

Starting at the Beginning

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"I know - I think I'll write a book. I know there are lots of people who might like what I have to say - and I've been thinking about it for ages, so I'm sure I can write quite a good book. Who knows, maybe someone will publish it. Perhaps I'll turn it into a blog...."

This must be what many people are thinking when they start to write something that eventually ends up on my desk as a manuscript begging to be reviewed and ultimately published. And this article is for all of those would be writers who are currently thinking this way. So my first big piece of advice is: STOP! please, and apply some thoughtful planning to your project at the start.

First, decide who you are expecting will want to read what you write. Why would they? What exactly will your words of wisdom do for them? Maybe you think that what you have to share is life changing, inspirational and challenging - but is it really? Maybe you are just one of many who is writing about the same general subject, in which case it's so easy to be lost in the crowd. Consider carefully what might make your particular literary masterpiece really stand out.

I recently had a 74 year old interesting man send me his memoirs. He had grown up in the Netherlands during WWII and had written a lot about those days of soldiers in the street, planes flying over head, a brother hiding in the potato cellar and being shipped off to the country as a war child waiting for the bombing to end in the city. While it is fair to say that he wrote it well and in some ways it's an interesting story, sadly there's nothing totally amazing or compelling about it. There was no particularly interesting or unique twist to his story. It's a great tale for a Grandfather to share around the dinner table with his young family, but it's not compelling enough to set the literary world on fire.

If you have a great story to tell and want it to be worthy of publishing it has to be more than just great. It needs to paint vivid pictures of the people, have fascinating central characters and a beginning, middle, end to the story.

A non-fiction book about how to achieve something, a book which explores and answers questions, or a narrative with a particular point to it must also be compelling, special, and creatively take the reader on a journey through the pages.

Once you know what your reason is for writing the article, story or book you have in your mind, then you need to plan how you will write it. My understanding is that starting at page one and working your way through from start to finish is only something that works for a small percentage of authors. Most of us need to plan and chart where the information will flow, and then write in pieces which come together as a whole eventually. Having a plan first is therefore critical to prevent you from either dropping bits out, or overwriting parts which don't need to be. A plan stops you going off into all sorts of tangents with your writing.

Then, you will need to have it edited, refine your work, re-edit and proof it. Once you have a really good piece of writing to show for your efforts, what are you going to do with it? Again, planning at the beginning is important to ensure you've written your piece with this outcome in mind. Will you submit it to a publisher? If it's an article, what sort of magazines and online publications will accept what you've written? It will certainly upset most authors to find they have written far too much to be a viable piece without a lot of slashing, or worse, to realise that it's just not what is currently in demand for what ever reason and therefore not usable at all.

Most publications post their submission guidelines clearly on their websites, and it's best to check these before you start writing so that you can focus your piece around these. It will save you a lot of time, angst and frustration.

Finally, know what you are going to do once it's been published. Will you write a follow up? What about helping to direct people in your target market to read your piece once it's published. Can you get busy speaking to groups about what you write about? Will this piece add some weight to your credentials or to your CV? If so, then consider all the ways you can therefore maximise on this?

And don't stop at just one article or story. Keep writing, and publishing what you write. Your confidence will grow with every item that is published, and soon you'll be ready to write a book. If you are already writing books, the same amount of planning and questions need to be worked through.

I know that the concept of 'planning' is boring to many - and some would argue that it stifles creativity. But the most successful authors I know don't simply get up, sit at their computers and books magically unfold all by themselves. So once again I say, to start at the beginning, develop a plan first.