

# Polish and Publish

*The Indispensable Toolkit for  
Creative Writers  
to Get Started and Get Published*



**Lynette Benton**

## Introduction

This booklet is designed to help writers launch their writing careers or hobbies, improve their writing to make it attractive in the marketplace, and submit it to online outlets or to agents and publishers. The ultimate goal of the book is to arm writers with the resources that successful writers use to get their work published.

The idea for this booklet, *Polish and Publish*, arose from both a conversation I had with a local reference librarian and from my own experiences as a writer.

My librarian friend told me that she gets dozens of inquiries from library patrons about the best resources for those who write or want to write.

These writers asked:

- How can I get started as a writer?
- What are the best books, magazines, and websites for writers?
- Should I take a writing class and how can I find one?
- How can I learn about writing a blog?

I know from my own experience that when people hear that I'm a writer, they often say wistfully, "I've always wanted to write, but I don't know how to get started (or find good resources for writers, or learn whether or not my writing is any good)."

If you've always wanted to write, but didn't earn an undergraduate degree in creative writing or graduate from a Masters in Fine Arts in Creative Writing program, it can be difficult to know how to proceed. Where do you start? What resources are available to you? What strategies should you follow to make your writing successful? And how can you prepare to be published in such a competitive field?

Other questions newbie writers ask are:

- How do I start putting my thoughts and ideas down on paper?
- How can I improve my writing?
- Where can I find a writers' group?
- What are submission guidelines and how can I find them?
- How can I find an agent or a publisher?

➤ What is a writers’ “platform,” why do I need one?

You’ll find answers to all these questions and more in this booklet.

*Polish and Publish* is for you if you want to write and publish your work, whether it is an article, blog, poem, personal essay, short story, novel, or even a full-length non-fiction book. The booklet also lists reputable contests in which you can enter your work, if that’s what you’d like to do.

*Polish and Publish* shares the little-known tools, tactics, tricks (yes, *tricks*), resources, and strategies that you can use to make your writing attractive in the marketplace, and get it published.

You can apply these secrets to your own writing – secrets such as how to:

- Jumpstart your writing
- Stay inspired so you stick with it
- Allocate time for writing
- Avoid the mistakes that doom writers
- Find and submit your work to writing contests
- Find an agent
- Prepare your work for publication
- Develop a platform

You will learn how to improve your writing and start getting your work published. After you have some [clips](#) it will become easier to get more of your work published.

[Clips](#) [Samples](#) of published work.

Under **Recommended Resources** in each section of this booklet, I list resources that will help you develop and enrich your writing. I have no connection – financial or otherwise – with any of the resources listed in this booklet, except in one case (my coach), which is noted. All resources are recommended purely on the basis of their helpfulness to writers.

## About the Author

I'm qualified to share writing and publishing tips and tricks with you as a result of all that I learned on my own journey to a writing career, and based on the Tools & Tactics for Creative Writers classes I teach to adults. (You can see all my qualifications at the end of the booklet.) Using questions and feedback from my students, I have researched, discovered, and assembled the most effective strategies and resources to strengthen your writing and get it published.

In addition, I've written a [creative writing blog](#) and 200 articles on [writing careers](#), and more than 50 on creative writing.

See samples of some of my writing at <http://lynettebentonwriting.com>

From my home page, check “Tools and Tactics for Creative Writers” and “Careers for Writers” in the right hand column, as well as the links embedded in the blog posts themselves.)

### **It's Never Too Late . . . or Too Early to Become a Writer**

No matter how old you are or what you've done earlier in your life, you can become a writer, if that's what you really want.

One of my students wrote his first poem at the age of 87 and has had his work published numerous times since. Another student, in his seventies, is writing a gripping mystery novel. A third, also in her seventies, writes and publishes intriguing personal essays in her local newspaper on a regular basis.

Some of my students have full-time jobs. Others have children and/or parents to care for. Yet they have always wanted to write, and that's exactly what they're doing now!

After you finish reading this booklet, you can find many more writing tips at my website: <http://lynettebentonwriting.com>, and follow me on Twitter @lynettebenton.

Now let's get going on what you really want – and need – to know to advance your creative writing career! —**Lynette Benton**

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## What is Creative Writing Anyway?

What is creative writing and how is it different from other writing?

Commercial or business writing is based on *facts*. This type of writing includes:

- Business materials, such as proposals, reports, letters, emails
- Promotional collateral, such as advertising, brochures, and press releases
- Training and technical manuals
- Newspaper reports
- Magazine articles
- Industry reports
- Annual reports
- Academic and white papers

Newspaper and magazine **feature articles** are a hybrid of straight factual writing and creative writing.

**Feature article** A long, prominently displayed, general interest article that uses techniques of fiction – such as quoted conversations and descriptive physical settings. See [Robbins Library Surge in Usage](#).

**Creative Writing** includes fiction (short stories, novels,) poetry, drama (playwriting and screenwriting) and creative nonfiction. Personal essays and memoirs are also examples of creative nonfiction.

Though it can be based on or inspired by fact, creative writing is original composition that relies heavily on:

- Imagination
- Personal perspective
- Personal expression
- Techniques, such as character development, literary devices (for example, symbolism and metaphor), and plot

These techniques engage readers and take them into a different world or a different frame of mind.

According to Wikipedia, creative writing “goes outside the bounds of normal professional, journalistic, academic, and technical forms” of writing.

Creative writing can be fiction or nonfiction. It expresses thoughts, feelings, ideas, and emotions. These can be wrapped up in a long or short story, a novel, play, poem, memoir, personal essay, or a nonfiction book, such as *Eat, Pray, Love*, by Elizabeth Gilbert; *The Blind Side*, by Michael Lewis; and *Three Cups of Tea*, by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin. Many writers’ blogs incorporate the tools of creative writing.

### **Recommended Resources**

You can find definitions of creative writing at [WiseGeek](#) and [Wikipedia](#).

**Note:** In all cases, I have confirmed and verified (many, many times) the links to the resources provided in this booklet.

However, know that occasionally sites disappear altogether. Or, sometimes, additional posts have pushed down the post I have provided a link to.

If you don’t see the article I’ve named, either scroll down on the website or blog, or enter the article title in the site’s search box.

## Why Most Writing Gets Rejected

Most writing fails to get published because of one main reason:

*The quality of the writing is weak.*

Are you willing to work to improve your writing? Because, although it's often pleasurable, writing is hard work. However, the rewards of writing are tremendous: expressing your voice and viewpoint in the world, pride in seeing your [byline](#) on your published work, and real satisfaction in accomplishing your goal.

**Byline** Your name under the title of your article, story, or book.

Here are some resources to improve your writing.

### Recommended Resources

*The 29 Most Common Writing Mistakes and How to Avoid Them*, by Judy Delton. This is a little treasure by the author of 200 books and articles. Topics covered include procrastination, being hampered by feeling that what you write has to be the best in the world, and 27 other useful cautions. The book is old, so you'll have to get it from your library or from [Alibris.com](#) or [Amazon.com](#).

### [Failure to Be Published](#)

After twenty-something years of trying to publish her novel(s), Nicola Morgan, the author of this blog post admits, "I wasn't good enough. And maybe . . . sorry . . . you aren't either. But maybe, by listening and learning and improving, you can become good enough."

