

"Hey, Kids! Become an Author at Home in Your Spare Time and Earn Big Bucks!"

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This is the first in a series of four articles on publishing.

Even if you can't write the Great American Novel, you may be able to write the Great American Manual. There is a huge market for non-fiction—books on software and computers, fixing cars, photography, mountain-climbing, cooking. This article is for anyone who wants to write a non-fiction book and get it published. It's not hard. In fact, it can be a lot of fun.

Getting Started

The first step in writing a technical book is to decide what you want to write about. It's not necessary for you to write about a topic that's never been written about before. Look at how many different books there are for almost any topic. Most of them sell, though they all cover roughly the same material. What makes each of these worth considering is that they are approaching the same material in a different way.

You may end up identifying the book you want to write by discovering that there's no book on the market that addresses the topic. For example, I wrote one of my first books ("Using Computer Bulletin Boards") because it was the book I wanted to have read 5 years earlier when I was getting started using BBSes and online services. Or you may have a new angle on an old topic that makes it worthwhile: for example, "A Field Guide to Windows Icons" and "Internet for Cats" are fun but helpful guides to a topic that have a novel and humorous spin to them.

Building a Basic Proposal

When you have your idea, you'll need to create a *proposal*. A proposal should contain the working title, the scope and purpose of the book, a description of the intended audience, what the reader should know at the beginning and at the end of the book, and a table of contents or outline. Your proposal should also include any salient marketing information; for example, if this book is the first of its kind or if there are several other books that address the subject but this one takes a new slant. Also tell the publisher what you can do to help them market the book. Most publishers are very receptive to having an author work with them on the marketing.

Tip: Many publishers have proposal guidelines on their websites. All of them will require the basic information described above, but many have additional preferences for proposal information. Once you've drafted your proposal and have chosen a publisher, check for the publisher's proposal guidelines to expand and tailor your proposal to the publisher's preferred style. As you do so, you'll find that you'll develop a proposal format that you like to use that's acceptable to almost everyone.

In addition to information about the book, you also need to sell yourself. Sell your understanding of the topic and your ability to plan and write 300-600 pages in the allotted time, which is never as much as you'd like. Demonstrate that you can write, organize, research, meet deadlines, and stick through the project. (Acquisitions editors *live* for people who never miss deadlines.)

What if you don't have a specific idea in mind? You may still have general topics that you'd like to write about. One of the best way to identify potential topics is to identify your own strengths and preferences. For example, I don't care to write books on software development, but I enjoy doing books on computer and software basics. If you're already writing manuals or articles, look at what you've been writing about professionally. Don't forget to see if you have other skills that you can add to this list: for example, you may be a whiz at setting up computers, at cooking, or at helping your clients analyze their interior design needs. All of these add depth to your writing and increase the potential for a variety of non-fiction books. Good topic knowledge combined with writing ability is enough to sell most publishers on you as a potential author. So, even if you don't have a specific book idea to propose, a general list of topics may well be enough to start with. You can focus your ideas later to fit the publisher's needs.

Choosing a Publisher

With your proposal or topic list in hand, you're ready to choose a publisher. Like other kinds of freelance work, you should ask people in the business for referrals. One source of contacts is local writing groups. Most of these are aimed at the fiction writer, but you might be able to contact other authors by talking to the local chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (at www.stc.org) or the International Association of Business Communicators (at www.iabc.com). Another organization to check into is the National Writers Union (www.igc.apc.org/nwu), which is the trade union for freelance writers of all genres. They have a number of resources including model contracts. Another source is to check out the Studio B website (www.studiob.com) and subscribe to the Computer Book Authors' list. You can also make some contacts through the *bit.listserv.techwr-l* newsgroup, a moderated newsgroup for technical communicators.

As part of your research, you should go to a large bookstore and look at other books on the same or similar topics. You'll rapidly notice that each publisher has a certain look and feel to their lines of books, designed to appeal to a specific audience. Write down the names and addresses of the publishers whose books you would most like to have your name associated with. Ask your contacts if they know anything about these publishers, or check the current *Writer's Market* (a guide available at all large bookstores) for more information about each publisher.

