

THE NICHE

HOW TO PLAN, WRITE, PUBLISH
AND MARKET SUCCESSFUL
NICHE NON-FICTION



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The Niche

How to plan, write, publish and market
successful niche non-fiction

Robin de Jongh

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Introduction

If you are considering writing a book – self published or with a traditional publisher – then this is the book for you. In it you will find much food for thought as well as a few insider tips you won't find anywhere else.

One of my authors just got his book to number 25 on the Amazon.com Kindle store and number 1 in his top level category. I was totally amazed, because he did it with a Niche book. He was already a switched on guy when I commissioned him. He built on that good foundation all the tailored advice I gave him. He laser focused his book's contents along the lines of what I suggested, used the title I gave him. Then talented editors did their thing, and he wrote with total dedication, non-stop for weeks on end. I got involved again in the marketing phase, and again he brought a lot to the table that he had already learned himself. This book became one of the best-selling books for the Publisher I worked for.

But something went wrong with the Amazon launch. The author got all his marketing going prematurely before I gave him the green light, and as a result Amazon ran out of inventory. The book tanked on launch, and by the time we got more copies to the Amazon warehouses, the magic of a good Amazon launch had almost been lost.

I moved out of publishing. We lost touch. Two years later, I got an email from him asking my advice on

some small aspect of book publishing. He said he was putting together another book – a sequel – and this time **self published**.

This time he did the Amazon launch right. Boy did he do it right. The book soared, kept going up in the rankings. One night I stayed up watching it peak, and I messaged him to remind him to savour the moment.

You see, I had nothing to do with the #25 book. This time I was watching from the sidelines, yet I savoured this success just as much as when it had been “my” book, “my” baby. I figured somewhere along the line I’d had some influence on the author that contributed to that success, and that was enough for me.

This author tried, failed, tried again, had some success, had the rug pulled, and then got back on his feet again. All the way along the road he sought the best advice and help he could, and in the end he did it by himself.

So this is why I’ve put into this book my last five years worth of writing about writing. I’ve had some success in Publishing, a little as an author, a fair bit as someone helping others to craft and market their books. Most of my advice to authors over the years has been on the power of finding your niche. The extraordinary mainstream success of that Niche author re-affirmed my belief in the benefits I know these techniques will have for you.

So now it’s your turn. Take the advice in this book, learn from your success and your mistakes, get up when you fall, persevere, and you too will become a successful book Author.

Part 1 - Becoming a writer

How can programmers improve writing skills?

I've commissioned a lot of programmers to write books, so I feel I can answer this one. Except that I only ever commissioned programmers who were already blogging. By reading their blog I could get a cast iron guarantee of their ability to write well.

There is an outside chance that, rather than the best writers choosing to start a blog, that the ones who began blogs were the ones who became the best writers.

So begin a blog. Explain something to someone. Choose something you know something about. Explain it to the people who are just below you in knowledge level. That bit is key. You will need to learn not to speak to peers using jargon and shorthand, but in full prose using easily understood phrases, analogies, summaries. You will need to learn to keep it short to keep them interested. Mostly that's it.

How can one get into the Publishing industry?

The traditional way is to get work as an editorial assistant or intern for a publishing company. The way I did it was to write a book for a publisher, then when a job came up there I applied for it. Given that I knew a lot about their editorial process and had a track record with them, I was a safe bet. Either route takes time and dedication.

English is my second language. Where do I start?

In general, you will be better off writing in the language you're most comfortable with. Don't forget, any language can reach hundreds of thousands of people at least. The English language part of the internet is vastly over catered for, so depending on your language, it may even be the case that you can be a "big fish in a little pond".

Once a book has become popular with your native language audience, there is always the option to get a translator at that stage in order to reach the large US and UK markets. Doing it this way round has the benefit of only needing to pay the substantial translation costs once your work has proved itself commercially, therefore being much less of a risk.

What should a teenager do if they have a book idea?

There are far too many people that make the mistake of focusing on publication. Just start writing and focus on writing. See how long you can make the story. Ideas count for nothing by themselves, and you will always have more ideas. If you think this idea is particularly special, then shelve it and write a few more stories before you feel ready to give this one your best shot. In essence, writing as much as you can in your early years will develop the part of your brain that handles writing (just like getting on your bike every day will develop your leg muscles and stamina), and whatever you develop in your teens will never leave you when you're older.

But don't just write stories. Write letters to your friends. Write answers on forums. Submit short news articles to your local paper. If you want to learn to write well you need above all to develop the place where you get your ideas and where you reason – hence write broad and write a lot.

