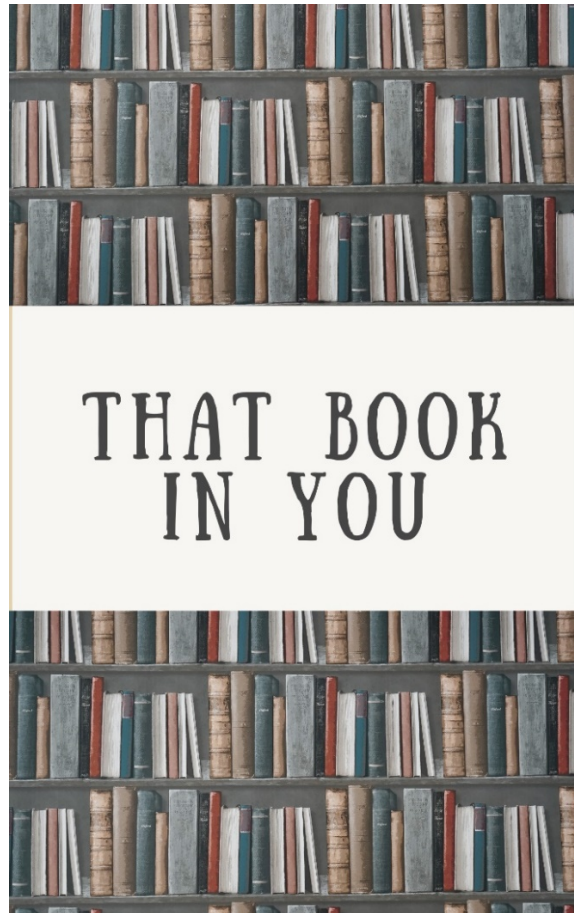


A Short Tutorial on Writing and Publishing

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That Book in You

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Introduction

I remember a cartoon I ran across some years ago. In the sketch, a man was lying on a hospital gurney, surrounded by a team of medical professionals. The group included a surgeon who was holding a pair of forceps clamped around a book, as if it had just been pulled out of the poor guy's belly, exclaiming, "Well, look at this! Mr. Brown *did* have a book in him!"

That cartoon often comes back to me when people contact me for help breaking into publishing. For the most part, those reaching out to me would like to write a book, but they haven't. Not yet, anyway. It's still "in them". Of course, there are exceptions. Some have completed a book. Others have started many different projects without completing any of them, although they've written a ton of words. Still others have penned journals of devotional thoughts they long to share with the world. The reasons I'm contacted are as individual as those looking for answers, and while this tutorial won't be able to address all of them, I do hope to help as many aspiring writers as possible find their way forward. That said, we'll need to start with a hard truth:

I can't help you get published.

I'm sorry if that was discouraging, but it had to be said and I surrounded it with white space on purpose. You'll have to find your own way through the publishing jungle, just like I and every other published author whose books you see on a shelf did. However, if you've swallowed that and you're still reading, kudos to you! I do believe I have advice to offer that will help the persistent ones towards that goal.

Here's one of the most important things I can say to you: Your story matters because you matter. So, let's get that book out of you, shall we?

"Scalpel!"

Just joking. Take a deep breath, friend. You're going to need to keep your sense of humor handy if you wade into this industry.

Hugs,
Shellie

Finding the Words

If you aren't familiar with the word "muse", consider yourself ahead of the game. But for discussion's sake, a muse is defined as a source of inspiration that moves one to create.

Write without your muse. That's my first piece of advice. Your muse is a myth, at best. Worse still, should this source of inspiration show up one day, you'll find it MIA the next. Muses aren't reliable, and that's putting it nicely. If you wait on your muse to show up, wrestle you into a chair, and pour beautifully poetic and meaningful words through your fingers, you will be waiting a long time. Possibly indefinitely. No doubt, you've heard of the muse's ugly sibling: Writer's Block. Don't have it. You can't afford it.

