

How to Start Writing Your Non-Fiction Guide

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Introduction

If you're an expert in your field and/or new to writing and wanting to produce a practical guide for readers, you might be needing a handle on identifying its focus and purpose, and organising your work.

This handy guide outlines what you need to know to create the optimum writing journey for you.

Start with why

It's not uncommon for some first-time or inexperienced authors to have a lightbulb moment, and dive straight into writing without considering their book's purpose beyond this:

'I have experience of X and I want to help people.'

That's a really great and laudable motivation! But Simon Sinek didn't come up with this key phrase without good reason. If you're going to write a book, it's important to be clear why you want to do this.

Publishing is an undertaking: it involves time, a huge amount of author effort and, if you're self-publishing, finance – so you'll want to be sure that you're focused, fully invested in the process and committed to seeing it through.

For example, are you writing to:

- Position yourself and your knowledge as expert in your field?
- Inform, advise and uplift others?
- Produce a business card – your book acts as a lead magnet and sales funnel?
- Achieve something else?

Being clear on your book's purpose will help you define the next part: your audience.

Who do you want to target?

Working out who your book is intended for is crucial to getting so many things about it right:

- Pitching its knowledge level correctly
- Deciding on the scope of content for the topic, field or sector
- The demographic

- Tone and address – how you're going to speak to your readers

– these are just a few aspects of writing a practical book which can be affected by lack of clarity.

To identify your audience, try the marketing exercise of creating avatars for your typical readers.

Ask yourself:

- Who is my tribe, and what are they like?
- What are my prospective readers' pain points – what do they really want and need?
- How am I going to solve them – and what is different about my solution?

If you're working with clients in coaching or consultancy, for example, you'll already have a reasonably good line into these questions, which will help to create, direct and focus your content (more on this below).

Gaining clarity on what you're going to write, for whom and how, are all fundamental to producing a good book.

Find your USP

Working out your unique selling point differentiates what you have to offer from all the other books out there in your field or topic.

And this is key, because the practical non-fiction sector is a crowded market.

It's even more important to have a unique offer if you're intending to pitch an agent or publisher.

So many new authors sit down to write without awareness of what already exists out there – only to find that what they're saying is exactly the same as everyone else, and has little added value that's fresh or interesting.

I totally appreciate that sounds harsh, but publishing is a business – we want you to achieve your goals, your book to sell, and for readers to think you're amazing!

Before you put hand to keyboard, it's vital to research well and thoroughly:

- Look at the current publishing landscape in your topic – if books already exist in the subject area, that means there's a market for them.
- Find the gap – look at the positions those authors take on the topic, their content and offer, and see how you can stand out with your own.
- Research the right publishers (and self-publishers) in your field – check their lists, see what they've published and their sales rankings.
- Examine the competition's style, production and quality – what makes them so attractive to readers. Do they have striking, well-designed covers? What about the interiors, how do they look? Why would people buy them?
- Check how recently those books came out – is there any space for more useful information, updated practice, new sector, career or industry and other developments?

If you're planning to pitch an agent or publisher (and if you're thinking of self-publishing too) all of this is important.

A publisher might believe your book is good but perhaps not quite the right fit for them. It's best not to waste time targeting the wrong channels.

Doing this initial desk-based enquiry will help you to get clear on the unique hook and angle for your book.

Don't appeal to everyone

It's a misconception that publishing a book needs to appeal as widely as possible. In fact, the opposite is true: niche works, and perhaps more effectively than you might think.

It's far better to specialise in your area – become the go-to person for it – than to try and speak to everyone and everything without focus.

You have important intel to share: there may well be readers out there who want the take in your book because the one they need simply doesn't exist yet.

As mentioned earlier, if you have your own course or system that you operate, even better – this will feed into your market research, because it's possible that what's out there might reveal a gap which your bespoke contribution can fill.

Here, your book is effectively a unique offer. It functions as a one-stop shop for your knowledge and positions

you as an expert, as well as actively helping your audience and creating a lead magnet to your business.

Organising your content

Generally, there are two types of author: planners and pantsers. Planners work out exactly what they're going to write and how, and pantsers, well, fly by their seat! They just sit down, write and see where it takes them.

