information:

- Primary and secondary audiences
- Needs of the audiences that the book meets
- Other books on this topic on the market
- How your book differs from these books
- Why you are the person to write this book

Building a Marketing Platform

Publishers aren't as interested in what you say you'll do to promote your book as they are in what you're already doing, your visibility. Therefore, you want to build your marketing platform first—or at least early.

- Best-selling books are used in teaching and consulting with a broad audience. Books and presentations feed each other.
- Write articles, columns, blogs (actively), book reviews.
- Join organizations, take leadership positions.
- Develop a website.
- Conduct webinars.
- Create and distribute videos.
- Use social media—selectively, wisely.
- Create podcasts.

Your marketing *plan* is a believable expansion of your marketing platform.

- As part of your marketing plan, arrange for reviews of your book to be published in venues such as the following:
 - Personal contacts with media ties
 - National religious/spiritual media
 - Alumni magazines: high school, college, graduate school, certificate programs
 - Hometown and other newspapers
 - Professional association (and other organization) publications
 - Online blogs, newsletters, and chat rooms
 - Local worship groups that publish newsletters
 - Congregation's newsletter
 - Media who have interviewed you, or whom you have interviewed, in the past

PHASE 3: WRITING YOUR BOOK

Some publishers want authors to write the entire first draft on their own; others assign editors to review the manuscript as it is written. Just as publishers are providing less marketing support than they did even five years ago, they are providing less editorial

support, so you might want to find an editor to work with you on the manuscript itself.

- Develop a plan for writing, and follow it.
 - Productive writers write on schedule, not inspiration.
 - They set goals for the number of words or pages per writing session or for how long they will write.
- As you write, try out your material on groups—classes, adult study groups, and others.
 - What fires up people?
 - What bores them?
 - What confuses or baffles them?
 - What do they want to know more about?
- Select reviewers, and listen to them.
 - Even if your publisher has a formal review process for your manuscript, consider recruiting your own reviewers to give you feedback as you write.
 - Three reviewers will provide a range of perspectives but keep the amount of feedback manageable.
 - Seek diverse perspectives that are representative of your audience.
 - Remember that your editor is your primary reviewer.
- Be patient—with the process and especially with yourself.
 - Publishing is a labor-intensive enterprise, and editors give top priority to books already under contract.
 - A month or so after you submit your materials, a phone call or e-mail message asking, “Did you receive my materials?” is appropriate.
 - Don’t be surprised, however, if it takes three or four months (or, I’m sorry to say, longer) to get a response.

A LITTLE WISDOM: Books reveal themselves to us.

- Don’t be surprised if your book changes as you write. (Of course, if you find that happening, talk to your editor about what you’re discovering.)