I'm dyslexic. What software should I take advantage of?

If you have dyslexia, or even are just not that fast at typing or getting your ideas down, you could do a lot worse than using a good speech-to-text software program.

Even better would be to hire someone to type up your dictation, called Transcription. This way you'd be able to dictate into a Dictaphone whenever you wanted, on the way to work, while out walking, or whatever, and still have the typist correctly identify your words. It obviously costs more (costs are up to \$1 per minute), but results would be more accurate.

Should I start writing a book?

How do you know if you're ready to write a book, when you're just a beginner writer?

One way of finding out is to open a novel you like, and copy it. Type the whole thing out, word for word.

Do not use copy and paste.

It should be over 80,000 words long, so it will take a while.

Many painters employed to copy Rembrandt's paintings ended up being well known artists in their own right. When you copy from a master, their pacing, dialogue, sentence formation, tense, scene setting, and so on, will rub off on you.

Copying a large work is also like running a trial marathon in preparation for a real race. How do you know you have the stamina until you do it? Running 4000 metres isn't going to do it, and neither is writing 4000 word essays or short stories going to prepare you for writing a book.

When you've finished, you will be ready to answer the question, and should your answer be "yes", you will have built up your writing muscles ready to do so.

How does someone with no experience test a book idea?

Here's a cheap and easy way to test a book idea without drawing a biased response.

Write your story in the same format as a film blurb. You can see examples online in any film download site. Next time you're choosing a film to watch with your friend or your spouse, pretend you're on Netflix (or whatever) and say "how about this one...", but read out your story blurb.

If you get some interest, your book idea may be interesting too.

Do you have to read to become a better writer?

I think what you have to do to become a better writer is to write. The idea that you need to read a lot comes because some high profile writers mentioned it as the secret to writing (Stephen King in “On Writing” for example), but to follow that dictate slavishly would miss the point, in my opinion. The reason to read a lot is to fill the head with ideas. While writing, the creative subconscious needs ideas to draw on. Whether you get those ideas from books, or from life itself, or from interviewing people, or from working hard in your career – these are all means to the same end. But the only way you can get better at writing is to write, a lot, and often.

In my experience the breakthrough as a writer comes when your ideas begin to flow seamlessly from the subconscious onto the page (or screen). The writers I’ve commissioned who have struggled most were the ones that constantly second guessed their material. They were the ones who didn’t have it in the forefront of their minds. When I wrote my first book the words just flowed onto the page because I’d spent a year immersed in the subject matter. That’s for non-fiction, and I don’t think it’s much different for fiction, except...

Well, where do you go for fiction material? If you want to write a best-selling travel guide you go abroad, and

if you want to write a best-selling woodwork guide you spend 12 hours a day doing woodwork, but if you want to write best-selling fiction, either you have to live the life of your eventual characters, or as a second best, read the creations of other people. For most, reading books will be the best or only option.

There is one other reason for reading a lot, which is that the style of the writing rubs off on you. I can't vouch for whether this is really a good enough reason to read the quantity some people suggest. If you're writing a lot you will want to try things out, and that is where you can simply get the book of a favourite author down off the shelf and read a few pages to check out how they do it.

Where can I find a cheap (but good) ghost writer?

If you have a highly commercial book idea, or are a recognised authority on something important, or have a large online platform or following, then your up-front budget is largely irrelevant because you can offer a percentage royalty on the sale of the book. If you don't have any of those things then all you can realistically get for \$400 is a 20-50 page book. If that's the size of book you're after, just look around on Amazon for authors who have written books similar to the one you're thinking about, and approach them, offering them \$400 advance and 10% royalty. You only need to chance on one of them who's a bit skint, and they might take you up on the offer.

Another way to go is to first get a recognised book publisher to accept your book proposal on its own merits, based on the size of your platform, your expert credentials or the sheer marketability of the book synopsis. State in the proposal document that you will be using an experienced co-author.

Do you need a degree?

Do you have to graduate to be a best selling Author? If you don't, how do you get better to become one?

Being a graduate helps, but not necessarily a degree in Creative Writing. Any degree makes you, the student, have to research something in depth, form an opinion on it, then write about it. This process is a foundation stone of what makes a writer. Writing is seeing the physical world and the people in it, internalising that, looking at it in a fresh or interesting angle, then sitting down to communicate that in writing day after day. I'd rather have a degree in Physics than Creative Writing, and rather the latter than no degree at all. Having a degree makes it easier for you to write at the level the world expects of you.

