
Chapter 3

The Steps To Self-Publishing Your Own Book and Making It a Bestseller

Choosing a Subject

The very first step in self-publishing your own bestselling book is to select a subject with high sales potential. The book must have a mass market appeal if your goal is to exceed 10,000 copies in sales. By "mass market appeal" I mean that the average American on the street would be interested in buying and reading your book. While very few books fit this category completely, you can pretty well determine which books would come close and which ones wouldn't.

Let's take a few examples. Let's say you have an idea for a book about investing in real estate. Perhaps you are a realtor with many years of experience behind you, and you feel confident that you are qualified to write a book on the subject. What will your book need to say to appeal to the greatest number of people?

Widening the Scope of Your Book

One title might be: *How I Made a Million Dollars Investing in Real Estate in Dade County, Florida*. This book might be a tremendous success in a biographical format. But is the average American going to be interested in it? What about a 20-year-old woman living in New York City? Or a 45-year-old city bus driver in Tacoma, Washington? Probably, they will not be remotely interested. A better approach might be to widen the scope of the book somewhat. Through this, your new title might be *How To Make a Killing Through Real Estate Investing with Little or No Capital*.

See the difference? The average American is interested in books that will benefit him or her personally. Their interest is piqued when you tell them how *they* can do something easily and inexpensively. You must always consider your buying public in your choice of topics.

How To Form Your Own Corporation Without a Lawyer for under \$75 has been successful largely because average people can do it all by themselves and can save big money in the process. If I had written my book with a format such as *How I Formed 18 Corporations by Myself for under \$75*, it simply wouldn't have the same appeal.

On the real estate book, take your experiences and add some in-depth research. In this way you could show people from all over the country how to do what you did and not limit it to Dade County, Florida. If you didn't expand the locale, the only people who would buy your book would be those interested in investing in real estate in one small county out of the whole United States. You would be drastically limiting your sales market.

What Makes a Book Sell

A study by Doubleday and Company Publishers revealed it is the subject of a book, not the author's name or reviewer's comments, that is the key to a successful book. The subjects with the best sales potential in this country are money (earning it, investing

it and making more of it—especially in today's economy), sex, health, psychological well-being, hobbies, numerous self-help topics and the growing seniors market. Although some fiction books seem to have been experiencing a shrinking audience in recent years, many editors are advising that the market for good, interesting novels will always exist, especially where the motion picture industry is concerned.

Unless you are not interested in large sales, which are necessary to make your book a success, it is probably best to avoid controversial or "protest" topics, or others with built-in audience limitation.

Watching for Trends

Some books that have been very successful would seem to be limited in market appeal. There are, for example, several bestsellers on the subjects of writing, gardening and other seemingly small-audience topics. Consider, however, the extent to which these two hobbies have burgeoned in recent years. More people are turning to writing as an enjoyable pastime, so more and more people are interested in buying writing books. Today, nearly everyone has a few house plants or a small garden plot, even those who live in apartments. So don't disregard a subject just because you don't know anyone who might be interested in it. Watch the trends. Certain things catch on almost overnight, and a good book on the subject is bound to become a success just as quickly.

As a publisher, I am constantly amazed at the number of people who have valuable information in their heads who have never thought of sharing it with the public through a book.

I believe there is at least one good book in everyone, based on the valuable knowledge gained from life's experiences. People are willing to pay handsomely for information that can help them in their daily lives and in areas where they cannot simply take a course or read a magazine article about it. If you have doubts about your subject's appeal, take a trip to the library, and ask the librarian to

help you find information about the nation's pastimes and current interests.

Chances are that you will find hundreds of associations and clubs throughout the country which may be ideal candidates for the purchase of your book.

Preparing the Manuscript

Nearly every type of person in this country (including doctors, housewives, business people, auto mechanics, and hundreds of others) write books each year and have them published. Few of them are professional writers, or they would have jobs writing or editing, or they would be freelance writers and little else.

You do not need to be a professional writer to self-publish your own book, either. The information you have to offer to the public is what buyers are willing to pay for. But if you are not a skilled writer, how do you get that information to the public through a book authored by you?

