

11 Questions You Need to Answer Before You Attempt to Become an Author

By Michael J. Dowling

What a thrill it is to hold a book you've written in your hands...to see your thoughts expressed in print! 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 either make the necessary changes and proceed, or you can drop the whole idea and save time, money, and frustration.

The Eleven Questions

1. Why do you want to write this book?

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

- 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.

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?

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. 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.

For an easy-to-read, comprehensive overview of self-publishing, I recommend *Dan Poynter's Self-Publishing Manual: How to Write, Print and Sell Your Own Book*.

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. Will your schedule allow you to grab a few moments here and there during a typical day to work on your book?

Although writing a book requires an investment of time, most of my clients find that the process demands less time than they imagined. That's especially true if they know their subject well, so they don't have to do a lot of research.

In my experience, a weekly one-hour author-to-writer phone call usually keeps the project moving along nicely. As you talk, your writer 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 need to spend time reviewing your ghostwriter's drafts and researching content for your next phone call. Typically my book projects go through three or more rounds of edits before arriving at the final product.

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.

If you use a publisher, you won't need to worry so much about production and distribution. Your publisher will handle that. But whether you use a publisher or self-publish, I recommend learning something about book marketing and promotion. One good resource 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?

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 coordinate these activities for my clients through my publishing company, Wool Street Publishing.

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.

The e-mail below illustrates how one of my not-for-profit clients benefited from a book I wrote for them:

“The book you helped us write, *Investing in God's Business*, is a terrific marketing tool. This week alone two new donors called because they had read it. One wants to set up a complex gift arrangement to give \$8 million to Christian charities!”

Pamela Pugh, Executive Vice President
The National Christian Foundation, Atlanta, GA

And the following testimony from a client who is a consultant and business coach shows how a writing a book benefited her:

“Michael, working with you on my book – *Ready, Set, Plan, Go!* – has been the one of the best moves I’ve made at this stage in my career. The impact in terms of visibility and credibility has been huge. Now when I’m introduced to people, I’m not only a business coach and consultant, I’m also an author. As a direct result of the book, my speaking engagements have increased almost 50 percent. Many of the organizations who invite me to speak buy my book and give it to the attendees. That, of course, brings in additional revenues and further promotes my services. On several occasions, it’s opened doors to profitable new business. In fact, before the first copy of the book was in my hands, it had brought in two new consulting contracts that more than paid for its cost.”

Joan D. Walsh, Co-Founder
FSMI, Kennett Square, PA
<http://www.fsmi.us>

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 magazine or e-zine 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.

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.

There's more to the writing process than writing. A creative professional writer who thinks conceptually and gives you honest feedback based on his knowledge and experience will add tremendous value to your project. And if you're planning to self-publish your book, he will save you time and effort by coordinating the interior layout, cover design, ISBN acquisition, printing, and other important aspects of the process

Unless writing and publishing books is your area of expertise, don't burden yourself with the details. An experienced writer will provide structure and accountability to the writing process, so you will be more inclined to give the project sufficient priority. You'll get your book into print faster, while saving lots of time and headaches. And the sooner your book is in the hands of your audience, the sooner it will start producing positive results for you.

If you decide to use a ghostwriter, make sure you choose the right one. A hiring mistake could cost you dearly in terms of wasted time, missed deadlines, unmet goals, and diminished credibility in the marketplace.

This hiring decision is so important that I've written an article about it. It's titled, "5 Key Qualities to Look for When Hiring a Professional Writer (So You Don't Make a Costly Mistake!). I'd be glad to send you a FREE copy. Simply e-mail me at MJD@MichaelJDowling.com and request one.

As you can tell, I recommend using a ghostwriter/editor. Since that's what I do, it would be rather strange if I didn't!

Michael J Dowling (www.MichaelJDowling.com) writes and edits books, articles, and other print communications that help individuals and organizations accomplish their goals, with particular emphasis on increasing the visibility and credibility of small businesses and entrepreneurs. He has an MBA from Columbia Business School in New York City, where he was a Harriman Scholar. Mike is the author of three published books.