## Are You Cut Out to Be a Creative Writer?

How many times have you heard someone say, “I’ve always wanted to write?” Maybe you’ve said it yourself. An estimated *80 million* Americans want to write a book. But how many actually write *anything*, let alone a book?

Creative writers must believe in themselves and their dreams. They must be persistent and able to accept rejection and send their work to the next publisher on their list.

They have to be observant – notice what’s said and happening around them, and be interested in how and why things happen as they do.

Creative writers have a need to express their ideas and personal point of view.

They love words and appreciate the power of language.

They are able to envision an appropriate audience and write for it.

And they develop their writing skills.

Many people believe that since nearly everyone has written a variety of things in their lives, it’s easy to write. It might be, but it *isn’t* easy to write *well*, unless you are armed with the right tools and approach.

To summarize, are you:

- Persistent?
- Curious?
- Observant?
- Expressive?
- In love with words?
- Prepared to improve your writing?

### Recommended Resources

[“What is a Writer?”](#)

## How to Become a Writer

If you've been doing something else with your life up to now (and who hasn't?), it's time to start identifying as a writer. It's not necessary to tell *others* that you are a writer, but it's critical that *you tell yourself*. Believe it in your heart. Believe it in your soul. *You are a writer*.

Now, a writer might not be all you are. You might still be a full-time worker, a parent, a jock, a politician – or any number of other things. But from now on, you're also a writer.

“I am a writer.” Put it on a sign over your desk. Put it in a note in your wallet.

I create covers for books I plan to write – with their titles and my name, as author – before I ever start writing them. Then, I hang them over my desk. They keep me inspired to work on those books and reach my goal.

Some of the best ways to begin identifying as a writer are:

- Read books about writers, especially writer-inspiration books.
- Read [interviews](#) with freelance and creative writers.
- Visit bookstores and thumb through books like those you want to write, or any books you like.
- Attend book signings and author readings at libraries and bookstores.
- Sign up for a writing class. (More on that later)
- Join a live or online writers' group.
- Offer to write things at your job – those memos, reports, proposals, or planning documents that always crop up.
- Get a full-time job as a writer.
- Volunteer to write for a community non-profit whose work you want to advance.

## **Recommended Resources**

[The 22 Best Writing Tips Ever](#)

[\*If You Want to Write: A Book about Art, Independence and Spirit\*](#), by Brenda Ueland

[\*Making a Literary Life\*](#), Carolyn See

[\*Page After Page\*](#), by Heather Sellers

[Tools & Tactics for Creative Writers](#)

## **Finding Time to Write**

It can be difficult to find time to devote to writing, unless you substitute writing for some of your other activities. If you find yourself always putting other things before writing, try the tips in the list that follows.

First, let's look at some examples of how others found time to write.

### **How Authors Find the Time**

Anthony Trollope, author of *Vanity Fair* and many other novels, got up at 5:00 a.m. every day, and wrote before he went to his job as a postal clerk.

But even more encouraging: His mother *began writing at the age of 53 and wrote 41 books before she died at the age of 84.*

With a husband and four children, as well as surviving many bouts of her own and her husband's surgeries, another author, Margaret Walker, accomplished decades of research and writing to complete her acclaimed historical novel, *Jubilee*. Sometimes Walker even left her busy home and stayed with relatives so that she could write in quiet.

Linda M. Hasselstrom, author of *Windbreaker: A Woman Rancher on the Northern Plains* counsels women who want to write:

“Say NO. NO! NO! NO! . . .

I will NOT bring a hot dish to the Ladies' Aid society meeting.

I will NOT pick up your child or your cleaning.

I will NOT serve on a committee, no matter how high-minded its purpose.”

Learn to say “no.”

Make a commitment to yourself. You want to be a writer, so you are willing to sacrifice other activities to be able to write.

Here are some specific steps to use to find more time to write.

1) Eliminate distractions and time wasters.

- Get on “do-not-call” ([www.donotcall.gov](http://www.donotcall.gov)) and “do-not-mail” ([www.directmail.com/directory/mail\\_preference](http://www.directmail.com/directory/mail_preference)) lists to stop telemarketers’ calls and junk mail.
- Mute the TV and write during commercials.
- Cancel some of your magazine subscriptions.
- Limit (but don’t eliminate) socializing.
- Close the door of the room where you write.
- Leave the house or your office.
- Tell others not to interrupt you during your writing time. (Put your mean face on or a “Do Not Disturb” sign on your door, if necessary.)

2) Free up time to write.

- Write while waiting in traffic.
- Write while waiting for appointments (make it a point to arrive early).
- Set an appointment with yourself to write.
- Write while on vacation (See [How to Find to Write While Traveling](#). Scroll down to find the article, if necessary.)
- Write during your lunch hour and breaks.
- Arrive at work early or stay late to write.
- Write while the children nap.
- Take a writing class with weekly assignments to complete.
- Promise a friend you’ll turn in a certain amount of writing – say 200 words – each week. If you don’t, you’ll pay him or her \$50.
- Apply the two-minute rule. Write for two minutes. That’s it. Two minutes and you’re done for the day!

3) During your writing time, no matter how long or short it is, don’t get distracted by:

- Reading email.
- Responding to instant messaging.
- Surfing the web.
- Answering the phone.
- Doing housework.
- Exploring the contents of your refrigerator.

It's all right to take a drive or a walk, so long as you let your imagination roam or gather impressions for your writing. It's *not* all right to include errands in this drive or walk.

What you're doing is making space in your mind for writing. You're ignoring responsibilities and interactions for a while so that you can think about your writing. After all, a huge part of writing is thinking. That's why writers often seem preoccupied, the glazed look in their eyes signaling that they're mentally removed from what's going on around them. Our world is noisy and busy. Separate yourself so that you think – and write.

If you find that you still can't make yourself write, talk it out with a writing coach. Writing coaches are discussed later in this booklet, in the chapter, Writing Support.

### **Recommended Resources**

[Making Space for Change](#)  
[Do You Need a Writing Coach?](#)

## Getting Started

Novelist Stephen King writes of people he meets who tell him they want to write a book. When he asks them what they've been reading, they answer, "Oh, I don't have time to read." King has to hold himself back from saying, "If you don't have time to read, you don't have time to write a book." Writing a book is a major time commitment. Reading a book isn't.

Do you read?

**If you want to be a writer, you have to read.**

Reading opens writers to real and imagined worlds. Reading helps writers develop an "ear" for good writing and the type of writing we want to do. Reading helps us internalize the rules and strategies that successful writers use.

And why should people read *your* writing, if you don't bother to read other people's writing?

You can ask friends or your local librarian to recommend some good books. Let them know the topics and types of books you prefer, such as: fiction or nonfiction, essays, biographies, how-to, romance, science, science fiction, thrillers, character-driven, contemplative, literary fiction, or hospital/medical dramas. You can find many genres and topics to suit your tastes.

**So, the first rule of writing is . . . *Read.***

As Stephen King says (and he should know), "There are two things a writer must do: read a lot and write a lot."