How To Get Help in Writing Your Book

The most effective method is to place a classified ad in the local paper, writer's magazine or *Publishers Weekly*, for editorial help in preparing a book. Newspaper reporters, public relations people, advertising writers, librarians, editors with publishers and a host of others have skills which you can purchase on a part-time basis to help organize your thoughts and your material.

You might need help only to get a working outline together or the research material ready. A librarian is the natural choice to contact for help in researching your book, again on a part-time basis. Most people are happy to "moonlight" and make some extra money.

If the actual writing process is foreign to you and you don't quite have the knack for it, you can advertise for a "ghostwriter." These are professional writers who are willing to write your book for you from your notes and thoughts. They will provide you with the

finished manuscript. Many writers are willing to do this, even though their names will never appear on the finished work, because it earns money for them and they are not involved in any of the publishing risks. As you may not be aware, a great number of the books on the market today were not actually written by the person whose name appears on the cover. Within the publishing industry this is common knowledge.

There are many reasons for using a ghostwriter and certainly nothing odd or unethical about it.

Whatever your reasons, here are some of the most commonly asked questions about ghostwriters.

"What is a ghostwriter?"

This is a professional writer who is willing to do the writing and have it appear under someone else's name. A ghostwriter is different from a collaborator because the latter is given credit as a coauthor. Most autobiographies list the credits something like this: "By Bethany Movie Star *with* John Collaborator," or "By Bethany Movie Star *as told to* John Collaborator." A ghostwriter receives no such recognition.

"How is a ghostwriter paid?"

Usually a flat rate, often on a per-page basis. For research (including library time, reading, background interviews, etc.), they are usually paid by the hour. Sometimes ghostwriters receive a flat fee when the project is handed over. Ghostwriters usually do not share in the royalties of the author, as do collaborators. But there are exceptions.

"Why would anyone want to be a ghostwriter?"

There are several reasons. The ghostwriter gets paid for doing the work whether or not the finished product is a success or even gets published. Second, many feel that they would rather be writing and getting paid for it than sitting idle. Third, some writers simply

enjoy working with interesting, idea-oriented people. Ghostwriting allows them to become knowledgeable in new fields. Fourth, writers genuinely enjoy their craft. Ghostwriting allows them to become someone else, to "disappear" behind the author and speak in someone else's voice. They like the versatility of writing in many different styles—in effect "becoming" different people. The best ones can write a fictionalized autobiography for a female celebrity and immediately switch gears and write political speeches for a foreign diplomat. Some writers thrive on the variety.

"How do I find a competent ghostwriter?"

The first place to start would be *Literary Market Place*, published by R. R. Bowker Co. This annual publication can usually be found in most public libraries. Check under the classification of "Freelance Editorial Services." These are people who will edit, polish, rewrite, clarify, coauthor (collaborate) or ghostwrite material. Some are agencies operating a clearinghouse of available writers, and some are individuals. Contact them by mail or phone, and emphasize that you are interested in a ghostwriting arrangement. Some may not be willing to work under these conditions, but many will be happy to discuss it with you.

Another source would be *Publishers Weekly*, a weekly trade journal for publishing company staffs, also published by R. R. Bowker. Look in the classified section in the back of the magazine. You're likely to find leads in the "Positions Wanted" and "Agencies" sections.

Writer's Digest is another source to consult. This is a monthly magazine for and about writers and is peppered with ads for editorial services.

Using a more direct approach, you might consider placing advertisements for a ghostwriter much as you would place an ad for a new employee. A classified advertisement in *Writer's Digest* will probably bring you a mailbox full of replies from all over the country. If it is necessary for you to maintain close and convenient

contact with your ghostwriter, consider an ad in your local newspaper. Replies will come from librarians, college students, homemakers, teachers and professors, local freelance writers, in addition to newspaper reporters and staff writers on local magazines. Choose the ones who have the most experience in your field.

"What makes a competent ghostwriter?"

As with any situation in which you will be working closely with another person, the personal relationship is important. Can you communicate with the prospective ghostwriter, and vice versa? Do you share a mutual trust and respect? Does the writer grasp your goals and aims quickly? Is the writer an agreeable person to work with? Are there any other obligations which will interfere with the work being done for you? Is the writer open to suggestions and willing to make whatever necessary revisions are needed before getting down to the final copy?