Tip: It's a good idea to find out if the publisher already has a book on the topic you want to write about. You can check www.amazon.com and do a topic, title, or keyword search for all the books on this subject. Don't be alarmed if you find 30 titles on the subject. Many of these books may be out of print, or dated (books on software and technology can go out of date overnight), or have a different focus than that which you want to do. You can also see if the publishers you want to work with have a book on this subject already in print. Make careful notes on what's already out there in the market—it can help your case and impress the publisher if you know who you're competing with—and be ready to show why your book is different from the others. This will go into the marketing section of your proposal.

Phone the publishers on your list and ask to speak to an *acquisitions editor*. The acquisitions editor looks for authors, solicits and reviews book proposals, and is the project manager for a book. If you already have an idea for a book, you can present it to the acquisitions editor for consideration and see if she likes it. If so, send her the proposal you've drafted. (Be prepared to send a resume and a few writing samples, too.) If you don't have a specific idea but are willing to write on a range of subjects, approach the acquisitions editor as you would approach any other employer. Acquisitions editors

frequently have projects that need good writers, and the two of you are likely to find a project that complements your skills and interests, in which case, she may ask you to write a proposal for a specific topic on her desk. By the way, many publishers prefer to consider new authors exclusively by mail. Be prepared in such cases to get just the acquisitions editor's name, address, and information on submissions, then hang up and send her your proposal.

If you don't already have extensive technical writing experience, you may need to prove yourself to the publisher before they'll consider you as an author. Ask the acquisitions editors if they need technical reviewers. Technical reviewers check the manuscript for technical accuracy and readability. This takes from 50 to 100 hours of time, for which you'll get paid \$400-1200 dollars. The money is not great, but the work isn't very hard. Technical reviewing gives you and the publisher a chance to evaluate each other.

Once you submit your proposal, the acquisitions editor will consider it for publication. Large publishers usually have an *editorial committee*, a meeting where all the acquisitions editors discuss the proposals they've received and make decisions about which books they want to do. You'll usually know within a couple of weeks if the acquisitions editor has accepted or rejected your proposal. One possibility is that the acquisitions editor will come back to you and say "We like the general idea, but we'd like to have you write the book for a different audience/with a different scope and purpose/in a different style than you've proposed." This is generally a good sign: it means that the acquisitions editor believes in your ability enough to keep talking and that there are elements of your proposal that she thinks could be profitable.

Tip: Always let the acquisitions editor know that you're willing to consider writing about other topics as well. My first book actually happened because I was trying to sell another book idea. An acquisitions editor at Osborne/McGraw-Hill said, "Well, we don't think that your book will sell well enough for us but we like the way you present your ideas. How'd you like to write a book on Microsoft Word for DOS?" I prepared a proposal and sent it in. The editorial committee reviewed it, made some changes to my proposed scope and the audience I was writing for, and I had my first book contract a week later.

If you have a great idea for a book and one publisher doesn't bite, try another publisher. A rejection doesn't mean it's a bad idea, simply that they weren't interested or it didn't fit. (Do ask why they didn't want to do it, though; frequently, the information you get about one rejection will give you what you need to refine the proposal so you can sell it to the next publisher.) Keep sending proposals out. Publishers are always looking for new books and new authors. And you might be able to resubmit a proposal to a publisher and have them approve it the second time: what the publisher wants right now may be different from what they'll want in six months. Don't submit a proposal simultaneously to different publishers (known in the business as "multiple submission") until you have a good understanding of the publishing process.

Avoid publishers who are flaky or have very bad reputations for how they deal with their authors (there are a few of these, sadly). If you don't know and you don't have someone you can ask, you might try phoning a few of the authors in a publisher's stable. You can frequently track them down through their biographies on the back of the book. Many authors of computer and other books will add their email or web addresses as part of their acknowledgments or contact information. You can also use Internet-based telephone directories to do simple detective work for tracking down email addresses, phone numbers, or mailing addresses. And as a last resort, you might send a couple of

letters to authors *via the publisher*. Seal the letters, send them to the publisher, and ask the publisher to forward them to the author at her/his home address. It's as good a way to get to them as any, and it stands a fair chance of success.

Advances, Royalties, and Contracts

Suppose the acquisitions editor likes your proposal and offers you a contract. The biggest question to ask is "How much will I get paid and how often?" There are two types of payment you'll be seeing: *royalties* and *advances*.