**Read a lot and write a lot.**

### Recommended Resources

[New Year's Resolution: Read More to Improve Your Writing](#)

**The second rule of writing is . . . *Write.***

Athletes, singers, dancers, and public speakers practice. So do writers. But, here's some good news. Despite what you've heard:

*You don't have to write every day* to be a successful writer.

It's okay to write as often as you can. For several days running, you might find it easy to write 500 words a day. After that, life might intervene – or you might not yet have anything to add to your writing – so you don't write for a week.

As long as you pick up your pen or sit down at your computer and get going again, you're okay. Writing every day isn't necessary – or practical, for most of us.

If you long to write, but haven't been able to begin, here are some other tips to help you get going.

- **Get yourself a notebook or writing pad and whatever writing implement that appeals to you:** a pencil, a pen, a computer – or even an old typewriter, if that's what you're comfortable with.
- **Find a space where you can concentrate.** For some people that's a quiet room. For others, it's the library. Still others like to write in the midst of noise and activity – on the train to work, in the park, in a coffee shop, or at their kitchen table, while the family mills round. Headphones can be helpful. Even if you're not listening to anything, people know you can't hear them, so they don't talk to you.

In *The Slate Diaries*, Cynthia Ozick, a prolific author of essays and novels wrote, "I write in a dim snug cell on a table with a single drawer that I have used since I was eight years old."

Find the space that's right for you.

Don't know what to write about? Here are some ideas – just to get you going.

- Write a letter – not an email, but a bona fide *letter*.
- Start a private journal – for your eyes only. Write about:
  - Something you dread doing today
  - How you feel about something that happened recently
  - A childhood memory – preferably a bad one
  - An odd or unusual person you met or know
  - The angriest you've ever been

- The most frightened you've ever been
- A situation you wish you'd handled differently
- The three things in your past that you would change if you could
  
- Make lists of:
  - Words you like – either because of their sound, meaning, or spelling
  - Words you've never fully understood
  - The most daring thing you ever did
  - Your bosses and their most notable traits
  - The reasons you want to write
  - The reasons you *don't* want to write
  
- If none of these subjects appeals to you, visit [Journal Writing Prompts, Creative Writing Ideas and Exercises](#)
  
- If you still can't think of anything to write about, swing by [www.creativewritingprompts.com/](http://www.creativewritingprompts.com/) for 346 entertaining writing prompts.

The point is for you to start greasing your creative wheels and get into the habit of putting your thoughts down on paper.

And most importantly:

- Don't critique what you write. *Just write.*
- Don't talk about writing. *Just write.*
- Don't worry about writing. *Just write.*

### **Recommended Resources**

[8 Nasty Writing Habits You Should Quit On Writer's Block](#), Victoria Nelson

## Write Badly

You might think that everything written by the greats – those published writers whose books are on bestseller lists, or whose names are always on the top book prize lists, just sit down and write perfect or even acceptable manuscripts. *Wrong*.

Like the rest of us, they write badly when they first sit down and stare at an intimidating sheet of paper or an empty document on their computers. Many of these famous writers admit that each time they start to write something new, it's as if they have never written anything before, never sold a book, never won a prize. They feel as if they have to learn everything all over again.

Edward P. Jones, whose novel *The Known World*, received enormous critical acclaim and won the 2003 National Book Critics Circle Award, said in an interview, “. . . [Y]ou take a week and you write a good story perhaps. And then you get up the next Monday, and all the effort and knowledge that went into writing that first story – you can't transfer it over to the second story. You are always starting at the bottom again.” By the way, *The Known World* – which was Jones's first novel – won a Pulitzer Prize!

Being critical of your work too early in the process of writing it suppresses your creativity. Be creative first. Then during editing and revising, be critical.

### Recommended Resources

[Shitty First Drafts](#)

## Stay Inspired

To be a writer, you have to be self-motivated – unless you’ve been lucky enough to have a publisher pay you an advance to produce a book. But, even then, you can run into days when you feel you’re just not up to the challenge.

Some of the questions writers ask themselves as they labor alone are:

- Is my writing any good?
- Are my ideas hackneyed?
- Who would want to read my stuff?
- Can I pull this (whatever “this” project is) off?
- Why can’t I get this thought into the right words?
- Will I be able to get anyone to publish this?

It’s your job to do whatever you have to do to stay inspired. Here are some ways to do that.

- Create a title for the story, essay, or book you want to write and post it where you can see it often.
- Visualize your byline on a page.
- Post inspirational messages and quotes above your writing space.
- Imagine yourself on television, discussing your writing.
- See yourself at your own book-signing event.
- Participate in a writer’s group or class.
- Be supportive of others’ writing efforts; they’ll be supportive of yours.

## **Inspirational Quotes from Famous Folks**

Internalize these quotes. Even better, post your favorite ones over your desk.

“If you wish to be a writer; write!” – **Epictetus**

“He is able who thinks he is able.” – **Buddha** (Of course, this applies to women, too.)

“Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you, too, can become great.” – **Mark Twain**

“Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.” – **E.L. Doctorow**

“Read a lot, . . . in order to develop a criterion for your own writing. And then trust it – and yourself.” – **Rosemary Daniell**

“To write something, you have to risk making a fool of yourself.” – **Anne Rice**

“Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart.” – **William Wordsworth**

“Writing is a form of personal freedom. It frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us.” – **Don Delillo**

“I have lived on the razor’s edge. So what if you fall off? I’d rather be doing something I really wanted to do.” – **Georgia O’Keefe**

“What makes for great art is the courage to speak and write and paint what you know and care about.” – **Audrey Flack**

### **Recommended Resources**

Follow me on Twitter @lynettebenton for tons of quotes to keep you inspired.

## Avoid Common Writing Mistakes

As mentioned earlier in this booklet (Why Most Writing Gets Rejected), one main reason that many writers have trouble getting their work published is that the quality of the writing is weak.

I tell my students that if you give someone your work to read and they respond, “Uh, that was nice,” what they’re thinking is, “*Please* don’t make me read anything else you’ve written.”

If they like what you’ve written, they’ll be effusive in their praise and maybe even ask you if they can read more of your writing.

For starters, the grammar, punctuation, and spelling might be atrocious. If you’re not confident of your grammar, it’s easy to learn the rules. You can find inexpensive local adult education programs that teach them or get online help at:

- [Writing Forward](#)
- [Lousy Writer](#)
- [The Grammar Cop](#)

Take a quick [grammar and usage quiz](#). Or, if your struggles with grammar have gotten you down, have a few laughs at [Grammar Blog: Mocking Poor Grammar](#).

Another problem with some writing produced by beginners is that it’s flat, predictable, and uninteresting. It lacks depth and vitality.

A mediocre story told well has a better chance of being published than a great story told badly.

Amateur writing often fails to take readers into account. For example, it might suffer from the following weaknesses.

- The writing fails to grab readers’ attention quickly.
- The writing might include technical or historical terms that many readers won’t understand.

- The writer might assume the reader knows details that the writer hasn't presented, for example, the gender of a first-person narrator. Just using the term "I" doesn't tell the reader if a man or a woman is speaking, or anything about the person's age, for example. But details, such as what the person is wearing, might.
- The writer forgets to create a setting for the story – or creates too much of a setting by getting carried away with lots of description and not enough story.
- The writing might contain run-on sentences and overly long paragraphs that readers find difficult to follow.