If you are serious about writing, establish a period of time in your day to pursue it. Sit down and write. Don't dream about writing and talk about writing. Write. Don't write ahead of yourself, either, wondering where you're going with the sentence you're typing or the paragraph that's forming. Instead, be willing to write ugly and revise. The best writing advice I ever heard was, "*Don't get it right, get it written.*" Committing to the likelihood that you'll need to lose the first paragraph or two of words from a writing session will free you to get words down. Otherwise, you'll play with a sentence until your writing session is over and you have nothing to show for it. Your words will be waiting when you come back, and time away will often crystallize them in a way you didn't expect and couldn't have foreseen.

What's that? You have time to write this very minute but you're not feeling it? Welcome to my world and the world of every other wordsmith out there. Story is happening in your life. I can say that without hesitancy because story is always happening in all of our lives. Talk to the blank space about the story happening in your life even if it has nothing to do with what you were hoping to write. It's called priming the pump. Describe what has kept you from the page—or moved you to it.

In between writing sessions, you can also train yourself to become an observer to ensure that there are fewer of those intimidating blank-page moments. I use my smartphone's notepad app to capture those prompts. You can use a journal or whatever works for you. Just be sure when you're jotting the idea down that you write out enough of it so that it's not a mystery when you return for it later. I wish I had a dime for every time I stared at a cryptic note about "purple flowers and going home early" before I learned that lesson.

Help us get involved with your words, early. Understand that readers are lazy, all of us. We won't work to read. There's zero use promising us we'll be drawn into the story if we stick with it. We won't. You're the one who has to stick with it until you stick it.

We the general public are like gnats on caffeine. Grab us with story. Describe the scene but don't drown us with details. We have an imagination. Whet it and appeal to our natural curiosity to find out where you're headed. Even better, get us involved emotionally and we'll be far more likely to hang in and see where you're going.

For example, here's an excerpt from a recent social media post of mine.

... One of my favorite things about this past Christmas happened around our dining room table. I've often said entering into the speed-of-light storytelling fray in our family is like getting into a swinging jump rope game on the school yard. Timing is everything ...

Notice the lack of description. We don't know what food is on the table or who is gathered around it, but it works. Those words remind each of us of similar scenes we've all shared and make us wonder what story is about to be told.

Present fewer points, more clearly. Longer isn't always better and less can be more.

This last point might be the best one. Writers are readers long before readers become writers. Read longer to write stronger.

Living the Words

“Write what you know.” The quote has been attributed to Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway, among others. It’s been heralded as sage writing advice to be followed and a silly rule to be broken. You can make that call for yourself.

I bring it up because I fall loosely into the first group. We’re about to talk subject matter, and I won’t be discussing fiction. I’m a storytelling humorist in love with Jesus whose writing crosses genres. You’ll find my books shelved with memoirs, cookbooks, and Christian nonfiction. (Granted, there is *Sue Ellen’s Girl Ain’t Fat, She Just Weighs Heavy*, one of my humor books that keeps getting listed as self-help, but that’s a mystery to us all.) While I can’t speak to your great American novel, I can offer you a few thoughts on storytelling and inspirational writing.

Storytelling

Funny is everywhere; don't let it get away. We mentioned not letting a writing idea get away in the first section, but trapping humor is about more than jotting down fleshed-out notes in your smartphone or journal. It’s training ourselves to pay attention when we laugh and when those around us are laughing. The best humor is often pulled from everyday life—and again, it’s more about catching it than creating it. Everything that tickles your funny bone might not be an entire article, blog post, or story for your next speaking engagement, but store that tidbit and it may work itself into another piece. I once read a news piece about elephants being the only mammals on earth that can’t jump. It was meant to be serious, but it made me grin, and although I couldn’t explain exactly why, I slid it into my phone’s humor file.