First-time non-fiction authors usually get royalties of 10-15% on the publisher's net receipts—the income the publisher gets when they sell a copy of your book, which averages out to around half the cover price of the book. You'll probably get about half your standard royalty rates for foreign sales, and there may be other types of sales that pay less than the full royalty. Most publishers expect to sell 15,000 to 25,000 copies of a book over several years, so if the book sells well, you can make \$25,000 or more in royalties.

An *advance* is a sum paid to you in advance to subsidize your expenses while you write the book. Advances are levied against your future royalties. Publishers generally pay between a quarter and a half of the advance when you start writing, with the balance spaced out over the book. In other words, if you negotiate a \$6000 advance, you'll likely see \$2000 up front, \$2000 at the midpoint, and the remaining \$2000 when you get done. The advance is yours to keep, even if the book doesn't sell well enough to "earn out the advance"—that is, to generate enough royalties to pay for the advance you've received.

Publishers aren't required to pay your royalties for a royalty period for 90 days after the end of the royalty period, and they don't. Acquisitions editors may be sympathetic, but they don't write the checks. Advances by themselves usually aren't enough to live on. Plan on having other sources of income until your royalties start arriving, and always keep some cash in reserve in case they don't. Don't quit your day job right away.

Look out for clauses in the contract that let the publisher pay you a reduced royalty on discounted sales. These clauses usually work out so that the publisher can use your royalty to subsidize discounts to wholesalers. Remember that everything in a contract is negotiable, even if the contract is preprinted on pretty bond paper.

Find out what production costs you are liable for. For example, you may need to pay for an indexer to create the index on your book. Costs like this are levied against future royalties, not against your advance. Make sure there are no unpleasant surprises.

As a first-time author, you won't have a lot of bargaining power. Don't be afraid to ask for what you want, but don't expect to get it. If you can get the publisher to increase your advance or the royalty rate a little and get 15 extra copies of your book, call it a victory.

Publishing contracts are a complex and fascinating subject. Buy a copy of *How to Be Your Own Literary Agent* by Richard Curtis and read it before signing your contract. If you want outside help deciphering the contract, consult a lawyer specializing in publishing, entertainment, or intellectual property law. Some literary agents will also review a contract for you for an hourly rate. You probably won't need more than an hour, and you'll learn a lot about what you are agreeing to.

One list piece of advice on contracts: never sign a contract with a publisher (or anyone else, for that matter) that you don't trust. It doesn't matter how much money you're being offered, how good the deal looks, and how much opportunity the contract may give you; if you don't trust the other party, you'll sleep poorly every time you think of it. There isn't anything worth that.

Do You Need an Agent?

Although some non-fiction publishers prefer to work only with agented authors, you don't have to have an agent to start with.

There are many things an agent can do for you as a beginning author. An agent is supposed to help you find a publisher and negotiate the contract, for which you will generally part with 15% of your earnings. Agents can provide a valuable entrance to the publishing business and some of the best will even give you help managing your career, but you shouldn't sign up with an agent just because you think you need one. As you've seen, finding publishers can be easy and fun. For information on negotiating contracts, *How to Be Your Own Literary Agent* will tell you most of what you need to know. You might, therefore, be comfortable foregoing an agent entirely if you enjoy researching and contacting publishers and are willing to consider negotiating your own contracts.

The moral of the story is: "Don't get an agent until you know why you need one, then get the best you can find." Stephen King says that if you're a bad writer, your agent gets 15% of nothing; if you're a good writer, agents will come looking for you and you can pick a good one.

Warning: Agents range anywhere from "great" to "terrible." Moreover, an agent who works well with one person may be terrible for another because of personality and style differences. Ask your contacts who they like to work with and why. If you've already done a book or two, ask your acquisitions editor who they like to work with and why. Their preferences in an agent might be 180 degrees from your own goals, but it'll be more information for making an informed decision.