Of equal importance is the writer's talent and ability. Ask to see samples of his or her work. Does the writing style seem similar to what yours would be? Can the writer write and sound like you? In other words, if you are planning a simple "how-to" manual on a popular subject, try to locate a writer with a style that is concise and easy-to-understand. If your subject is technical in nature, locate a writer with a background in or familiarity with your topic.

The rate of pay the writer will accept is another important consideration. The best guideline would be: Pay what it's worth to you. Don't try to get the cheapest writer available; you may end up with a shoddy job. Be flexible. An experienced, professional writer will command a higher price. For general guidelines on rates, consult *Writer's Market*, published by *Writer's Digest* (available in most public libraries). There is a listing of the "going rates" for all types of writing. Generally, you should expect to pay at least \$10 to \$25 per page, or a flat rate of \$500 to \$2,000 for a book. But you can pay as much as \$10,000 to \$15,000 or more, depending on credentials. Sometimes a ghostwriter may request an advance,

retainer or a percentage of royalties. This is up to you. I feel that a 50/50 split on royalties can be fair to both if there is little or no up-front fee.

"How would I write an ad for a ghostwriter?"

An example of an ad for a ghostwriter for an autobiography can be very short, something like this:

"Writer needed to assist with autobiography. Send resume and writing samples to..."

If your needs are more specific, you might place an advertisement something like this:

Ghostwriter wanted to work on a "how-to" start your own computer cleaning company book-length manuscript. Talent in writing and experience in the business field essential. Send resume and samples to ..."

When you get replies, read the sample carefully. Contact those who interest you, and arrange a meeting to discuss the project, the rate of pay, the style, length and time requirements.

Once you have agreed upon a rate and time frame, you will want to have your ghostwriter sign an agreement. Essentially, this is a contract whereby you detail the conditions of your working relationship and each other's obligations. Figure 3.1 is an example of a useful agreement.

Figure 3.1 Ghostwriter Agreement

GHOSTWRITER AGREEMENT

The date of this Agreement is: _____

This Agreement is made between _____ (ghostwriter) _____, (hereinafter referred to as "Writer"), and (your name) _____, (hereinafter referred to as "Author" or "Publisher").

Author/Publisher hereby contracts with Writer to provide certain Work under Author's/Publisher's specifications. All Work that is generated under this Agreement, including copyright shall be a "work for hire" or become the sole property of the Author/Publisher. Writer hereby agrees that he or she will keep the nature of his or her written assignments and the fact that Work will be published under the name of the Author/Publisher strictly confidential.

Author/Publisher agrees to pay Writer \$ _____ per page for a final draft of Work. Research, typing, copying or other miscellaneous expenses in producing this Work shall be borne by the Writer. Acceptability of written Work, including specifications and form thereof, shall be at the sole discretion of Author/Publisher. Work may be stopped at any time at the sole discretion of Author/Publisher.

Writer fully understands that aforementioned fee is full and complete for any Work covered under this Agreement, and that no further compensation or royalties will be paid should any of the Work be published at the discretion of the Author/Publisher.

Writer agrees to take full responsibility and indemnify Author/Publisher for costs of any copyright infringement action including damages and attorney's fees which occur as a result of the Work.

Writer acknowledges that all confidential ideas for Work covered under this Agreement have been supplied by Author/Publisher and are exclusive property of Author/Publisher. Writer further acknowledges access to certain of the Author's/Publisher's trade secrets. Writer agrees not to produce any Work similar to or competitive with the Work covered under this Agreement at any time or otherwise compete with Author/Publisher, directly or indirectly.

This Agreement is for a period of _____ days and is cancelable by either party upon written notice. It shall automatically renew for additional and consecutive 30-day intervals unless terminated by either party.

Signed:

Author/Publisher: _____ Date: _____

Writer: _____ Witness: _____

Once you have the signed agreement, you can present your material in more detail to your ghostwriter. Prepare a table of contents and a synopsis. Have ghostwriter prepare a rough draft of the first chapter. Then carefully go over it, and make your suggestions and revisions. If satisfied with the ghostwriter at this point, have him or her proceed with your work. If not, it's better not to go any further with the project.