Let your fun side write without knowing where you're going. Give yourself the freedom to explore something that strikes you as funny without letting your self-editor frown over your shoulder. While you write, look for an opportunity to tie the ending to the opening or bring in one of those wayward nuggets you’ve captured.

Laugh at yourself, first and primarily! I don’t like humor at other people’s expense. But I do believe the Good Book when it says laughter is good medicine, so I look to dose up regardless of what I’m doing. I find my own weirdness to be an endless treasure trove of opportunity.

Let me show you how those suggestions work together. I wrote the following piece without a clue as to where I was going or how I was going to end it. I was as surprised as anyone else when the elephant story found its way into the close!

Hello folks, let's chat ... Our story begins when those in charge of the conference I was speaking at asked me to submit some playful selfies for the speaker's introductory video, along with a few fun pics taken by a friend. Being notoriously anti-selfie, the first part was challenging.

There I was, self-consciously attempting my selfie session when a sweet young girl exited the building I was using for my hasty photo shoot. Mortified, I pulled her into my madness so I could explain. And then I asked her to take some of those fun pictures for me. Although hamming

with someone else behind the camera was easy-peasy, things went south. Literally. I honestly can't remember who decided I should try that "jump in the air" shot, but why not? I've always considered myself athletic ...

You know the picture I'm talking about, right? The one where the camera catches you mid-flight with your feet kicked out all cute to one side? That's where our plan began to fall apart. I tried executing a playful jump and smiling at the same time, but the Law of Gravity was working against me. I tried more than once. Only I kept coming down on my way up. It didn't help that I found the whole thing terribly funny, which meant I now needed a pit stop. I think my photographer wanted to laugh, too, but she had clearly been raised to respect her elders.

We all know I'm hard-headed but apparently, I also enjoy torturing myself. Days later, I tried capturing the same shot with my darling man behind the camera, until Phil finally said, "You need to jump off something and I'll snap it on the way down." I gave him a pass for that. He meant well.

Ironically, several days after those infamous photo shoots. I ran across a news piece that said elephants are the only mammals on earth that can't jump. Do I need to explain how badly that hurt my feelings? I didn't think so.

Inspirational Writing

I can't imagine an area where the mantra to "write what you know" is more applicable than Christian nonfiction, and I'm definitely not talking about writing from a place of having arrived. If that was the criteria, none of us would qualify! However, when we've taken in God's Word, when we've marinated in it, meditated on it, and are living it out, our writing can be of immense help to others. Get those steps out of order, and we may be able to offer up beautiful prose, but our words will be devoid of the life-changing power of God's Holy Spirit. Without God resting on our thoughts, they're nothing more than keystrokes on the page.

Here's my humble suggestion. Don't look to teach the Word if you can avoid it. What do I mean by that? The consistent compelling to teach is a strong indicator of the calling to teach. We need to make sure we aren't seeking the teacher's platform merely to be heard. If we're not compelled to communicate Gospel truth, perhaps it'd be best to satisfy the writing urge in other ways. Fiction is a beautiful genre that can also be wholly devoted to God and a life-giving tool when used for His purposes.

Here's a humorous stab at how to identify a teacher's calling in a few admittedly non-definitive steps.

1. Every time you get hooked on a new passage or verse, a theme will begin to build in your head and you will start taking notes in anticipation of teaching it.
2. As the notes collect, you will begin to realize that the lesson is for you, first. This will happen

repeatedly.

3. You will forget Step Two every single time you hit Step One, and Holy Spirit will have to call you down. Again. He is faithful.

At the risk of even more repetition, it's only once we're living what we've been learning that we should feel released to share.

Perhaps you read all of that and still feel you're called to inspirational writing because the compelling to teach the Word is strong and unrelenting. That is wonderful! I celebrate that with you. Commit your work to the Lord, gather any and all who will listen, and start teaching! Be it one curious soul, or a classroom of eager beavers, take whatever opportunity presents itself and teach. Don't wait to be given a platform. Share what God has taught you with those God gives you and trust Him to take it from there.