My day to day work used to involve finding potential non-fiction authors and offering some of them a book contract. Most of the time I looked for people with degrees. When there's so many people that have, why would I go for someone that hasn't?

Which is the best 'technical writing' manual?

All the books I've come across about technical writing are terrible. That sounds harsh. But think about it like this. Why is someone writing a book about technical writing? Probably because they think technical writing is different to any other writing. And that's why these authors write terrible books.

Do yourself a favor and let go of the idea that writing for a technical audience is somehow different to other writing. Get a book on how to write non-fiction and use that instead. All you need to learn is how to write clearly so that your reader understands what you mean. You do that by putting yourself in the shoes of the reader and at each stage of writing, thinking:

"How far are they from knowing this thing already? What do I need to add to their knowledge to get them there?"

This is the basic rule of writing. Think of someone. Ask them how far they are from knowing x. Fill in the gaps until they understand x.

Let's apply it in a couple of simple examples. As a writer you usually decide you want to teach or explain something, and you start with "I want to teach people how to ice a cake." The problem is, what is

your definition of “people”? Some readers have iced hundreds of cakes with rolled icing but want to know about piping. Some readers never even baked a cake before. Are you really going to try to write for both of those... at the same time?

By applying the basic rule of writing you will get a drastically different set of instructions.

Example 1 Fill the icing bag half full with your standard icing mix. Take hold of the top in one hand and twirl the bottom half, creating a tight seal. Cut off the bottom with scissors leaving the desired diameter hole. Begin with the outside of the cake and squeeze...

Example 2 Icing is basically just powdered sugar with water added. If you mixed a cuppa-soup before, you should get the hang of making it no problem! The trick is to get the consistence right so that your icing spreads easily but doesn’t droop or flow off the cake. Let’s begin by assembling the following ingredients...

I hope you can instantly see the difference. For the expert audience we’re 1) missing out what they already know, 2) assuming they know what standard mix of icing is, 3) moving very quickly through the material. What we are most definitely not doing is writing in a special way, using convoluted phrases or hard words or jargon, nor are we writing in an “academic” way. We’re merely writing to the intended audience.

In the second example we’re starting much earlier because we’ve established the reader won’t even know how to make icing. We’re being more supportive “you

should get the hang of it”, and we’re going much more slowly, not assuming any prior knowledge about what icing is.

The two books I recommend on writing

Writing Successful Self-Help and How-To Books (978-0471037392), Jean Marie Stine

On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft (978-1444723250), Stephen King

Part 2 - The writing process

How do you quit procrastinating and write a book?

This is probably the million dollar question, because procrastination can hit on any of the hundred days (or more) it takes to write a book and torpedo your chances of ever completing it. Even then, you may finish the draft but procrastinate on editing it.

There is a saying in the Bible book of Ecclesiastes:

For to him that is joined to all the living
there is hope: for a living dog is better than
a dead lion.

What does that mean in terms of book writing? It means any old tatty, badly written, boring finished book is better than your part written masterpiece.

It means your chapter packed from beginning to end with scintillating character insights and thumping story-line, is worth nothing compared to any chapter in any published book, no matter how dull.

It means the finished first draft of your stunning debut novel sitting in a cardboard box under your desk is worthless compared with a published one written by a jaded old hack who's churned out the same tired story-line over and over again for thirty years.

The key to procrastination is in that phrase.

You need to be properly scared of never finishing.

Writing your book needs to carry on through illness, pregnancy, birth, loss of job, accident... all the things that life throws at you. Only some strong medicine is going to keep you going through all that.

Your nine step plan to beating procrastination

This is the strategy I followed to write a 80,000 word novel in 3 months.

1. Set a target of when you will finish your first draft. Three months sounds about right for 80,000 words.
2. Divide that by the number of days you will be writing. Either make that every day, or take out the Sabbath or Sunday if you wish. That leaves you about 77 days.
3. Turn your spell checker off. Turn off the internet to your PC. Tell your family about your plan.
4. On the first day, sit down and write your target of say 1000 words. Write fast, doing no edits, checking no spellings, doing no planning... just write. Write it full of mistakes, dead ends, whatever you need to keep going. If you stop to put "quality" into it at this stage you will never get your book finished. Any mangy living dog is better than a dead lion.