And one of the biggest problems writers have is not understanding what a story is and how to develop one.

### **What is a Story?**

Steven Spielberg said, "People have forgotten how to tell a story." Instead of telling stories, many writers write what could be better classified as reports. Or general observations. Or lists (which might have promise as poems). But your readers are looking for *stories*.

Whether you're writing fiction or nonfiction, you *must* tell a **story**.

**Story** A story is the telling or retelling of a linked series of events – and their *meaning*. Just telling what happened first, then next, then after that, is a report. A story shows us cause and effect, and what *matters* in the events.

A story has momentum and suspense. If it doesn't, if readers knew what was going to happen, why would they read on? You want to give your readers the sense that something significant is going to happen and they want to be there when it does.

Most stories have a three-act structure. (If you pay attention, you'll notice this structure in movies.)

In the first act, the main character is introduced, faces a problem or challenge and arrives at a turning point where he or she decides (often reluctantly) to take on the challenge.

The second act makes things worse for the character. Things become

complicated. The main character faces even more obstacles and challenges. Tension and suspense rise. We learn more about the character.

In the third act, the story continues to turn up the heat on the **protagonist**, who finds the problems or challenges even more difficult to solve. The story moves towards a climax, and the main character wins or loses. Or, the story might have an ambiguous ending in which victory or loss is mixed or unclear.

**Protagonist** The protagonist is your story's main character.

- Ask yourself: Am I telling a *story* – or just making a report? A report is lifeless, factual, direct. You want to shape your creative writing into a *story*, with highs, lows, subtleties, indirection, misdirection, suspense, *life*.

### **Recommended Resources**

- [Understanding What a Story Is](#), Bill Johnson
- [Perceiving the Foundation of Story: 15 Principles](#), Bill Johnson
- [Plot & Structure](#), by James Scott Bell. An excellent book for any writer who is trying to structure a strong story. Although the author primarily uses mystery stories as examples, his advice applies to all storytelling.

Some of these essays about stories are long, but they are well worth reading.

For shorter essays that explain stories, read:

- “The 3-Act Structure,” by Ridley Pearson, in *The New Writer's Handbook*, Philip Martin, Editor, or
- “Storytelling Techniques,” by Ira Glass, in *The New Writer's Handbook, Volume 2*, Philip Martin, Editor

### **Avoid Weak Writing**

- Read others' published work to learn how to make your writing strong – *and* to know your competitors. This is important for your book proposal.

- Give your writing power, by using the following.

- A strong hook. Grab your readers in the first few sentences.
- Interesting words. Banish safe, boring words, like “nice” and “great” from your writing.
- Images. *Show, don't tell.*
  - ❖ Instead of “We ate modest meals,” write: “We stuck with stews made from tough meat and stringy vegetables.”
  - ❖ Instead of, “I got wet in the rain,” write: “Water trickled from my collar onto my neck and gurgled down the sewers.”
  - ❖ Instead of “A desperately poor man entered the room,” write: “A man with a three-day stubble, wearing a shabby overcoat and shoes with holes in them shuffled into the room.”
- Quotes. Tell your readers what your characters said. This makes characters and situations come alive. Quotes also break up long paragraphs that can be difficult to follow. They leave “white space” on the page, giving the reader’s eyes a rest.
- Physical sensations: Put smells, sounds, textures, tastes, and sights in your writing. This helps readers enter into the experience, not just read the words on the page. Use language that engages your readers’ senses.

Here are links to two of my published essays, [From Part Time to Parting Time](#) and [Should I Apply?](#) See if they integrate the tips I’ve listed above.

*Note:* The latter essay is written under one of my pseudonyms, Lauren Moore.

## More Ways to Avoid Writing Mistakes

- Be original. As you write, ask yourself: “Am I saying anything new?” “Am I saying anything old in a *new way*?”
- Inject your writing with *personality*. Make it stand out from the crowd. Don’t write the way you were taught to in high school. It will be boring.
- Engage your readers. Ask yourself: “Is this truly interesting?” and “Why should anyone care about this?”

### Recommended Resources

[Seven Bad Writing Habits You Learned in School](#)

*Note:* Publishing mistakes and how to avoid them when you’re ready to submit your work will be covered later in this booklet.

## Writing Support

Writers need support, guidance, and feedback. Not just the kind you get from your friends and family, although theirs is important. Writers need other writers, particularly when they're just starting out. It's important to be in the company of people who value the written word, and understand and respect what you're trying to do. Choose people who respect it so much that they're doing it themselves. In short, spend time with other writers.

Although writers are often introverts who prefer to be alone with their thoughts, they can benefit from joining a writing community.

Joining the right writing community can help you grow as a writer, in the following ways.

- Helping you identify and take yourself seriously as a writer
- Getting necessary encouragement on your writing
- Getting crucial feedback on your work
- Learning to be a better writer
- Helping other writers, which ultimately helps your writing
- Creating accountability with other writers, so that you'll write.
- Getting tips on new resources for writers.

A writing community can also help you learn the *business* of writing, including these points.

- How to organize your projects.
- The best research resources.
- The types of work that agents, publishers, magazine and online editors are seeking.
- How to promote yourself and your work.

Places you can find writing communities are in:

- Courses
- Groups
- Writing jobs

All of these, even writing jobs, can be on site, remote, or online.

## Writing Courses

Writing courses are an excellent way to become a part of a writing community – and develop or expand your writing abilities. They have the added benefits of::

- Identifying you as a *real* (even if only aspiring) writer.
- Allowing you to see other writers' works in progress. (It's always encouraging for writers to see that even the best writers produce weak first drafts.)
- Providing feedback on your work
- Morphing into a writer's group that you can participate in after the course is over

You can find writing classes at your local universities, adult education centers (often held at local high schools), and online. Check the bulletin boards and ask at the reference desk at your local library.

You can find a wide variety of online classes – from poetry, children's books, mainstream, fantasy, and sci-fi novels, romances, mysteries, and short stories to feature writing, personal essays, memoirs, and autobiographies. Some of the best and most extensive variety of classes are offered by:

- Writer's Digest ([www.writersonlineworkshops.com](http://www.writersonlineworkshops.com))
- Mediabistro (<http://www.mediabistro.com/courses>)
- Writers.com: Writers on the Net ([www.writers.com](http://www.writers.com))

At these sites, you'll find hundreds of writing courses, both online and on site, with their respective course descriptions.

Here's just a small sample of the types of courses offered:

- Blogging
- Travel writing
- Fashion writing
- Food writing
- Fiction writing
- Writing for children and young adults
- Writing for the web

- Writing query letters
- Writing the nonfiction proposal
- Making money writing short pieces
- Marketing your magazine articles

Instructors of the classes presented by each of these learning centers are successful practitioners in the area(s) they teach, so you'll learn from those who know not only writing techniques, but the markets and publishing outlets appropriate for your work.