Typing the Manuscript

Once the manuscript is ready to be taken to the printer for quotes or for typesetting, you can hire a typist to prepare the final manuscript. If it is typed without errors on a computer disk or on an IBM Correcting Selectric typewriter using a carbon film ribbon, your manuscript can then be put on your printer's computer typesetting equipment or photocopied. This will save you hundreds (or even thousands) of dollars in typesetting and printing costs. Before you prepare the final manuscript, discuss the specifics with a printer. In any case, whether you have your book on a disk, photocopied or typeset, the manuscript should be in perfect form, entirely free of errors and exactly as you want it.

You will receive galleys or page proofs. If you make corrections on these proofs that are different from what was on the manuscript, you will be charged for alterations. Obviously, it's best to have everything exactly as you want it to appear in print before it goes to the typesetter.

Desktop Publishing

As quickly as this new, revised edition of this book is printed, computer technology will also have changed. Print cannot seem to keep up with the speed of the ever-changing world of computers.

Desktop publishing is turning into a household word. But what is it?

Desktop publishing refers to the capability of a person not trained in graphic design to be able to create professional, effective graphic images at home or in the office without hiring professionals. People who have little or no graphic design background but wish to publish their own book, magazine or newsletter can now create attractive, effective printed material.

You might say that you don't have one artistic bone in your body and that a computer will not cure that problem. But through your experiences of reading and analyzing printed material, you have gained skills in design.

If you simply want to write technical literature and wonder why graphic design is important to publishing your book, think carefully about the books or manuscripts that have caught your eye. You'll have to admit that appearance as well as content is very important in written communication.

Effective graphic design is the difference that will cause a consumer to choose one book on the same subject over another. Consumers do judge a book by its cover. The book must look as appealing as possible.

Appearance also applies to the readability of a book. Readers don't want to struggle reading print or poorly designed graphics. Effective graphics help your readers make a decision to purchase a particular publication based on their emotional and intuitive feelings about your product.

This book will not train you to use your desktop publishing hardware and software. Tutorials and training manuals for whatever type of system you have will guide you with the basic commands.

Regardless of whether you use an IBM PC/AT, an Apple Macintosh, Ventura, Aldus PageMaker or any other system available, all the combinations are capable of producing the concepts that your creativity can invent.

Desktop publishing has saved even large corporations a lot of money and time by saving steps in going right from disk to film.

The film then is used to make the printing plates to go to print. The following steps show the difference between the conventional method and the desktop publishing method. Steps 1–6 can be done in-house. The savings come from time and not having to prepare high resolution (typeset) output that the film is made from.

<u>CONVENTIONAL</u>	<u>DESKTOP</u>
1. Typeset Manuscript	1. Enter Manuscript
2. Typeset	2. Output Galleys
3. Output Galleys	3. Proofread
4. Proofread	4. Enter Corrections
5. Typeset Corrections	5. Output Corrected Galleys
6. Output Galleys	6. Reproof
7. Reproof	7. If OK, Disk to Film
8. If OK, Output Type	8. Printing Plates
9. Final Proof	9. Print
10. Film	
11. Printing Plates	
12. Print	

Both experienced and beginning publishers can increase efficiency and profitability by learning desktop publishing skills. By experimenting with the creative processes of desktop publishing, you will continue to improve your work and save yourself a lot of money. (See pages 77–83 for more complete information.)

Avoiding Rewrite

Writers are notorious for wanting to change practically everything once they see their work set in type. Maybe that's why conventional publishers will charge the author if alterations on the galleys or page proofs are made. This serves as a deterrent to rewriting the whole manuscript. You must give yourself a cut-off limit after which you will consciously try to leave things as you have written them. If not, you can spend your lifetime rewriting and never get your book into print.

Retain your original manuscript in all cases, and store it in a fireproof box or bank safe deposit box. I won't go so far as to say that publishers are careless, but they are human, just like the mail carrier. As long as you provide a legible, duplicate copy, there is no reason to submit an original to a publisher or to a printer because it can be lost.