5. If you run out of time before your wordcount is done, go and do whatever you have to do, then come back to it before you go to sleep, even if it's the early hours and you're half asleep while you type. Keep your habitual daily target alive at all cost ... remember, a living dog is better than a dead lion.
6. When the first draft is done, don't print it out in case seeing it there tricks you into thinking you've finished.
7. Set a deadline for when you want to have this edited. Divide the number of pages by the days you have. Set a target for that number of pages per day.
8. Print out the day's pages and edit them, then write up those edits straight away. When finished chuck the pages. If the day's edits are enormous and require a rewrite, jot this down in a notepad along with how many pages it needs.
9. With your edits done, now set a deadline for the rewrites in your notepad. This time do it by taking the number of words you need to write, divide that by how many you wrote per day, and use that as your deadline.

At any point along this long path when you're starting to slow down or stop, or to skip a day's writing, remind yourself that until this is written, edited, rewritten, and finally published, anything out there no matter how poorly written, boring, or derivative, is infinitely better than your unfinished (dead) work.

What are some ways to get ideas for writing books?

Observe the world. Life is way stranger than fiction.
If anything, you'll need to tone it down for a fiction
book!

When do you push back on an edit?

I've written for several editors, and worked as one too. This is a personal view from both sides of the fence.

As an editor I've rarely found significant push back from authors. Where I've felt strongly, I've had it my way in the end. The reason is that, ultimately as an editor you represent the publisher, and the publisher owns the book.

Let me say that again, because a lot of writers reading this will assume that was a typo.

The publisher owns the book.

Even while the author is writing it.

So as the editor you have to make decisions to safeguard the publisher's investment. You have a lot of power to wield, backed up (within reason) by your senior colleagues. In extreme cases you even have to sack the author and find a replacement. I've had to do that, and not just once.

The two types of Authors that have been most challenging are the ones that won't accept any edits, and those that accept all edits too meekly.

Similarly from the author's point of view, you probably know your work better than anyone. If an edit

entirely disagrees with your vision for the book, discuss it with your editor. They will probably agree with you once they hear your point of view.

What software tools are out there to help me write a book?

By experience there are no software tools that will help you. Software gets in the way. The more features you have, the less easy it is to concentrate on the simple act of writing. Ideally you want a free path between brain and page. Try not to clog that path.

If for you typing is easy, use a keyboard and minimalist word processor. If you're more of a talker, use voice recognition software such as [Dragon](#)¹, or the built-in one on your phone.

¹www.nuance.co.uk/dragon/

How do I have my voice notes transcribed?

A free way to use speech to text is to use **Google Docs** on your phone and laptop at the same time. Sign in on your phone and also on a laptop and set up a document. Now dictate into your phone using Google's speech recognition. You can then correct errors as you go using your laptop.

I prefer to use **Dragon Naturally Speaking**. It's not free, but for the small price tag it's invaluable. With a keyboard I can write 1000 words in an hour. With Dragon it takes half an hour. It also has an Android or iPhone app, so you can pace around while you talk, and the screen on your laptop fills up with your words.

Should you write specifically for your audience or write what you want?

Oscar-winning composer of the score for *The Lion King* and a series of superhero blockbusters including *Batman v Superman*, Hans Zimmer, put it this way in an interview with the BBC:

“It might sound a bit strange but I compose for just one person. This lady is a single mum with a hard life. After a long, week looking after children and working hard, she has just two hours to herself to relax and unwind. She enters that cinema and sits down, so I’d *better* entertain her.”

I think that’s the most wonderful summary of the way it is. When faced with this reality, how can we write for ourselves? Hans is saying with this simple statement that there’s probably a million more “literary” things he’d rather write, but he doesn’t because he has a job to do. A job to save people from their drudgery.

After years of writing and encouraging other new authors to write, I don’t think I can write “what I

Should you write specifically for your audience or write what you want? 28

want” any more. Everything always starts with “who is this for?”, and then “How can I meet their need?”.

I feel I must write everything specifically for the reader. Without that I feel my words are empty.

Which software do writers use to compile their novel?

You can do everything you need using free and Open Source software. Here are my suggestions, going through the publishing process step by step.

1. **Writing software.** Choose [LibreOffice](https://www.libreoffice.org/)² or [WPS Writer](https://www.wps.com/)³ by Kingsoft. Other software either doesn't give you enough features (e.g. Google Docs, or has so many features that they get in the way of writing (e.g. Scrivener).
2. **Graphics software.** [GIMP](http://www.gimp.org/)⁴ is just like a free Photoshop. You can use it for covers, for illustration, or to handle screenshots or photos.
3. **Ebook software.** Use [Sigil](http://www.techspot.com/downloads/5797-sigil.html)⁵ to convert your text to Epub format for the eBook version of your book.
4. **Desktop Publishing software.** If possible, try not to use DTP software, as it's usually an unnecessarily complex step to take, and once your work is in a DTP format it's time consuming to get it into eBook formats. If you have complex layouts, or you're publishing a magazine, use [Scribus](https://www.scribus.net/)⁶.