### **Recommended Resources**

[How to Choose a Creative Writing Class](#)

[How to Choose an Online Creative Writing Class](#)

### **Know Your Instructor**

When selecting a course, find out as much as you can about it. Does the instructor have experience in the type of writing you are interested in? Has the instructor published work? Read the instructor's publications. What have the instructor's course evaluations been like? You can get this information from the program registrar or administrator.

### **What Do You Want to Get Out of a Writing Class?**

Before you choose a writing class, be clear about what it is that you want to learn. Do you need inspiration? Are you eager to get in touch with your authentic self? Are you looking to develop specific skills, such as plotting, dialogue, or character development? Seeking information on marketing your work?

### **Writing Groups**

How do writing groups differ from writing classes?

Writing classes have an instructor; writing groups do not. In a writing group, all writers are equal. They are there to read their work and get encouragement and feedback from the other writers present. Writers' groups can range in size from three to fifteen members. In most cases, smaller is better, so that everyone gets to read his or her work.

Also, if you can find one, it's great to belong to a writer's group that focuses on the *issues* that affect writers, rather than just the quality of the writing. These groups help you understand the *business* of being a writer.

Some excellent writing groups, including the following, are on LinkedIn.com. Here are a few of the [writing groups](#) that I belong to.

- Aspiring Writers
- Author Planet
- LinkedEds and Writers
- New Authors Need Marketing Ideas
- Write-it-Down: A Website for Writers
- Writing Mafia

### **Recommended Resources**

*The Writing & Critique Group Survival Guide: How to Give and Receive Feedback, Self-Edit, and Make Revisions*, Becky Levine. (Read a 2- part [interview](#) with Becky.)

[Join a Critique Group to Get Your Writing Moving](#)

### **Writing Conferences**

Attending writing conferences is a useful way to meet other writers, as well as editors, agents, and publishers. Get information about [choosing a writing conference](#).

### **Writing Coaches**

Writing coaches serve a number of crucial functions for writers. The best ones are writers themselves, so they possess a deep understanding of the challenges that writers face. They also provide their writing clients with ideas.

Writing coaches typically have connections with the publishing industry, which means you will have a greater chance of writing the kind of work that interests agents and publishers.

Writing coaches encourage you to do your best writing. And, two of the most important functions writing coaches perform for writers are . . . encouraging them to write and keeping them to a schedule!

Most importantly, writing coaches keep you accountable – to your own dreams. They help you hold onto the vision of what you want to achieve, so that you can stay on track. You can and will get it done.

In case you're interested, my own writing coach is Helen Chang of [Ocean Cloud Media](#). She's super. Click [here](#) if you want to write a memoir.

## Best Books for Writers

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of publications about writing. But the following have been selected for the *practical* guidance they offer writers.

All contain a variety of easy-to-absorb information that new writers can apply immediately. They teach how to be a writer and they provide strategies for solving thorny writing challenges.

The first three books listed below are informative and inspirational. The rest teach writing tools and techniques.

### Inspiration

- *If You Want to Write*, by Brenda Ueland  
You want to write *powerfully, but simply, and engage* your readers, not *impress* them. (If you impress them in the process, so much the better.) This book includes lovely passages of writing that are simple, yet quite moving.
- *Making a Literary Life*, by Carolyn See  
This is an enjoyable book on living the writing life, humorously presented. At the same time, it offers tips for improving your writing.
- *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, by Stephen King  
This book will tell you how Stephen King, prolific master of the horror novel, started and continued from success to success.

## Craft

- *The New Writer's Handbook: A Practical Anthology of Best Advice for your Craft and Career*, Volumes 1 and 2. Phillip Martin, editor  
What could be better? Two books that cover creativity, craft, and a host of information to build your writing skills, and advance your writing career. This is accomplished through a series of short essays from accomplished writers.

### Sample essay titles from Volume 1

- “The Art of the Start,” by Brandi Reissenweber.  
Ideas on how to write beginnings for your fiction or nonfiction.
- “The Treadmill Journal,” by Gregory Martin.  
The way one writer structures his day to get daily writing done.
- “Why Aren’t You Blogging?” by Lani Voivod.  
One of a number of essays about blogging in Volumes 1 and 2, this one encourages you, as a writer, to start a blog. Her message is that it doesn’t have to be perfect or take up too much of your time.

### Sample essays from Volume 2

- “Baby Steps,” by Bill O’Hanlon.  
Ways to approach big writing projects in small steps.
- “Writing and Mothering: How I (Sort of) Do Both,” by Shannon Hale.  
Both entertaining and informative. After you read Hale’s essay, you’ll have a better idea how to get your writing done, whether or not you have kids.
- “Storytelling Techniques,” by Ira Glass.  
You’re almost finished with this essay by the time you begin it. Short, direct, and oh, so helpful. It’s by a master of storytelling, host of public radio’s popular weekly program, “This American Life.”
- “Common Faults in Short Stories,” by Stephen Moran.  
This is a harangue about why some short stories get eliminated from writing competitions.

Both volumes of *The New Writer's Handbook* offer information about preparing your work for publication, as well as using the Internet and other means to market your work.

- *The Beginning Writer's Answer Book*, Jane Friedman, Editor. 2006 Edition. This handy reference is packed with information for the writing newbie, as well as the experienced writer. It provides answers to questions that all writers regularly ask.

The chapters include topics on: why writing gets rejected; how to write and sell your articles; how to write a successful novel; how to find an agent; and how to get published. You get easy-to-understand answers that will guide you in your writing and publishing endeavors. Children's writing, submitting scripts, and [writing for newspapers](#) (the latter is a great way to break into the business and get credible writing clips) are also covered.

The best part is that this book was compiled by the very experienced and knowledgeable writer and editor, [Jane Friedman](#), of *Writer's Digest*.

- *Plot & Structure*, by James Scott Bell.  
This is the best book about plotting I've come across. Though written for mystery writers, this book will teach you how to structure your writing so that it's shapely and suspenseful – whatever its topic, and no matter if it's fiction or nonfiction.
- *The Synonym Finder*, by J.I. Rodale. Find imaginative synonyms to use in your writing.
- [Writer Mama](#), by Christina Katz. This is a useful guide for mothers or anyone else who wants to write.

### **Use Your Writing Books**

You know those people who collect cookbooks, but never cook, or people who own sports equipment, but never move off the couch? Well, when you get the writing books of your choice, read and refer to them as you write. They're not just for display.

## Best Magazines for Writers

Magazines also provide a rich resource for writers. Here are some of the best.

- [\*Writer's Digest Magazine\*](#) (Read an [interview](#) with the editor of this renowned publication.)
- [\*The Writer Magazine\*](#)
- [\*Poets & Writers Magazine\*](#) (This is the most “literary” of the major magazines for writers. It contains comprehensive lists of places to [submit your work](#).)

## Best Websites for Writers

Every week new websites for writers appear. Don't miss these.

- [Writersdigest.com](http://Writersdigest.com)
- [Writing-World.com](http://Writing-World.com)
- [LinkedIn.com](http://LinkedIn.com) (various groups for writers)

Thanks to [Writing White Papers](#) for some of the following.