Writing for the Reader

A book about creating a bestseller wouldn't be complete without some information about putting words and sentences together to form a readable unit. Although there is no quick, magical formula as far as I know, I have found that the best route is always simple, clear writing, easy to understand by someone with an average education. The newspaper industry reports that to make your writing readable to the majority of Americans, you should write on a sixth grade level. In other words, a student in the sixth grade doing reasonably well should be able to read what you write, understand most of it and be able to tell you what it means.

Other Tips

1. Avoid the temptation to use a long word when a short one will do just as well. If you simply can't use a short word, include a glossary in your book, or explain the meaning in the text. This occurs most commonly in technical writing or in an area in which occupational jargon is frequently used.
2. The purpose of writing is to communicate something you know. It is not necessary to impress. The exceptions to this rule may be scholarly writing or educational writing for peers, or fiction and poetry. The effect of obscurity in these areas is often considered a skill.

3. Use simple, declarative sentences. Vary their length and position enough to make your writing interesting rather than monotonous.
4. Before you begin to write, read several pages of work you admire from another writer. Don't consciously try to copy his or her style, of course, but get into the mood for writing. Chances are good that if you enjoy a particular writer's style, your readers will too.
5. Use the precise word to express exactly the meaning you are trying to convey. If you don't know the dictionary definition of a particular word, look it up before using it.
6. Try to write as you speak. This makes writing more interesting. But if you tend to ramble when you talk, don't use a tape recorder and transcribe from it. You may speak ungrammatically while your writing is better.
7. Avoid colloquial or slang words and phrases. Most of these types of things come and go in style and usage. Readers several years down the road won't know what you're talking about. Also, slang can change meaning fairly rapidly.
8. Use action words which tend to conjure a mental picture for the reader. Put sight, smell and taste into your writing.
9. Try to be straightforward and precise. Avoid phrases such as "very big." How big? Compared to a pinhead or an elephant?
10. Vary paragraph length, but aim for short paragraphs in the main. Tests have shown that readers are more apt to read short paragraphs over long ones. If your subject absolutely needs a lengthy paragraph, see if you can reword it so that it can be separated into two.
11. Put the words you want to emphasize in the beginning of the sentence. Put the sentence you want to emphasize at the beginning of the paragraph. Put the paragraph you want to emphasize at the beginning of the chapter.

12. After you've written a chapter or several pages, put them aside for at least an hour so that you can approach it with a fresh mind. Revise and edit as many times as it takes until it feels right. Cut words that do not add to your message. Your writing can always be improved, but avoid the tendency to be verbose.
13. Be yourself. Even if you're writing textbooks, a little personal insight or something that will show the reader that you are a human being underneath it all will add interest. Readers want to believe in you, they want to follow your advice and they want to get to know you. If you allow your personality to show through the written word, you have made their reading much more pleasurable.
14. Have a dictionary and thesaurus handy at all times. You might also consider having a handy spelling dictionary, a spell check software program, a dictionary of quotations and a quick reference of synonyms and antonyms available. A grammatical guidebook is also recommended. The University of Chicago's *The Chicago Manual of Style* is a standard.

Writing is one of the most difficult tasks. It provides a stimulating mental workout for anyone attempting it. But it is also one of the most productive things you can do. You are creating an original work as you write, and in the case of fiction you are actually making up a new and separate reality complete with human beings. It's truly a remarkable feat.

Getting Professional Help

So be careful when you write. Nothing is more aggravating to a reader than to have to continually correct your grammar or your spelling while trying to figure out what you're trying to say. If you just don't have a good command of the English language, and you

don't speak correctly by second nature, perhaps it would be to your advantage to hire an editor or ghostwriter.

If this describes you, it is still very possible to write an excellent book full of valuable information which will benefit many people. You will probably find the job much easier though if someone else actually puts the sentences and paragraphs together for you.

Collaborations and Coauthors

Another low-cost method (if you still feel awkward while trying to write) is to collaborate with a professional writer. This person would do the actual writing while you provide all of the information. In your self-publishing venture, the writer could be an equal partner, sharing both the risks and rewards. Obviously, if a writer's name is going to appear on your book as a coauthor, greater pains will be taken with the writing of the manuscript. He or she will be infinitely more interested in the potential profit from book sales.