That might work for fiction because story and characters evolve – but for non-fiction and practical guides, it's advisable to start by planning and outlining your content.

How to outline your book

This process involves starting by noting down your ideas, then pulling them into a framework which helps to prompt the writing and form your book's structure.

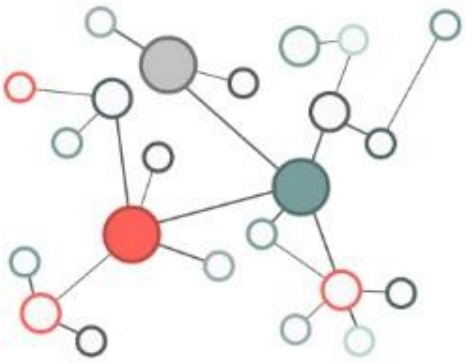
The great thing about outlining is that it can combat writer's block: you won't find yourself wondering what to tackle next. If you have a clear picture of the topics you want to cover and the pathway to follow, you won't run out of steam. Instead, you'll know what to say and where.

However, this doesn't necessarily mean your first draft will be set in stone: usually, that's far from the case. You'll likely want to go back over it, refining the text: perhaps adding more content, moving or removing some copy as a result of new thoughts and ideas arising along the way.

Self-editing is key to producing a more solid result. And writing is an organic process – which is absolutely okay! Often, the best, most inspired and ingenious content comes up during writing, because your creativity is being sparked – it's fine to let that happen.

Brainstorm your topics

One way to start identifying your topics is to create a spider diagram:



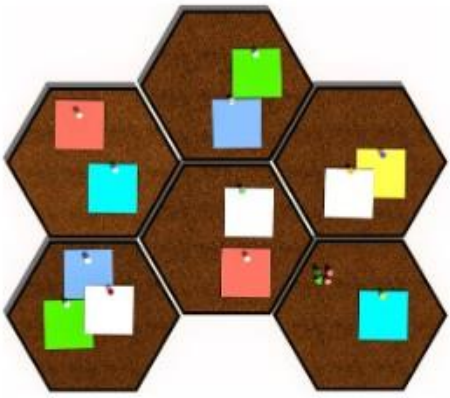
This helps you form the core topics and the subtopics relating to them that are relevant or you want to include.

Make this a free process: it's fine to let your mind do its work and not to regiment or control the exercise too closely.

This is just about coming up with ideas and seeing where that takes you.

Group the topics

Then, position your topics in different sections. Sticky notes on a wall are an ideal way to do this, as they help you visualise everything easily:



You might want to move some main topics or subtopics around, depending on their interrelationships and where you feel they're best placed.

Again, feel free to play with this and see what works. This is a good visual exercise to start to see exactly what you want to discuss, and how the points might link together.

Order the topics

Here, start to form the topic hierarchy from which you'll build the backbone of your book's structure.

Select the main topic for each section, then place the subtopics underneath. Does it seem right, are the subtopics in a good place, does anything need to be moved?



Create a list

Now you have all your topics and subtopics, you can transform your sticky notes into a list and rough table of contents.

At this point, you can create draft chapter headings to cover each section too.



What you should end up with is a list that looks something like this:

1 First chapter title
Main topic
Subtopic

Subtopic
Main topic
Main topic
2 Second chapter title
Main topic
Subtopic
Main topic
Subtopic
Subtopic
Subtopic

– and so on. Obviously this will vary, depending on the number of main topics and subtopics in each chapter.

From there, you can begin to make deeper notes on those topics, breaking them down and expanding them further to create a fuller, more detailed content plan to follow.

As the writing progresses, your skeleton structure might be refined and altered, according to the content and discussion you allocate to each topic. You might shift things around, add new headings – all part of the process.

Summary

By following these steps, you've identified:

- Your book's purpose
- Who you want to write for
- Your USP
- The competition and market
- What you're going to cover and where.

All you need to do now is get researching and writing!

I hope you've found the advice in this booklet useful. If you'd like more information or to discuss or soundboard your idea and project, contact me:

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