Writers find daily doses of inspiration and discovery at these excellent web sites:

[Confident Writing](#)

[Grub Street, Inc.](#) (For Boston-area writers)

[Help! I Need a Publisher!](#)

[The Poetry Foundation](#)

[Quips & Tips for Successful Writers](#)

[Urban Muse](#)

[Write to Done](#)

[Writer Advice](#)

[Writer's Relief](#)

[Writing Forward](#)

[Writing-World.com](#)

[Writers Digest](#)

Writer's Digest, one of the best sites for writers, publishes (online) its own selection of the [101 Best Sites](#). *Disclaimer:* I don't entirely agree with some of their choices, particularly when the recommended site is difficult to navigate.

As of this writing, each of the websites listed above is still in existence and still has a writing focus. But websites do come and go – or sometimes remain, but with a new focus. The ones listed above have, thus far, proved reliable and long-lived.

Write to me at [relief11@comcast.net](mailto:relief11@comcast.net) to share *your* favorite writing websites.

## **Easiest Places to Get Work Published**

Like recent college graduates, new writers sometimes are caught in an impossible cycle. They can't get their work published because they've never gotten their work published before. They have no clips to show potential publishers.

But there are plenty of publishers who are willing to publish the work of previously unpublished writers.

### **Print Publishing Opportunities for Writers**

Some print (that is, hardcopy) outlets amenable to the work of new and experienced writers are:

- [Local newspapers](#)
- [College alumni magazines](#)
- [Guideposts magazine](#) (See their writers' guidelines [here](#).)
- [Literary magazines](#)

A literary (or lit) magazine is a small press journal, usually containing short stories, essays, poetry, interviews, book reviews, and visual art. Many are published by universities, although you don't have to be connected to a university to be published in them.

One rich source for finding out more about literary journals, contests, and other resources for serious writers is [Poets & Writers](#). You can subscribe to their magazine or visit them online. On their homepage, there's a box for "Tools for Writers." Click on any of the databases below the title for the information you're seeking.

## Online Publishing Opportunities for Writers

There are dozens of websites where writers can submit their writing for publication online, and in many cases, earn modest sums for their work. As a group, the paying sites are called “content mills,” because they constantly need new web content (web writing) for their individual sites.

Examples are:

- [Associated Content](#)
- [Ehow.com](#)
- [Examiner.com](#)
- [Ezinearticles.com](#)
- [Hubpages.com](#)
- [Suite 101](#)

For a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of writing for content mills, see these sites.

- [Content Mills: Just a Stepping Stone in Your Career](#)
- [Associated Content: A Good Starting Point](#)
- [Content Mills: Why Aspiring Writers Should Avoid Them](#)

### Other Online Source for Writers

- [3 Places to Get Published for New Writers](#)
- [\[Places for Writers\]](#) *Note:* This site uses the brackets you see here.

### High Visibility Publishing Option for Writers

- [Chicken Soup Series](#)

### Blogs

You can gain exposure and develop an audience for your writing, while positioning yourself as a subject expert, by writing a **blog**.

**Blog** A blog is an online “web log.” Originally, the purpose of a blog was to share the writer’s thoughts and activities with online readers. Today, blogs have a much broader purpose, and audiences are huge.

## **Recommended Resources**

Excellent tools for beginning bloggers are available in hardcopy and online.

### **Hardcopy Resources**

- *Blogging for Dummies*, by Susannah Gardner and Shane Birley
- *The Everything Blogging Book*, by Aliza Sherman Risdahl
- *Secrets for Blogging Your Way to a Six-Figure Income*, by Darren Rowse and Chris Garrett

### **Web Resources**

- [Blogging Advice](#) (Access blogging advice articles at this link.)
- [How to Craft a Blog Post – 10 Crucial Points](#)
- [Free blogging templates](#)
- [LinkedIn Professional Bloggers Group](#)

### **Online Writing**

Online writing differs from traditional hard copy writing in three main ways. In online writing:

- 1) Strong titles are critical (for search engines to find the articles).
- 2) Articles and blog posts are short (200 – 350 word length is optimal).
- 3) Sentences are shorter (fewer than 40 words).

Social media sites also offer great practice in writing succinctly. Twitter, for example, limits posts to 140 characters.

For more tips on writing for the web, see [5 Rules for Better Web Writing](#)

### **Guest blogging**

If you'd rather not create your own blog – with responsibility for writing frequent blog posts – you can become a guest writer on someone else's established blog.

Usually, specific guest blogging opportunities are open for a limited time, which is why I haven't provided links to them here.

However, you can discover opportunities to guest post through various LinkedIn groups and other online writing communities.

## Why Enter Writing Contests?

Some controversy exists about whether or not it's beneficial for writers to enter their work in writing contests.

Some writers feel that contests are a waste of time and money. These writers contend that publishers aren't impressed by a writer winning a contest. And they're not very happy that most contests require an entry fee of \$5.00 or more.

On the other hand, entering writing contests can be a way for writers to have their work measured against other writers' work. Sometimes the contest judges will even give a contestant valuable feedback. And most contests offer publication of your writing, in addition to a monetary award, if you are among the winners.

Some competitions, such as those sponsored by [Writer's Digest](#), are quite prestigious.

### Recommended Resources

Find more information about writing contests at:

- [The Colossal Guide to Writing Contests](#) (Scroll down.)
- [10 Tips for Winning Writing Contests](#)
- [Grants & Awards: Upcoming Writing Contests](#)
- [Glimmer Train: Short Story Award for New Writers](#) (This literary magazine publishes only the most accomplished writing, so be sure yours is truly strong before submitting.)

You can read a useful perspective (okay, a rant) about submitting work to writing contests in:

“Common Faults in Short Stories,” by Stephen Moran, *The New Writer's Handbook*, Volume 2.

Several times a week, I tweet about writing contests open to writers. To read these and other tweets to help you in your writing, follow me on Twitter @lynettebenton.

## The Plain Truth About Publishing Books

You might not want to know the following facts, but they are included here to *inspire* you to do what you must to be a writer and get your work published.

According to statistics culled from a variety of sources, book sales are extremely competitive. Consider these trends.

- It's very difficult to get bookstores to carry new books.
- The majority of books published sell fewer than 99 copies.
- The publishing industry is in a state of turmoil.

Make no mistake: The competition to get your work published and purchased is tough. Yet every year, millions of people publish something – whether a short piece of less than 100 words, longer stories, articles, or essays, or full-length books.

These days, you have more publishing options than ever, which makes your chances of being published that much higher. And (as of April, 2010) book sales have been rising!

However, it's more important than ever that you write material that is fresh and that you work hard to develop your “platform,” that is, your audience.

### Some Greats Who Have Overcome Rejection

Dr. Seuss received 23 rejections before he got his books published. *M\*A\*S\*H*, written by Richard Hooker, was turned down 22 times, the same as *Dubliners*, now a college standard, when James Joyce tried to interest publishers in it.

The hugely successful *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, was rejected 33 times. *The Peter Principle*, by Laurence Peter, was rejected 16 times.

Stephen King's *Carrie*, was rejected 30 times. And *Gone with the Wind*, by Margaret Mitchell, was rejected by 38 publishers. All those publishers who rejected books that later became enormous best-sellers must have gnashed their teeth – and maybe lost their standing in the industry, as a result.