Publishing the Words

Here we are at the section you've likely been anticipating since you downloaded this ebook. You may even have scrolled down to read it first. I only suggest that as a possibility because it's the type of writing question I'm asked about most often. "How do I get published?"

If you're hoping to pursue publication, you'll need a different type of dedication than the person who is writing for personal enjoyment. You'll need the persistence of the most annoying mosquito on the planet. (Okay, so that was totally a Southern reference, but if you've ever known the agony of battling a mosquito that seems to stay one swat ahead of you, you'll recognize the truth of it soon enough.)

You'll also need to define your goals. Do you want to publish a book? Do you want to be published in print magazines, or are you aiming for an online platform? Platform—there's that word again. We've already used it a couple times, but it's unavoidable as we turn to this subject. Actually, we can't afford to open this part of the conversation anywhere else. If you hope to be traditionally published, you'll need a platform. What is it and how will you build it?

A writer's platform is a creative's established method of getting his or her words before like-minded readers. Publishers will want to see proven numbers on your platform. Gone are the days when a writer could be a hermit and send in their work without being a part of its promotion. Writers need to be seen and heard. What follows are a handful of ways to establish a platform to launch your writing.

A. **Speaking events:** Become an expert or an entertainer on your subject matter and advertise your services as a speaker. Don't expect to get paid immediately. Lay the groundwork of making yourself available to clubs and organizations that fit with your platform and establish yourself as someone willing to add value to their events.

B. **Online presence:** You must have one. Yes, you can start building your online presence with social media, but if you're serious about writing, you need your own website. I'll be posting a link in the Resources section to the service I recommend using to create your blog. Write regularly on your subject and post it to your site and social media.

C. **Social Media:** Become social-media savvy: Twitter, FaceBook, LinkedIn, etc.—they are all available to you, and the number of followers you can prove are engaged with your work on these platforms are numbers that can make or break a publishing deal. It may not be fair, but it's where we are.

D. **Network:** Attend writer's conferences. Join online and local writers' clubs and/or form your own critique group by finding a like-minded writer friend and committing to regularly reading each other's work and offering feedback.

You may have noticed I've yet to discuss getting an agent or pursuing a publisher. That's because the hard work of building a platform must be done before there can be any expectation of interest from agents and publishers. Once your platform is in place, the internet will prove to be an endless source of information. When I broke into publishing years ago, the access to such valuable sources barely existed. I bought books on writing, on contacting agents, on publishing-house guidelines, and tons of materials on how to query and submit to the right people. Today, those type of resources are widely available and free! Anyone serious about breaking into publishing should take every advantage of these opportunities. I'll list a few of those writing and publishing sites in the last section to get you started, along with a few of my recommended resources. My list is meant to be a sample and by no means an extensive compilation. Follow the links, and then explore the sites and their links to other sites, and you'll quickly begin to see how much information is out there.

I sincerely hope I've communicated information in this ebook in a factual way that can give you a clear-eyed scope of the land ahead without dampening your enthusiasm for the writing life. I meant what I said at the onset. Your words matter. If you have a book in you, I pray you will have the tenacity to engage in the hard but necessary work of getting it out!

Hugs,
Shellie

Recommended Resources

Self-publishing site: <https://booklocker.com/>

Freelance editor: White Pencil Productions <https://karladiadial.com/>

Website hosting service: <https://wordpress.com/create-blog/>

Newsletter service: <https://mailchimp.com/>

Writing software: <https://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener/overview>

Writing Links

Publishers Marketplace <https://www.publishersmarketplace.com/>

Writer's Digest <https://www.writersdigest.com/publishing-insights>

How to find an agent: <https://www.janefriedman.com/find-literary-agent/>

Creating the book proposal <https://scribewriting.com/book-proposal-template/>

Great site for increasing productivity <https://blog.nanowrimo.org/>