If you decide to do it all yourself, here are a few more tips on writing effectively for a general audience—

What Makes for "Good Writing"

Good writing is usually considered to be that which gets the message across to the reader in a manner readily understood. It also affects the reader in some way. It has been said that a good novel is only a "good novel" when it somehow changes the life of the reader. It must move people emotionally, must provide them with illumination into themselves or people around them, must make them cry or laugh, must affect them in such a way that they might see life differently. They must remember it, too. Nothing is more boring than a flat, emotionless, uninteresting piece of writing that says nothing and goes nowhere.

Researching Your Subject

Research is another area of great importance. You will need to become absolutely familiar with all the "ins and outs" of your subject if for no other reason than to maintain credibility. You cannot overlook a single area, and you must cover every contingency and possible question in your reader's mind. Before drawing up an outline, list all of the possible questions a reader might have about your topic from his or her point of view. Put yourself in the reader's place. Imagine you are standing in a bookstore looking for a book on the subject. What would your questions be? What would you want covered in the book? Most important, what would make you buy a particular book over a similar one on the same subject?

Once you have these questions, head for the library and do some work. This involves reading everything you can get your hands on that even mentions your topic. This gives you a realistic idea of what has been covered and what hasn't.

Mentioning Your Sources

Research also involves establishing a "Suggested Readings" list for your book and a bibliography. Even if you do not quote directly or paraphrase someone else, list the sources from which you gained valuable knowledge about the subject. Unless you have performed some totally new research under laboratory or scientific method testing conditions, you have garnered information from other sources besides your own imagination.

Even if you are a recognized authority on a subject, you will still want to quote directly or paraphrase another author, simply to offer some back-up for your statements. Particularly if your work is basically new information (or is controversial in nature), you will want to mention other people's contributions to the field.

By researching your subject you are gaining the knowledge which will effectively make you an "expert." You will also see how the subject has been treated previously, what was left out and what

new advances have been made recently. You can then make sure your book is the best in the field.

Perhaps you might want to do some research which cannot be found in bound books or periodicals. Your subject may be such that it is necessary to interview authorities in the field, and you feel your book would be greatly enhanced by an original quote or two. How do you go about this?

Using Your Local College or University

Usually, your local college is a great source of information. If you have a question, most librarians will be happy to help you if you explain that you are writing a book and need some information which is not generally available. The librarian may be able to direct you to a professor knowledgeable in the subject whom you can interview and quote. Don't forget about local business people who can be knowledgeable interview subjects as well.

Interviewing Other Authorities

For instance, if you are writing a book about natural foods, you might interview a nutritionist at your local college or university. But at the same time, don't forget the proprietor of your local health food store. Since business people's livelihoods depend on their knowledge of their products, they can be helpful in providing accurate and up-to-date information. They can also guide you to the most recent and well-received books on the subject. Local tradespeople and proprietors can often be your best source of information. Also, college professors are often involved in their own writing and research and may not have the time to help you with yours.

Interviewing Techniques

When you interview someone, there are some basic steps to follow:

1. Come to the interview prepared with a list of questions. Never go in "blind" and expect the person you are interviewing to carry the ball. They want to know what you are interested in and can't be bothered with leading the interview.
2. Formulate your questions so that they cannot be answered with straight "yes" or "no" responses. Ask leading questions so that the person being interviewed must explain or qualify his or her answers.
3. Try to put the person being interviewed at ease. Be friendly and interested in what he or she is telling you. Don't come on like a hardboiled newspaper reporter or try to intimidate them with your manner.
4. Don't take up much of their time. Be prompt for your appointment, and don't hang on beyond about half an hour to 45 minutes. Most people tire of talking after that amount of time. If you still need more information, call back and make another appointment. You might simply ask your questions over the phone.
5. Never put a person on the spot. If they don't want to be quoted, don't press them. Personal privacy is one of our fast-vanishing human rights; don't be one to help it on its way.
6. Be aware of the value of a person's time. Write them a note in thanks of their consideration. Always end on a good note by offering to send a copy of the book when it is published.
7. If you intend to quote the person, get written permission. This can be in the form of an informal letter which states the exact quotation. It is simply signed at the bottom and returned to you for your files. Most people will go along with this.
8. Keep your facts straight. If they have said one thing, don't embellish it or put words into their mouths by making them appear to have said what you wanted to hear. Don't quote out of context, and never quote a person and then disagree.