²<https://www.libreoffice.org/>

³<https://www.wps.com/>

⁴<http://www.gimp.org/>

⁵<http://www.techspot.com/downloads/5797-sigil.html>

⁶<https://www.scribus.net/>

Which software do writers use to compile their novel?

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That's it. Don't forget that if you're creating a text only novel (no pictures), you can probably get away with just using no.1, and when you upload your file on **Createspace**, it will do the rest.

Which writing software is better: Scrivener or Ulysses 3?

“I am looking to purchase a serious writing software and have narrowed it down to these two programs. However, I am having trouble seeing which is better.”

I think you need to evaluate why you want “serious” software for something that is not a software solvable problem. I wrote about it at length in an article and a lot of authors said it resonated: (See chapter “Aspiring writers: Borrow the bashed up bike”).

The trend today is actually to move away from complex tools like **Scrivener** and **Microsoft Word** toward distraction free writing software. See the online reviews at [Five Best Distraction-Free Writing Tools⁷](#).

If you’re doing a lot of research and your writing entails complex plots, ask yourself why your own marvellous subconscious cannot cope with the complexity. Is it that you have not yet internalised your research or perhaps that your plots are too complex so that your readers won’t follow it either?

Leaving the biggest reason for last, I really feel that the very worst thing you can do while writing a first

⁷<http://lifehacker.com/5689579/five-best-distraction-free-writing-tools>

draft is to stop every few paragraphs and get side-tracked by filling in notes or reading them. It's akin to jumping out of the shower every few minutes to answer the door. The extra cognitive load that creates is like drying off, putting on clothes, going downstairs, then getting undressed and back in the shower again. Not optimal!

How hard is it to write/publish a 300 page eBook in 2-3 months on Kindle?

My answer would be “not very difficult”, even when you work full-time, but there’s two secret ingredients. Firstly, if you need to write fast, you will need speech to text software. Secondly, you will need to aim to get this book adequate, not perfect. You’ve heard of the 80/20 rule? It means that you can get 80% of the result by doing 50% of the work. Doing the next 20% to complete the project will take you a further 50%. So if you’re serious about this venture, decide early on what level of quality you are aiming at, what you need someone else to do, and what you’re prepared to leave out.

Is it easy to write a 30-page e-book in a weekend that's a bestseller?

It is next to impossible. Best-seller status (at least if you define it in the way big publishers do) is only ever there for novels and non-fiction of book length, which would be considerably longer than 30 pages. As an eBook only format you further reduce your chances.

There are exceptions.

- Minecraft, Raspberry Pi and Video Game Guides. If you catch the crest of a huge wave and get a really great book out when something HUGE is launching, you might get a bestseller. Many Publishers were astonished that Minecraft topped the charts last year, outselling everything else.
- Childrens picture books. You'd be struggling to do art and text in one weekend, but at least the lower page count would work for you, not against. As for eBook, again, no. It has to be print.
- Someone important dies, and leaves no biographer. It's unlikely, but again in this case you could steal a few weeks of sales before the official book comes out.

Is it easy to write a 30-page e-book in a weekend that's a bestseller?

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Aiming for Amazon category best-seller is another matter, and this is where I would recommend expending your efforts. If you find a niche category you may be able to be the best-seller in there.

Part 3 - Getting published

What is it like to write for a big Publisher?

I wrote two books for Packt Publishing, one of 400 pages and one of 250 pages. I then worked for them as an Acquisitions Editor too, guiding other authors through the process of writing and publishing non-fiction works. While it may not be typical for all publishers, this will give you a flavor, as they all generally work along similar lines.

If you are a subject matter expert with an online footprint you may have been contacted by someone doing an author search already. Some people get annoyed at being singled out as a potential book author. Don't. It's an opportunity that may never come around again. At the very least, be flattered that your profile is good enough that they found you. At best, reply that you're interested, and ask what kind of book they had in mind.

If you have a book idea you want to pitch, you usually find details of how to apply via the publisher's website. This application gets emailed around to all Acquisitions Editors, and they get to take their pick if interested.

Once you or your book pitch are deemed of interest, you will eventually be put in touch with a Commissioning or Acquisitions Editor who will help refine your book idea, and send you a document to fill in

which guides you on how to write a proposal and TOC (table of contents). They will get this reviewed internally and get back to you with some suggested changes.