There's no reason to give up on your dream. Reread my tips for getting inspired and *staying inspired* as you pursue your writing goals

## Preparing Your Work for Publication

Writers often don't realize that having a great story, essay, or book manuscript isn't enough to get their work published. Many writers don't even get their materials read by editors, agents, or publishers because the writers are unfamiliar with publishing requirements.

### Errors in Attempting to Get Work Published

The biggest reasons for not getting published have to do with not understanding what readers and publications need. Here are some examples.

- Over coverage. Writing on a topic that's been covered so much that publishers are no longer interested in it.

Know when a trend (for example, vampires) has reached a saturation point and publishers are no longer interested in new work on that topic – unless it's by Anne Rice. Has your topic already been published *ad nauseum* in magazines and books in the last few years? Remember, your writing needs to be fresh.

- Not knowing the audience for the work. Telling an editor, agent, or publisher that "This book will appeal to everyone" isn't acceptable.

Know your audience and write for them, as well as for yourself. Know your market – those people who would be interested in your work. Who are they? How old are they? What is their gender? What are their interests (Sports? Dining out? TV watching? Fashion? International affairs? Science?)

- Being unfamiliar with what a publisher's audience likes to read.

Ask the people you come in contact with what they read, so you can get an idea of different people's reading preferences.

- Not reading and applying publishers' submission guidelines.

Each book, magazine, and online publisher has different rules (submission or writers' guidelines), and you must know and follow those rules. You can find them by going to the publisher's website.

One of the best places to find lots of different submission guidelines is [Wordhustler.com](http://Wordhustler.com). At this gold mine of a site, you can search magazines you're interested in sending your work to by name, subject, and so forth.

- Submitting work in the wrong format. For example, a “novel” that is only 50 pages long or a picture book that is 250 pages long doesn't meet the conventions of novels or picture books.
- Not having developed a “platform,” that is, name recognition and a following.

### **Increase Your Odds of Getting Published**

You can increase your chances of having your work published by following the guidelines below.

- Submit writing that is new and fresh.
- Keep your writing authentic, not derivative. Plagiarism, of course, is strictly taboo.
- Know what agents and publishers want. Don't send cooking tips to a car racing publication, or articles to a poetry journal.

Research agents and publishers to be familiar with what they have published in the past year or two. Don't submit work to a magazine, in particular, on a topic it has covered recently or exhaustively.

- Use the required format for your genre. [Screenplays](#), [novels](#), and [children's books](#), for example, all have specific form and format guidelines.
- Follow submission guidelines – the rules that agents and publishers insist that you adhere to when submitting work to them. Your work probably will be disqualified or unread for not following submission guidelines. For example, deadlines and word-length specifications must be met.

- Know publishers' *unwritten rules*. Do they publish humor? Quotes? Swear words? Inspirational messages? Political messages? Do all their articles, essays, or books end on a positive note, *no matter how dire the rest of the story*? When researching magazines, pay close attention to the tone of the articles they publish.

## **Recommended Resources**

["What Do Your Readers Read?"](#)

["Why Writers Must Read the Right Stuff"](#)

["Reasons for Submission Guidelines"](#)

["Publisher Submission Guidelines"](#)

["Magazine Submission Guidelines"](#)

## What You Need to Publish a Book

What will it take to get your book published? The steps below will tell you.

To get a publisher, you need an agent.

- You've got 10 seconds – tops – to spark an agent's interest in your book.

To get an agent, you need a book proposal.

- Your book proposal (usually accompanied by a query letter) includes the title of your proposed book; a brief description of your book; your competition, i.e., similar books on the market and why yours is different and/or better; a description of the market for your book and how you will help promote it; and how many pages you expect your book to be, when completed.

To get an agent, you also need a query letter.

- This is the letter you send to an agent or publisher to sell your idea.

To write a query letter and book outline, get an agent, and get published, you need a platform.

- Your platform must be described in your query and book proposal. It describes your potential audience. The writer's platform is explored later in this booklet.

That's the bad news. The good news is that you can get your book published by meeting the following criteria.

Write very well.

- Strengthen your skills: take writing classes; join writing groups; submit your work to online sites that critique; attend writing conferences and retreats.

Revise your work.

- Let it rest and revise it again. As one of my English professors used to say, "Give it time to turn good."

Have someone proofread your work before you submit it.

- It's very difficult to spot your own errors.

- Write the strongest query letter you possibly can.
- If a proposal is called for – and it usually is – write one that answers all the questions an editor or agent might ask. Book proposals are discussed later in this booklet.
- Make sure your topic and approach are fresh.

### **Recommended Resources**

*Note:* The process for submitting fiction and nonfiction work is different, so be sure you follow the guidelines appropriate to your work.

[Writing the Novel Proposal](#) (an online course)

[How to Write a Synopsis](#) (for a novel)

[The Book Proposal: Tips for Writing Your Outline](#) (for a nonfiction book)

[The Art of the Nonfiction Book Proposal](#)

## Querying

Many magazine editors, and just about all agents and publishers, require that you submit a [query letter](#) before they will consider your short or long work.

What is a [query letter](#)? What does “to query” mean?

**Query letter** A query is a written communication addressed to an editor, literary agent, or publisher summarizing your writing project and asking if they would be interested in publishing it or seeing more of it.

To be published, *all books* must be queried in advance; many magazines and websites also require that you query before submitting any of your writing.

For shorter pieces, a letter or email is usually sufficient. For books, you might need to include your book proposal (and perhaps several chapters or your entire book). Check the submission guidelines or ask in your query letter if the editor, agent, or publisher would like to see your book proposal and/or entire manuscript.

If a query letter is required, that will be stated in the submission guidelines, also called writers’ guidelines. It might read: “Please query first.”

Querying is an art – and a *sales letter*. It’s not just a letter describing your idea in a few words. There are recommended formats for query letters. The very best resources for querying are:

- *The Renegade Writer*, by Linda Formicelli and her website, [The Renegade Writer](#). You can read my interview with her, too: [Part 1](#); [Part 2](#).
- [How to Write a Successful Query Letter](#)
- [Writing a Query Letter](#)
- [How to Write a Nonfiction Book Query Letter that Gets Attention](#)

## Agents

*It's virtually impossible to get a book published without an agent.* To find out what agents do and what they require from you, visit these two agents' blogs:

- [Rachel Gardner](#), Literary Agent
- [Nathan Bransford](#), Literary Agent. See especially, "The Essentials (Please Read Before You Query)," in the column on the left of the blog.

## Finding an Agent

If you're trying to get a book published, you'll need an agent. Agents are closely connected to the publishing industry; they're insiders. They will review your query, proposal, and manuscript, and if they think your book is salable, they'll collaborate with you on improving your work so that they can sell it to a publisher.

It can be very difficult to get an agent. That's why your work must be of the highest quality and include no errors. In addition, you need a strong idea and an innovative approach to the idea, full knowledge of your potential market and competition, a demonstrable platform, and all the other elements discussed in the proposal itself.

If you are going to meet agents at a [writing conference](#), the article just below will help you prepare.

