

HOW TO WRITE A TECHNICAL BOOK

by

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INTRODUCTION

Writing a book can be both an exhilarating and exhausting experience at the same time! Writing a book can be rewarding to your career: It can give you visibility, recognition from your peers as an expert in your domain, and can set you apart as a person with a vision, a purpose. What's more, you will get a sense of achievement and some additional (almost tax-free!) income that can supplement your regular income. In this article, I will outline the book writing process, demystify common myths about book writing, and provide a realistic perspective on what it takes to write a book.

WHY WRITE A BOOK?

Why should you care about writing a book? Is the amount of effort and time you put into writing a book really worth it? Here are some important reasons why you should consider writing a technical book (Morgan, N (2013).

Reason #1: Get known

Writing a quality book can give you visibility, credibility and respect. A technical book can give you visibility in the area of your work. It can give credibility and respect amongst your colleagues and peers and help expand your circle of influence. This recognition may translate in the form of invites to give talks, seminars, conduct training programs or even be asked to deliver a keynote address if you are well-known and respected in your domain.

Reason #2: Learn and gain expertise

One of the best ways to learn and gain expertise in the topic you are interested in is to write a book on that topic! Realistically, writing a book will require you to focus on a specific topic for many months (or even years!). If you choose a topic you are passionate about, you can learn a lot and become an expert on the subject matter. What's more, it is enjoyable to spend considerable time on something that you love and that's a huge reward in itself!

Reason #3: Earn some extra income

When you write a book and publish it (through a traditional publisher), you get a regular royalty income. Depending on the publisher and the contract, you will get these returns every 3 months, 6 months or 1 year. In India, up to 3 lakh rupees of royalty income is deductible from income tax (under Section 80QQB)! If you are working in a typical nine to five job and are earning a regular fixed salary, this royalty can become an additional income.

Reason #4: Get a sense of achievement

Writing a book requires commitment, focus and effort. When you publish it, you get a sense of achieving a concrete result or milestone. I look at writing your book as expressing your passion. Once married is always married (even if you get divorced!); in the same way, once you have written a book, you are always considered an author! If you make it big, you can even leave a legacy behind.

In my experience, most people who love reading books are interested in writing books as well. However, what stops them from writing a book is their lack of knowledge (or fear) about the writing process. In this section, I will outline the book writing process in a step-by-step manner. You can read relevant books on this subject such as “How to Write” (Stein, G, 1975) to name one among many to get a more detailed understanding of the writing process.

THE WRITING PROCESS**Step #1: Get a book idea**

The first step in writing a book is to choose the right book topic. Your ideal book topic is something that matches your interests, your skills, and caters to market demand.

Step #2: Develop content

Once you finalize your topic for the book, you need to start working on developing the content. It is a bad idea to directly start writing the book content from the first page to the last page! You can be creative in this part. When I write a book, I do various things related to the book topic apart from writing the book itself. I conduct workshop on the topic, write articles and blogs, read books related to the subject and give presentations to my colleagues. In this way, I will have amassed

sufficient knowledge and insight that will enable me to look from various perspectives and get up-to-date feedback as I develop the content of the book.

Step #3: Fill the book proposal form

Once you have a specific book topic and fairly decent amount of content, it is the right time to talk to a publisher. You may opt to self-publish (these days, increasingly large number of authors are taking this route), but I would recommend you to publish your first book with an established publisher. Why?

- It will help you understand how to turn your draft into something that is “production quality.”
- It will give you credibility from your readers. As a first-time author, if you self-publish, that work is unlikely to be taken in seriously..

Find books in the market that are similar to the book you are writing and find out the name of the publishers. Then go to their website or contact an editor from that publisher and get the Book Proposal Form (BPF) (Larsen, M., 2011). You can think of BPF as an “application” to the publisher for writing a book. The contents help the publisher to decide whether to take up your book project. Iterate over it multiple times and revise it before submitting it to a publisher. Note that this is the key step in the publication process, so it is important for you to put considerable effort/focus on this task.

Step #4: Contact an editor

You need to contact an “acquisitions editor” from the publisher you are targeting to get your book published. You can reach the editor through LinkedIn, the publisher's website, or even check the names of editors from the corresponding competing books you have used as referral points. Send the BPF you have prepared with a couple of sample chapters in an email. If possible, talk to the editor over phone and get their inputs and revise the proposal before submitting the final proposal.