Sometimes you will be up against other candidates. You won't necessarily be told about this. Packt exists to sell books that fulfil a market need, so they won't let you slow down their plans. If you don't write the book, they'll find someone else to do it - guaranteed. If all goes well, and you're communicating in a timely and professional manner, you'll get the email that will go something like this:

Dear [your name]

Your book proposal has been approved for publication. Congratulations!

I can offer you an advance on royalties of ___, paid in installments throughout the writing process. Royalties will be ___% on all revenues.

As an author I think that's an exciting email to get, and as an Acquisitions Editor who got to send maybe a hundred of them for various Publishers, each time I wrote it it was a thrill. I hand typed each and every one, even though the format is pretty much the same each time. I guess I did that because I felt personally connected to each author I contracted.

At this point you'll get a contract to look at. This is a standard contract, without your specific details filled in yet, for you to look it over and check you're happy. As an author I was very, very picky about this. I asked a lot of questions. Yet I have to say that no matter

how much you ask for changes, there's only so much your Acquisitions Editor can do. Publishing Contracts hold together as a whole document, with each clause carefully balancing out others. As an AE I have on several occasions had to tell a would-be author that the clause they were trying to get me to change was written for their benefit, and if we removed it they would be left with a worse deal.

Basically the contract signs over all rights to your work to the publisher, and it is at this stage that you really have to make peace (or not) with the idea that you will never be getting your work back once you have signed it over to the Publisher. This is the same with any Publisher. As a first time author the moment you sign the contract is bitter-sweet.

As well as the TOC and the contract, you have to agree to a set of deadlines, which for what I call a "normal" book of 12 chapters, 250 pages, should be 10-20 days. One of the best things about Packt is that they hold you to this. Think about it. How motivated a person are you? If you have 12 deadlines, you're much more likely to pull it out of the bag for each one, than if you had one big deadline at the end. And to have a task-master constantly on your back to get you to hit the deadlines can't be a bad thing either. There was only one person I mentioned by name in the acknowledgements section of my first book:

Special thanks to Poorvi for keeping me on schedule

The writing will now begin in earnest. You write the first chapter, probably going into great detail about the invention of the internet, and submit it. You'll

probably write in Word, and use the template provided. You'll get feedback, either now or later. Essentially an editor will cut your waffle, keep you to the subject in hand, keep you to the word-count required, and if you're lucky, give you some tips. The skill of your editor will vary greatly.

Once you've done a few chapters, you may start getting reviewer comments. These are what will really ensure the quality of your book. In computer science, an editor can only do so much. A reviewer is someone who knows the technology as well as you do, and will comment on the technical and readability of your writing. Pay attention to it, and think twice before discarding their advice. On the other hand, remember they know nothing about Publishing, so take some of what they say with a pinch of salt.

Once you submit your full manuscript, have rewritten it to reviewer comments, and it's been accepted, you'll feel elated... but not for long. The pain is about to begin. If you have family that you love, maybe you should send them to the in-laws for a week or so...

Packt has a large office in Mumbai. This is the engine of the company. It is staffed almost entirely by degree educated, English speaking young Indian people. For this structure to work, the setup is highly automated. There are targets for everything – and everyone tries to hit them, irrespective of what that does to your book. From now on, you're thrown into a machine and you better go along with it or it will chew you up. It won't stop for anything or anyone.

You will probably get an email that goes like this.

Dear [your name]

I am ____ and I am taking your book through production. The final proofs of chapters 1, 2, and 3 are attached. Please check them and let me know if you have any comments. We are publishing on [date three days from now] and we need any changes back by tomorrow.

You open up the “final proofs” and take a read through. What you do next will define whether your book makes you proud, or whether it gets so many 1* on Amazon that you become a pariah to your friends and colleagues. So please listen up.

There will be terrible errors.

You may think that the book now looks worse than when you submitted it.

You will feel like writing a desperate email, or ringing them, or hiring an editor, or crying.

But this is just how it is in publishing, where there are not enough hours in the day.

1. What you do now is calmly ring work and take some time off
2. Have the discussion with your family that the time you told them about has arrived. Either you or they should go for a few days.
3. Go to the store and buy some supplies. Note the weather, feel the air, savour the event.
4. Calmly open the first chapter and using a PDF program, note all the places where you want changes. Use strikeouts, replace, insert, and so on. Where you need to explain that an image

“shouldn’t be that way up”, use a Comment feature.

5. Save that chapter in a REV1 folder, then send it in. Start on the next chapter.
6. When a revised version of chapter 1 arrives, open it and go to step 4.
7. There may be as many as three iterations on any given chapter, and each time the changes will get smaller. You are now the editor.