- [Pitching to Agents at a Writing Conference](#)

## Recommended Resources

- [How I Got My Agent](#)
- [Querying: 10 Tips for Querying an Agent](#)
- [How to Write a Query Letter](#) (to an agent)
- [Query Letter Mad Lib](#)
- [How to Word a Follow-up Query to an Agent](#)
- [Agent Follow-ups](#) (The inside scoop on what it *really* means when an editor doesn't respond to you or your agent.)
- "How Do I Get Published?" in *Beginning Writer's Answer Book*, Chapter 4

- [Pitch Your Hook](#)
- [The Agent List](#)
- [Agent Advice](#)

Not all of those representing themselves as agents are legitimate. Talk with other writers about their agents and perhaps even get a recommendation.

If you don't have connections to writers with agents, you can still find out if an agent you're considering to represent you is on the level. Just click on [Beware](#).

### **To Publish a Book**

If you want to publish a book, you will have to prepare a query letter, as well as a book proposal. Proposals have very specific formats, so make sure you follow it closely. For example, each section must start on a new page. Some agents or publishers also want to see several chapters of your proposed book.

In your book proposal, you'll need to show that you have a "platform" and are willing to help promote your book.

### **Recommended Resources**

- [How to Write a Nonfiction Book Proposal](#)
- [How to Write a Fiction Book Proposal](#)

## Wrap Up on Getting an Agent or Publisher

You've put a lot of work into writing your book. When you're ready to submit it to an agent or publisher, follow these tips to increase your chances of getting a response.

- Research, research, research the best agents and publishers for your work.
- Read agents' and publishers' blogs.
- Know the kind(s) of writing your targeted agent or publisher is seeking.
- Know your target audience.
- Know your competition.
- In your proposal, explain what makes your book different from others on the market.
- Include in your proposal why you are the best person to write this book.
- Follow the submission guidelines to the letter.
- Describe your "platform."
- Describe the ways in which you will actively market your book.

And just as important:

- If your work is rejected, send it to the next proposal on your list. Keep studying the newspapers, magazines, websites, and books published by those publishers you hope will accept your work. Understand what they're looking for and keep submitting your work.
- Remember, even famous writers have had to submit their work many times before finding a publisher.
- In general, it's easier to get a nonfiction book published than a fiction.

## Creating Your Platform

“Millions find their voice; few find an audience.” (Attributed to Robert McCrum, former literary editor of the *Observer*.)

What is a “platform,” and why do you need one?

**Platform** A writer’s platform is everything that publicizes the writer and his or her work, and develops an audience for that work. It is a demonstration of the writer’s

- Influence
- Expertise, and
- Following (audience).

Agents and publishers now *insist* on assurances that authors have people who are interested in their work. A platform is essentially evidence that people are aware of your work and will want to read it.

### Elements of a Platform

- A blog
- A website
- Published work
- Interviews
- Teaching experience
- Public speaking, particularly on the subject you write about
- Activity and followers on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn (at a minimum)
- A contact list (email addresses) of people who would be interested in your work. These could be:
  - People who follow you on social media sites, such as Twitter
  - Students you have taught
  - People who have commented on your blog
  - Colleagues in your field

Remember, publishers want you to have a ready-made market – *before* they agree to publish your work. And they want you to give them your ideas for how you plan to market your writing.

## Recommended Resources

[10 Ways to Build Your Writer's Platform](#)

[How to Build a Writing Platform](#)

[\*Get Known Before the Book Deal\*, Christina Katz](#)

[\*How to Become a Famous Writer Before You're Dead\*, Ariel Gore](#)

Join LinkedIn.com groups, such as:

- Author Planet
- Authors, Writer, Publishers, Editors, and Writing Professionals
- Book Authors & Agents
- Informed Ideas for Writers
- LinkedEds & Writers
- New Authors Need Marketing Ideas
- Publishing Today
- Writing Mafia

## Should You Self-Publish?

In the past couple of years, self-publishing has lost many of its negative connotations. Instead, it has become a viable and often very attractive option for previously unpublished authors to get their work seen by audiences.

While publishers and book reviewers used to consider self-published books a sign that a writer couldn't find a traditional publisher, that is not always the case anymore. In fact, an agent or publisher might be impressed by the sales of your self-published book and decide to take it on for traditional publishing.

Here are just a few very well-known (and profitable) books that were originally self-published. These books launched their authors' literary (and often consulting and speaking) careers.

- *A Time to Kill*, by John Grisham
- *The One-Minute Manager*, by Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson
- *In Search of Excellence*, by Tom Peters
- *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr.
- *The Joy of Cooking*, by Irma Rombauer
- *Robert's Rules of Order*, by Henry Martyn Robert

## Advantages of Self-Publishing

As you decide whether or not to self publish, consider the following.

- The time lapse between completing your book and publishing it is much shorter if you self-publish than with a traditional publisher.
- You have complete control over the design – and contents – of the book.
- You get to decide how many copies are printed. You can even print one at a time (Print on Demand, or POD).
- You keep all the profits from sales of the book, if there are any.

## Disadvantages of Self-Publishing

- The self-published manuscript is more likely to contain errors. You will have to hire an editor and copy editor (or proofreader).
- You will be responsible for all of the [marketing](#), although you can use the marketing services offered by an outfit such as Lulu.com for this. In either case, see the [free marketing guide](#) offered by [Smashwords.com](#).
- You might not be aware of what are reasonable prices to pay for the services involved.
- You have to manage distribution. How will you get your book to potential customers?
- Getting your book reviewed by traditional newspapers will be nearly impossible.

Remember that even if you decide to publish your own book, it's a good idea to have a platform, a following that will want to purchase it.

## Recommended Resources

- [How Self Publishing Works](#)
- [Self Publishing](#)
- [How Do You Self-Publish The Right Way?](#)
- [Seven Ways to Sabotage Your Self Publishing](#)
- [Complete Guide to Self Publishing](#) (Read reviews on Amazon.com)

## Author Credentials

Here is more about where my published articles and essays have appeared (with a few links), my experience, and my education.

*Note:* Some of these publications have published several of my works.

### Publications

- [Arlington Advocate newspaper](#)
- *Art New England*
- *Bay State Banner*
- [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) (pseudonyms: Lauren Moore; Marie Pelangy)
- *Cottage Connection*
- [Inside Higher Education](#) (pseudonym: Barbara Mainwaring)
- [Lexington Minuteman newspaper](#)
- [More Magazine](#) online
- [Skirt! Magazine](#)
- *Sojourner*
- [Stoneham Sun newspaper](#)

### Professional Experience

- Former Director of Marketing Communications at Simmons College, Boston, where I managed the development and implementation of large-scale internal and external communications. In that role, I won advertising and publications awards.
- Tools & Tactics for Creative Writers instructor
- [Boston writing careers expert](#) for Examiner.com
- Writer of [creative writing blog](#)

### Education

- BA, English, Northeastern University; Won first prize for Essay
- MS, Communications Management, Simmons College
- More than a dozen writing and literature courses

Visit my website at <http://lynettebentonwriting.com> to see what's new in resources, tips, and strategies for writers.

Write to me at [relief11@comcast.net](mailto:relief11@comcast.net) to let me know how your writing is progressing.

*Thank You*

and

**HAPPY WRITING!**

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