The Downside of Writing Books

Before the stars in your eyes and visions of accepting the Pulitzer Prize block out any view of reality, I need to show you the dark side of the mirror. First of all, you're going to be alone when you're writing. This is not the same as contract technical writing. Even if you're working offsite for a contract, you're in contact with people. But your acquisitions editor is not like your project lead. You may not talk to your acquisitions editor even once a week. You will possibly talk to the project editor once a week and even once a day as the book is getting close to done, but the project editor is only interested in page count, style, and editorial and mechanical questions, rather than process and production questions.

You have no idea of what "alone" means until you're 2/3 the way through a hard book contract and you're running a month late. It's just you in your office, staring at the monitor, and (hopefully) writing brilliant prose. You may be a writer that likes a TV or stereo on in the background, but it's still going to be just you and the computer. The bottom line is that you just won't have much contact with people while you're writing a book except when you're not writing.

As a result, you can get depressed easily, particularly if you're having trouble with a chapter that's just not gelling. You can also procrastinate easily. Before you start a project, you should be completely

honest with yourself about what kind of procrastinator you are. You can get derailed easily. Set goals for writing productivity and be absolutely honest with yourself. (You don't need to show this to anyone else with the possible exception of your therapist but you need to track your progress.)

One publisher I know says that as many as 75% of all computer books are delivered from one to six months late. The reasons for this are many and varied, but most commonly, it's because the authors lose focus, they get over booked (one project runs late and slides into another), they get depressed, their support system breaks down (or their significant other loses patience with the enforced solitude), or because they discover they just can't do this one.

You need a lot of personal tools to be a successful author. Over the years, I've developed a whole array of tools, including the book proposal format I use (which covers everything about a book you'd need to know before the fact), a large network of people I can call upon with technical questions of all sorts (including a good friend who'll periodically come over and fix my computer late at night in exchange for a sushi dinner with me), and my boundless optimism. These are some of the tools I have, but you won't necessarily have any of these to hand. Part of your choosing to write a book should be to identify the resources you have available and how to solve some of the problems that may come up. Listing everyone you know, or at least, listing your technical contacts, will be helpful. (BTW, if someone does help you, even if it's only answering a single question some evening, mention them in the acknowledgements.)

One hot tip: don't count on corporate support for a book when you're looking at resources. Just because you're writing a book about a product that will provide marketing for the product, improve the users' ability to use and enjoy the product, and will let the company sell more of the product, you can't expect the company to help you. Like many of the other things we do for clients, this doesn't have to make sense... but it's reality. Just because your book is a great idea and it'll help the company and they like the idea, too, you still can't count on the company's help for ANYTHING. As one example of several, I've written a series of books on accounting software that do all of these things and the company refuses to support the project or acknowledge that the books exist because they have a "not invented here" attitude. I make money off of these, but the company has been enormously irritating to deal with over the years.

A lot of people who contract (me included) like the freedom of assignment combined with the large paychecks. But we still have a lot of structure in our lives, even as contractors. We're hired to accomplish a fairly specific task by a specific deadline. The format, writing style, and content are largely predetermined. By contrast, writing a book has no safety net. It's completely free-form. The format and writing style will be broadly dictated by the publisher, but there's not a lot of structure beyond that. And, unlike contracting, you're working with people in remote locations who you will probably never meet face-to-face and who may not have a great deal of understanding of what you're writing about. As a matter of fact, YOU are usually the subject matter expert for the book, not the developer down the hall. The publisher will have a technical editor working on the book, but they'll expect you to know what you're talking about.

Probably the most important thing to consider is your significant other and family. You single people don't have to worry about this—you'll probably just remain permanently single while writing books—but people who are in relationships have to consider the effect that their absence is going to have on their significant other and family. Be sure to make some provisions for taking your sweetie out for dinner/movies/a weekend on a regular basis during the project and be extra nice to them when you're

done. I'm still learning to balance this one myself, but it's important and will save you a lot of friction. Make a contract with your significant other and stick to it. And don't be that surprised if halfway through a book, your SO announces that they are fed up with you being absent. Be prepared to negotiate some more if that happens.

One final downside that you should keep in mind: you can write a brilliant, award-winning book that's critically acclaimed, lauded in the New York Times, and is quoted for 10 years thereafter... and it can still die on the vine and never earn out its advance, let alone make any money. It's happened to me. Never spend your royalties before you earn them.