And that’s it. A few weeks may pass. You will go back to your life. You will vow never ever to do that again. If you didn’t follow my advice in no2 you may be having family problems, or at the least trying to make amends.

Then one day a box arrives. You take it into your office and close the door, or you drive out to a car park and sit with it on the passenger seat. You open the box and look at the books with your name on them. You pull one out and leaf through it. It’s not bad. Your memory is of thinking the whole thing was a disaster, but now what you have in front of you is actually quite good. It’s actually... well... book-like.

Because, well, when all’s said and done, publishers are run by people who know how to make books. While you probably thought the whole thing was sham-bolic towards the end, you now realise that someone created a pretty decent index without you knowing, and all the pages look kind of laid out correctly, with page numbers and chapter headers, and the right fonts, and chunky chapter titles, and it’s got a barcode, and the cover looks right. And there’s a lot of it between the covers. You realise there’s no way you could have created this by yourself.

So that's a glimpse into what it's like to work with a publisher. As you can see it's hard work, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. If you want it, you will have to *earn* your badge of "published author".

How much difference will an Editor make to my book sales?

Most answers you will get to this question, Online or elsewhere, will miss the point completely. They think of an editor as someone who does copy-editing, proofreading and error checking. But who really cares about those? A friend can copy-edit. Microsoft Word can proofread and grammar check. A few knowledgeable reviewers can error check for free. None of this stuff makes more than 1% or 5% difference on how much your book will sell. It doesn't matter.

But what if there were a person out there who could tell you where the big book markets were? What if there was someone who could tell you how to write on target to what that market needs? What if there was someone who could work out how many copies your book idea could sell, and then guide you in outlining it so that you delivered that book perfectly? What if someone existed who could tell you how to hit your target audience so precisely that they would simply have to buy your book?

This person exists.

They are called an **Acquisitions Editor**.

You should get one of these.

Long before you start to write the book, an AE can guide you in planning the right book for the current market. They will already know the market so well that it will be second nature to them. They will spot straight away when your book proposal is a waste of time. They will save you a year of your life, wasted, and instead guide you toward producing a book plan that could make it the best year you ever spent.

So where do you find one?

Unfortunately, since these people are at the top rung of the Editor's career ladder, they are invariably employed full-time by a Publisher and often too busy to freelance. The only hope you may have is to befriend one, or simply to offer them a freelance gig they can't refuse. Basically what I'm saying is that if you really want editorial advice that will make a big (a huge) difference to your book, you will probably have to get it by going the traditional publishing route. Once you have been noticed by a Publisher, their Acquisitions Editor will work with you on your book synopsis and outline to make it shine, and once they're happy with it they may offer you a contract.

Publishers: What tips you off that a book is well written or publishable?

Really this is two completely different questions.

“Well written” does not equal publishable. Not even close. I mean, in fact, “well written” has nothing whatsoever to do with publishable.

Confused?

That’s because publish-ability is all about market-ability.

As an Acquisitions Editor you look for clues as to whether a book could be marketable, but actually, what do we know about it? Not much. Just a little bit more than everyone else. So we go on instinct, on whatever sales data we can get, on what we read ourselves, or past experience, or whatever.

If something is well written it has a better chance of pleasing the Acquisitions Editor, and that’s a good start. But let’s not confuse this with marketability. Write well in order to get the attention of the AE or Agent, but don’t expect good writing to get you anywhere in the market place.

Why is that? Because people read books to get a kick. No-one ever recommended a book to me as a reader because “it was well written”. If they did I’d probably

avoid it thinking it meant the book was written in poetic language without real substance. Good writing is nothing special. It's the baseline we expect.

What sells books is the ability of the book to give the reader some kicks. In non-fiction that might be to satisfy some burning desire or need. If it's fiction, it may be to thrill them or show them something that makes them smile or look inside or feel some new emotion. Really, successful books are fairground rides. You choose which one to go on because of which one gets the most screams of fear or delight. Remember that, it's rule #1.

Secondly, a book isn't publishable when you submit it to a Publisher. You may need to rewrite the whole thing, or you may need to do some re-drafts. Certainly it will get picked apart by reviewers who will suggest changes. Then it will get several rounds of edits, copy-edits, and proofs. Only then is it publishable, in the traditional sense.