Step #5: Sign the contract and follow the production process

Once the publisher accepts the BPF, your “acquisitions editor” will send you a contract. Check the terms before signing the contract. Deliver the draft as you had promised in the contract. Once copy-

editing and proof-reading is done, provide your inputs for cover page design and sign copyright documents. Traditional publishers have documents that explain the book production process. Further, in my experience, "developmental editors" are typically very helpful - so you don't need to worry too much if you don't understand the book production process. For now, just be mentally prepared to learn about the process of book production and follow it.

Step #6: Celebrate the success

This may sound cheesy, but this is the best part of writing a book - getting it out in the market. So you can now enjoy the fruits of your labour. Take time to celebrate your successful launch as an author.

Step #7: Aggressively promote the book

Your efforts do not stop once your book is published. You need to aggressively promote your book. Here are some ideas:

- Request potential reviewers to write reviews (in magazines, blogs, Amazon book page, etc.)
- Reach out to potential bulk buyers of your book (such as libraries and training institutes)
- Reach out to your readers (by writing articles or speaking in conferences)
- Promote your book online (create a supporting book website, tweet, blog, etc.)

You may find it uncomfortable promoting yourself. But ask yourself: If you don't tell the world about your book, how will the readers know about it and buy it? If you don't spread the word about your book, who else will? So, relax, it is okay to "blow your own trumpet" once in a while!

BOOK WRITING: FALLACIES

Here are some of the common fallacies on book writing.

- You must be a born writer to write a book. As Henry Ford observed: "Whether you think you can or think you can't ... you are right!"
- You cannot become super rich by writing a book. Of course there are exceptions such as J K Rowling who became a billionaire through writing books. But we are talking about technical books in

this article, and they don't sell millions of copies. But yes, you can make money, but certainly not get super rich by writing a book.

- There is no “ONE-right-way” to write a book. There are numerous ways to write a book. The writing approach that works for me may not work for you. So, find what works for you and stick to it. For example, I do not start from the first chapter but I take random notes and “stitch” them together.
- You need to learn to use specialised writing tools before you write a book. Perhaps this is the most common myth about writing a book. To start with, a word processor (such as OpenOffice) is more than enough for writing your first book. Of course there are many tools that can aid in your writing process and that can help improve your productivity. As you gain experience as a writer you can use such tools with expertise.

TIPS FOR BOOK WRITING

Based on hard-gained experience in writing books, here are some tips to help you get started with writing your first book.

Tip #1: Plan ahead and allocate time to write your book. Most first-time authors underestimate the effort required to write a book. Here is the rule of the thumb: if your initial estimate is X number of months to write your book, make it 2X times - that is a realistic estimate of the time required to complete writing your book!

Tip #2. It takes a team to write a book - so find compatible co-author(s). It takes a long time to write a book and it could get lonely or frustrating. Hence it is a good idea to work with someone with whom you are comfortable working and interacting with. There are always exceptions like Donald Knuth) who can write prodigiously on his own. In general, give due diligence in choosing your writing partner.

Tip #3. Be prepared for rejections - just move along! Did you know that J K Rowling's Harry Potter was rejected by 12 publishers? Agatha Christie struggled for 5 years before landing her first publishing deal! In general, be prepared to get rejected by book publishers. It's just like attending job interviews - just move along. **DON NOT GIVE UP.**

Tip #4. Choose a topic that you are good at and are passionate about. Just because you are good at something doesn't mean you should write a book on that. If you are not passionate about the topic, the challenging

task of writing the book will wear you out. Hence it is important to choose a topic that you are good at as well as something that excites you and motivates you.

Tip #5. Write a book that is “useful” that “helps” people, or makes a meaningful contribution in its domain knowledge. It could be about teaching, programming, a cook book, or just a compilation of tips and techniques on any particular subject. Ultimately the book should help someone. Don't write just because you want one more entry in your resume, or want to be tagged as an “author”.

Tip #6. Make sure that there is a USP (Unique Selling Proposition) for the book. A book is a product. A product gets an edge in the marketplace when it has a USP. The USP could be any of the following: it could be the first book of its kind in the market, an only book on the subject, a novel approach to the topic, a consolidation of all material in one place or an easily accessible textbook that exactly matches the syllabus.

Tip #7. Organise your thoughts using “mind-map” tools (and other available tools for writing). “Mind maps” are especially effective in organising and stream-lining your thoughts. Find and use such tools if it works for you.

SUMMARY

It can be both exhilarating and exhausting to write a book, but the rewards are worth the trouble and the sleepless nights it entails. Get a book idea, develop the content and create a draft. Send sample copies and the BPF to well-known publishers, and follow the book production process to refine it into a publishable manuscript, get it published, and celebrate the success. Remember that writing a book does not stop at getting it out in the market: As an author, you need to aggressively promote your book!

REFERENCES

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