For example, don't say, "John Doe of Doe's Health Food Store said . . . , but I think he's wrong and I say" That's playing dirty. If you don't agree with someone you've interviewed, don't quote.

9. Try to be relaxed and open during your interview. Be genuinely interested in what the person has to tell you, or don't interview at all.

Developing Your Idea

Another sign of good writing is a sound, well-thought-out idea. It must be a deep enough subject to warrant a book. Avoid subjects that can be covered just as well in a magazine article. No matter how much extraneous information you add, readers will be able to tell that you are just filling up pages.

One example of this might be the idea for a book on the personalities of cats. Let's say that you have always had cats as pets, that you've noticed how they all seem to have distinct and separate personalities, and that you'd like to write a book on your experiences with your cats. It could be approached in several ways.

First, you could write an article for a magazine in a humorous vein, recalling the many different cats you've owned, their names, how you chose their names, what they were like and how they were different from each other. That would be a good magazine article, but it would be tough to write a whole book about it.

To expand this idea into a book, you would need to research the history of cats and their relationships to humans, speak with several veterinarians about their findings and personal experiences, talk with other cat owners to see if they have had similar experiences and if they believe in your original idea. To take it beyond that point, you might speak with animal trainers and ask them for specific tips on training cats, where you might be able to offer your readers some guidelines for choosing a particular breed of cat, how to train it, how to avoid the cat's development of bad habits and how to treat

"meaty" enough for a full-length book. Your own experiences peppered throughout would make the book, and you, come alive through the words.

Getting Ideas for Books

Other ideas for books seem to be around us every day. For fiction, most writers use their powers of observation. One thing these authors have in common is that they tend to have an uncanny sense of seeing through people—the ability to determine what they are really thinking and feeling. After all, if you are going to write and create people in your writing, you must know all kinds of people almost inside and out. An author I know can sit on a bus (and frequently takes the bus for this very reason) and overhear a simple conversation between two fellow passengers. He will write notes at the end of the bus ride to catalog the conversation somewhere in his brain for retrieval when a particular situation in a story or novel calls for it.

The Observation Technique

For instance, if you are sitting on a bus and two women are behind you discussing the price of meat, listen to what they are saying and, more important, what they are *not* saying. Perhaps one woman's husband was recently injured in an accident, and she has had to cut down sharply on the quality and amount of meat she buys. A writer will immediately sense a story line behind that snatch of conversation. The most interesting conversations are between strangers (frequently on a bus or subway) who are making polite conversation, revealing little bits about themselves. As an eavesdropper, you get to know them as they reveal personal aspects of their lives. To make a fully formed character, you merely fill in the blanks. Writers of "confessions" frequently use just such a technique, by imagining the woman's house, what her husband is

like, what she might have been like when young, how they fell in love and how they came to be where they are now.

To fiction authors, no situation is ever dull. Even the most mundane and commonplace conversation can take on a quality where it can be the source of many good ideas. Some writers have even built entire books around everyday experiences where they have let their imaginations run wild.

Turning Gripes into Books

A valuable source of ideas for self-help or "how-to" books is listening to people's complaints and gripes. I came to write this book by listening to many authors who said, "I wish there was a common-sense guide to explain the steps necessary for publishing my own book. The publishing industry is so secretive. I would really appreciate a book that showed me how to do it in simple, well-defined steps." So, after I learned how to do it, I wrote this book for people like you and me who want and need this information.

The art of listening is one of your most valuable skills as a writer. Listen to everyone and everything. Try to understand what people are *really* saying, what they feel and what they think about. The sources of ideas for books surround us every day. If you don't believe me, take the bus to work for a week!

For further information on writing styles and ways of getting ideas, I suggest the books listed in the "Recommended Readings" section. These books have been of great value to me.

Choosing and Testing the Title

I can't emphasize enough the importance of the book title. Perhaps the most frequently disregarded element in conventional publishing is selection of titles. An author might spend years agonizing over the manuscript, only to sit down over a cup of coffee with the editor to decide on a title.

More than anything else, the title is what gets people interested in your book. The title tells potential buyers what your book is about in nonfiction books, so it must be appropriate.