Addendum: Starting about 2001, the market for a lot of computer books, particularly the low-end books (of the "How to Write Your First Paragraph with Word/Absolutely Anything for Dummies/The Internet for Anybody Who Hasn't Heard About It Yet" class) pretty much died and went away. There's still a market for higher end books, such as "Webserver Administration Tips for People Who Never Sleep" and "Programming Your Own HAL9000 in XML," but you'll probably need a speciality to capitalize on if you're going to write general computer books. The market for lower-end books will probably start picking up again around 2005.

Writing the Book

Writing a book (at the beginning) looks awfully simple. Here are some tips for the writing process that will keep it from being simply awful.

Before

- Let your calls roll to voicemail! Kiss your family and social life good-bye for a while. Explain to your friends that you can't make social commitments right now. Prepare as if you were going to be away on vacation for a month or two. Figure out what you will have taken care of by other people. Don't make any commitments for the month before or after the scheduled handoff.
- Make sure that you have adequate disk space on your computer to keep the entire project online at once including first drafts, sample documents, spreadsheets, supporting programs, and so on. Also make sure that the computer you have is adequate to the software you're writing about. How much processing power does the program really need, as opposed to running the program slowly on a stripped-down computer. Do you need a 21" monitor? A color laser printer? A second CD-ROM drive or a DVD burner? Make a list of what you need and find out how you can get it.
- Find out where you can make good, cheap photocopies in the middle of the night. You'll need to, sooner or later. Consider buying a \$59 scanner to make quick photocopies.
- Be prepared for all contingencies: computer loss or breakdown, unavailability of anything and everything, loss of manuscript or art originals. For example, I had a hard disk crash in the middle of writing my first book. Because I had been making daily (and sometimes hourly) backups of critical files, I only lost the six hours it took me to restore everything to my other hard disk. No writing was lost, and I finished the chapter on schedule. Consider getting a CD-ROM burner (they only cost a couple hundred dollars) for your computer so you can automate the backup process. You might even consider getting a second computer to drive your printer with and to act as a backup if your primary computer goes down.

During

- Store your backups away from the computer. If a fire breaks out in the office, it'll toast whatever is there. If someone steals your computer, they'll also take whatever disks, tapes, and CDs are lying around. Publishing contracts invariably make you responsible for maintaining a copy of your manuscript in a safe place. Also consider buying a small safe for more secure storage, but remember that fireproof safes just keep the contents from burning up. In a fire, the temperature in a fireproof safe goes high enough to erase disks and tapes.
- Learn your editor's strengths and weaknesses. For example, several of my editors have been relatively unfamiliar with computers. This caused me some frustration at first trying to explain things, but I soon realized that this was a great asset. Whenever I presented a concept that was technical, I had to be able to explain it to a live, non-technical, person first, rather than just say, "The reader should be able to figure that out."
- Keep a journal of how you're feeling about the project. Although this probably won't help you during the first book, you'll be surprised at how your patterns will repeat from book to book. Once you know your patterns, you can make more accurate plans and estimates based on your working style. After years of writing books, I know that I always hit a slow spot somewhere around chapter 6, after which I have relatively smooth sailing until just before the last chapter, at which time I need to take a long weekend off before the final push.
- Make sure that the sound system in your office is in good repair. Buy a few extra tapes or CDs.
- Take a lot of vitamins. Take a 20-minute walk once a day to relax and to get exercise.
- Keep a list of the people who have been helpful to you and remember them in the acknowledgments. Be sure to include everyone on the staff at the publisher who had anything to do with the book, even if it's only a lump acknowledgment with a long list of names (which should be in alpha order for this kind of acknowledgment, by the way). Make sure that everyone's name is spelled correctly and (oddly enough) that they want to be acknowledged in print—some people don't.
- Budget time after the manuscript is complete for questions, revisions, corrections, and reviewing the page proofs. Some of this will probably happen while you're writing the book, but most of it is after you've handed off the last chapter to the publisher.