So getting to what I believe is the crux of your question, you should step outside of the text of your book for a while and look at it in outline. Perhaps write a table of contents, scene by scene. What is it about this TOC that provides those fairground screams and whoops of delight? What is calling out of that TOC, waiting to pull the reader in and shake them around before letting them go at the end completely satisfied? If there's precious few of those, then put them in now, right there in the TOC, and get to work writing / rewriting those scenes.

Only when you have a crowd-pleaser are you finally ready to write a killer book proposal to send to AEs and Agents.

Why are magazine editors no longer responding to my queries?

If a magazine editor no longer responds to your pitches, it either means they're busy, or that they don't think you're the right fit for their magazine. It's best just to move on and try elsewhere as in both cases there's nothing much you can do.

How can I find a publication for my novel and what's the procedure?

The basis steps if you already have written a novel, are these:

1. Get the manuscript edited
2. Revise it based on editors comments
3. Research publishers and agents on **Amazon.com** that publish similar works
4. Submit carefully written proposal to their submission guidelines

Are publishers interested in picking up self-published books?

Yes they are. Walk a mile in their shoes for a moment and think about it from their perspective. Every author they sign is a risk. Each book they develop takes investment. Anything that will reduce that risk a little is worth doing.

So let's say I was acquiring for a fiction house, and I had a manuscript in hand from a first time author whose writing I thought was great. If I give them a contract, I have to pay them an advance, then persuade the boss to fork out many thousands of dollars to finance the editing and production of the book, the marketing and the promotion. Then that book could sell nothing and we lose it all.

Now, if I have in the other hand a self published book that's not as good, that I don't like as much, but it has a thousand people who already paid good money to read it, then I'll always be tempted to go with that. Why? Because if *before* I got to it, it sold 1000, then after I'm through with improving it I'm sure it will sell 10,000, and that's all I need for it to have covered costs. In other words, the risk is gone.

Business success is reached as much through minimising risk as maximising return on investment.

“What if you self-publish your book for FREE, though? Are the amount of reads/reviews still indicative of potential profit for publishers?”

All the information on the internet is free, yet we make decisions on popularity by how many views a page or a blog post has had. There is a rough correlation between how many times a page is viewed for free, and how many people might be willing to pay to read something similar.

Let's say your thesis gained 10,000 reads. You then put this into book form, and advertise it on that self same web page. A percentage of people would buy it. Perhaps 1%, for argument's sake. 1% of 10,000 is only 100, so that would give you an idea of how many sales you might get. As you can see, the popularity of a free book needs to be very significant before the numbers become meaningful for publishers.

Generally publishers prefer to see evidence of money changing hands.

What is it like being an editor for an author?

Being an editor is a fantastic line of work. You get to help authors produce well above their best.

It's also hard to get into the business. I'd suggest writing a book, getting a degree, and getting some work experience under your belt first. Some people go via the English degree route. I can't see why someone who studied English would make a good editor. It's like saying someone who studied sand, cement and brick kilns would make a good builder.

Editors should be interested in people, in ideas, in things. If you're interested (I mean like you can't stop absorbing knowledge/ideas/conversations like a sponge) then you can be interested in what authors write for you.

Editors should be ego-less. An editor is a servant to the publisher and a servant to the author. Most of all, the editor serves the eventual reader, so you have to have been a reader.

Editors need to learn to be decisive but pragmatic. You should learn to know what's best for the reader, but know when it's pushing the author too far to get what you want.

Finally, to reiterate, become more interested in things, people, ideas, than in language. Language is a barren wilderness without them.

When can I say “I’m published”?

Can I say “I’m published” even if I only publish my works online?



Published

As you can see from the image it’s an exclusive club. What you’re really asking (if not you, then the next

one reading this will be) is “can anyone stick a PDF of a Word Document online and be a member”?

The term “published author” really refers to your book being put out by a publisher who is in the business of publishing using their own money (not yours). These days “self publishing” sounds better than the previously used term “vanity publishing”, so at least self publishers now have a decent name to give themselves. Indie Author is catching on too. I would use those rather than “I’m published”. This applies to any length of work, by the way, so you could say “I’m published” if you had a reputable publication run your short story or magazine article. Implicit in the phrase is the understanding that a gatekeeper let you in the gate because the quality of your work was good enough to join the club. The same would go for saying you’re a Chartered Engineer or a Decorated Soldier, so I don’t think it’s unreasonable, but then I’m biased.

On the subject of Online only books, I don’t think this is an issue at all. If you are contracted by an eBook only publisher then you are still a published author, and no-one would (should) dispute that. Quite why a publisher would only release a title as an eBook is a mystery to me, though, since **Print on Demand** makes it so easy to produce a print work.