As mentioned, one of the best ways to sell self-published books is through direct mail and space ads. It is a method of exposing your work to the widest possible audience for the fewest initial dollars invested in promotion. The title is of primary importance, especially to those who cannot examine the book before buying it. If you were selling the book through bookstores, which you may do later, the jacket also becomes important. But even a professionally prepared dust jacket can be of little use if it carries an uninteresting title.

Earlier some discussion was made of titles as they relate to book subjects. To illustrate the importance of a book title, let's use the book on cats that was mentioned previously. The book contains the information outlined earlier, but we are going to use two different titles. Which one do you think would sell more copies?

**"A Scientific Investigation of
Feline Personality
from an Historical Perspective"**

or,

**"How To Get Lots of Love
from Your Cat"**

The second example is a more humorous, personal approach. The first one sounds like it ought to be a textbook in veterinary school. Also, the second tells you what the book is about. It grabs your interest (if you are interested in cats, of course) and gives you an idea of the information presented. It also hints at the style of the book. As another example, would you have *this* book if it had been entitled *An Examination of the Publishing Business*? Maybe, but I don't think it's likely.

Title-Testing Techniques

Since a title is of such importance in publishing and especially in mail-order marketing, I have developed a technique of title testing that costs very little but provides solid market research data both for title selection and further advertising.

Let's say you've written a book on organic gardening, a subject of widespread interest today. How do you choose a title? One "how-to" approach is: *How To Grow a More Productive, Pesticide-Free Garden* or *Secrets of Organic Gardening on a Shoestring*.

To test the pulling power of these titles, run ads for both of them. You need do nothing more than place a classified advertisement in one or more gardening magazines. If you choose a publication which specializes in one facet of gardening, it will probably have a lower circulation figure (number of subscribers and newsstand sales) than one dealing with the entire gardening gamut. Advertising rates will be correspondingly lower in the smaller circulation magazine. There will be more information presented about choosing and analyzing your advertising media in a later chapter.

What should your advertisement say? It ought to read something like this: "New book being completed by professional gardener—*How To Grow a More Productive, Pesticide-Free Garden*. For free information, write . . ."

Developing the "Brochure"

What is the information? For about \$25 per thousand you can have an 8½ x 11 inch circular printed in black and white containing the pertinent information about your book. It would include the titles you are testing so that you can use the same circular to respond to inquiries from all your ads. Vary the titles in the ads to test the pulling power of each.

The circular should also contain the table of contents of your book. This gives the potential buyer a very precise idea of what the book contains.

In addition, the respondent can be offered a financial inducement to purchase a copy of your book when it's hot off the press. Perhaps here you would say something along the lines of: "As a prepublication offer, I would be happy to autograph your copy of my book and give you a \$2 discount from the advertised retail price. It will be off the press in 60 days!"

Finally, the circular should contain a coupon enabling a person to order easily. Allow plenty of room for the respondent to fill in his or her name and address legibly. Also stress that they will receive their money back promptly if for any reason they are not satisfied with the purchase.

You will find that some checks will begin to flow in before your book is even printed. And at this point you can begin to analyze several things:

1. *The title that brings in the greatest number of inquiries will always dramatically out-pull the others.*
2. *Your "conversion rate." This is the number of people who write for free information and then go on to purchase the book.*

It is also quite possible that you will receive enough advance orders to pay for the printing costs of your first edition.

At this point, of course, your book has not been printed, and you have not invested money in printing a book in which no one is interested or one that has an ineffective title. In addition, you have gained a good feel for the potential market acceptance of your book with an investment of as little as \$100. If your title is effective and the book is priced right, you may receive many times that amount in checks from people who take advantage of your prepublication offer. You can then choose the most popular title and have your book printed.

This technique may sound odd to you, but it is rapidly becoming a standard practice in many publishing houses. To minimize the risk, a publisher will have an artist prepare "dummies" of several

different dust jackets for the same book. These are tested in the manner described above. Whichever title pulls best becomes the final one.

If none of the titles or jackets pulls any significant amount of inquiries or orders, usually the whole book project is dropped. The reasoning is relatively simple. If no one is interested in buying a book or product of any kind, why produce it? It's far better to return the few orders and payments received if it's a loser.