After

- Put the book contract and any legal paperwork in your safe or safe-deposit box. Put all of the remaining paperwork for the book—chapter drafts, printouts, general correspondence—in a couple of boxes. It's a good idea to put the paperwork inside a couple of grocery plastic bags as a protective against water and mildew. Label the box with the book's name and the date and store it on a high shelf. Plan on keeping this box indefinitely. You'll first want it for legal archival purposes, then for a sense of history to show what you've done.
- Also make a final backup of all the files on your computer related to the book, including email, source files, proposals, illustrations, and chapter drafts, and store them to diskettes using a standard backup program. Label the disks carefully with the date, the backup program you used, and the book name. Wrap them in several plastic bags (so they're waterproof and moisture-proof) and store them in the box with the drafts and correspondence. Keep the files of your final chapter drafts on your computer, for at least six months so they're easy to refer to.

- Send "Thank you" notes to the people who had to put up with you while you were writing, including your editor. Flowers, chocolates, and a dinner for your significant other are definitely appropriate. The wife of one author I know has a "Welcome Back" party for her husband every time he finishes a book. It's something like a groundhog seeing his shadow. (If you do, it means six more weeks of revisions.)
- Do something nice for yourself that gives you a sense of closure on the project. You've just completed a major effort; you deserve a little time off.
- Start thinking about your next book. Once you've gotten one book under your belt, you're very likely to want to start writing another one right away. See if the publisher has any projects coming up that you can work on.

Summary

Writing technical books sharpens all of your writing skills. Your ability to plan projects improves. Most authors notice that their writing speed increases dramatically the further they get into a book, usually to between 10-15 finished pages a day in the last stretch.

Writing technical books can be profitable. Furthermore, royalties are "found" income. You can expect royalties for several years after the book is published in addition to your current salary. Publishing a book also looks very good on the resume and impresses clients greatly.

Most importantly, writing technical books is fun. Although I like to joke that writing books is like hitting yourself in the head with a hammer ("Because it feels so good when you stop!"), it's been an incredibly valuable experience for me. When I got my promo copies from the publisher, I had a tremendous sense of satisfaction. Seeing my first book for sale in the bookstores was one of the great joys of my life, and it will likely be one of yours, too.

About the Author

John Hedtke is the award-winning author of 25 books, including "Firefox and Thunderbird Garage" (Prentice-Hall, 2005). He is a Fellow of the Society for Technical Communication. He requests that anyone who gets a book contract because of this article remember him in the acknowledgments and send him a copy.

Recommended Reading List

There are several books on writing that you should add to your library:

How to Be Your Own Literary Agent by Richard Curtis.

The basics of contracts and what agents do. Required reading before you sign your name to a book contract. If you get interested, you should also buy the author's *Books into Bestsellers*, a clear look at the publishing industry and how it works.

The Writer's Market (annual).

The most commonly available source of information about publishers and magazines. There are profiles of hundreds of publishers and magazines, their focuses, and contact information. There are also profiles of a number of agents.

Writer's Guide to Book Editors, Publishers, and Literary Agents by Jeff Herman.

An exceptional guide (updated annually) for people looking for information about publishers and agents.

1001 Ways to Market Your Books by John Kremer.

John Kremer's book will excite you with the opportunities for marketing your books. Most of the ideas are ways to market your book over and above anything your publisher might be doing for you (though you can frequently get your publisher to do more by pitching ideas to them).

The Artist's Way by Julia Cameron

This book is a 12-week self-taught course on creativity. You can do it by yourself, but it really works best with a small study group both for the commitment and the interaction and insights. This is a vital component of examining and understanding your motivation prior to making a career change... and choosing to write books as a large part of your professional life is definitely a career change.

The Secrets of Consulting by Gerry Weinberg.

Although this is slightly tangential to being an author, this is an amazing book for the independent worker. Gerry makes his points by telling stories and creating aphorisms, maxims, and rules that stick with you, like "Rudy's Rutabaga Rule: Once you solve your number-one problem, your number-two problem gets a promotion." You'll want to read this book every year.

Clutter's Last Stand by Don Aslett.

An amazingly helpful book on how to keep clutter out of your life. Don Aslett runs a multi-million dollar cleaning organization and writes dozens of fun, approachable books on cleaning and organizing. This is one that no author should be without.

The Richest Man in Babylon by George F. Clason.

None of us are in this business for our health. This book gives you the basics on how to become rich and it won't put you to sleep while you read it (unlike most other books of this kind).