The 10 Commandments for Becoming a Successful Writer

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February 13-16, 2014 / www.sfwriters.org / sfwriterscon@aol.com
Keynoters: Chitra Divakaruni and Barry Eisler
Mike’s blog: http://sfwriters.info/blog / @SFWC / www.facebook.com/SanFranciscoWritersConference
30 Reasons Why Now is the Best Time to Be a Writer

1. You are the most important person in publishing because you make it go. Technology enables you to control the two fundamental challenges of being a writer: creating content and communicating about it.

2. The phrase “unpublished author” is obsolete. All you need to be published is a manuscript.

3. You have more options for getting your work published at less cost than ever: e-books, print-on-demand, podcasts, blogs, and websites.

4. A book that costs nothing to write or publish will succeed. If only one person buys it, it’s making money.

5. There are more ways to profit from your books with spinoffs, speaking, and subsidiary rights. If you have a salable idea for a series of related books that you will enjoy writing and promoting, you can build your career book by book. Books and e-books in English—the international language of culture and commerce—and in translation are selling in more countries and being consumed in more forms, media, and countries than ever.

6. You have more models—books and authors—to guide your writing and your career. You don’t have to figure out how to write a how-to or build a career; use your favorite books and authors as models.

7. A book that serves readers’ needs for information, inspiration, beauty, and entertainment well enough is unstoppable. We live in a social-media–driven, bottom-up culture, in which readers, not publishers, are the gatekeepers. Publishers spend millions of dollars a year buying and marketing books that fail, while social media enable self-published books and books from small presses go viral and become bestsellers.

8. There are more than 30,000 publishers, and new houses continue to open their doors. Big and midsize New York houses require that agents submit books. Others buy books from writers. Their sites have submission guidelines. You can do multiple submissions of e-query letters and nonfiction proposals.

9. There are more subjects for you to write about than ever. There’s a book in just about any idea that excites you enough to want to write about it.

10. Writing is a forgiving art. You can write as many drafts as you need; only the last one counts. As long as you have many knowledgeable readers and you learn from your models, mentors, and mistakes, writing salable books is inevitable.
11. **You can be an author without being a writer.** The two assets nonfiction writers have are information and the ability to promote their work. If they can’t write, they can work with an editor, collaborator, or ghostwriter.

12. **You can sell most kinds of nonfiction books with a proposal.** Memoirs and first novels have to be finished, but most nonfiction is sold with proposals that include an overview of the book and author, an outline, and one sample chapter.

13. **Finding an agent is easier than ever.** If you have a book that’s salable to a big or midsize house, it’s easier than ever to get an agent.

14. **You have more ways to test-market your books than ever.** You can maximize the value of your book before you sell it by proving it works with a blog, talks, articles, videos, and whatever other ways work best for you and your book.

15. **You have access to an amazing array of resources, many free.** Finding the books, magazines, events, classes, organizations, publishing professionals, and online resources, information and communities you need is easy.

16. **You will continue to grow as a writer and an author.** Think of your career as a lifetime endeavor with ten or twenty books in it, each better conceived, crafted, promoted, and more profitable than the previous one.

17. **Writers have an easier, faster path to success than actors, artists, dancers, composers, or musicians.** Publishers accept more new ideas, writers, and books than gatekeepers in other creative fields.

18. **You don’t have to quit your day job.** You can keep writing until you’re making the income you need to devote your life to your calling.

19. **Money doesn’t rule publishing; passion does.** If publishers believe in a book passionately, because they love it, they think it will sell, or it must be published because of its social or literary value, they’ll do it.

20. **Word of mouth and mouse enable books to succeed faster than ever.** One of our authors, Cherie Carter-Scott, appeared on Oprah, and that afternoon, her book, *If Life is a Game, These are the Rules*, rocketed to the top of Amazon’s bestseller list and rose the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list.

21. **Anything is possible.**

   - Dr. Benjamin Spock’s *Baby and Child Care* has sold 50,000,000 copies.
   - *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown has sold 80,000,000 books.
   - R. L. Stine’s *Goosebumps* has sold 300,000,000 copies.
   - The Harry Potter series has sold 450,000,000 copies.
   - The more than 100 *Chicken Soup* titles have sold 500,000,000 copies.
Barbara Cartland’s romances have sold 1,000,000,000 copies.
The Agatha Christie mysteries have sold 2,000,000,000 copies.
The Bible has sold 6,000,000,000 copies.

22. Thousands of new authors succeed every year:

- The Bridges of Madison County by Robert James Waller
- The Christmas Box, originally self-published by Richard Paul Evans
- Cold Mountain by Charles Frazier
- Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets by J.K. Rowling
- The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan
- Snow Falling on Cedars by David Guterson
- The Shack by William P. Young
- The Four-Hour Workweek by Timothy Ferris
- Dreams from My Father by Barack Obama
- I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell by Tucker Max
- Julie & Julia by Julie Powell
- The Help by Kathryn Stockett
- Fifty Shades of Gray by E. L. James sold 70 million copies in six months.

These are first books that became bestsellers. Because it’s easier to promote nonfiction than fiction, it’s easier for nonfiction writers to become bestsellers, especially if they have national visibility.

23. Self-published authors are on bestseller lists. A growing number of ebooks are going viral and hitting bestseller lists.

24. Books are more accessible than ever. It’s faster, easier, and often less expensive to buy books than ever.

25. Technology is the greatest tool for writers since the printing press.
Technology ended the physical drudgery of writing. It will help you with every aspect of being a writer, making it faster and easier to succeed.

26. Technology is making the industry more effective than ever.

- Publishers can sell books and subsidiary rights more efficiently.
- They can print, reprint and distribute books faster.
- Publishers can promote to the trade and the public online as well as off-line. Big houses have dedicated online promotion specialists.
- When publishers format books, they do it so that books can be used in all electronic formats.
27. **Publishers know how books are selling.** They receive sales figures from Nielsen Bookscan that account for 75% of sales. This enables them to:

- know how their books and competing books are selling
- schedule reprints based on sales, which lessens returns and ensures that stores have a steady supply of books
- acquire the kinds of books that sales prove readers want and avoid those that aren’t selling

28. **The more people know, the more they want to know.** If readers like one of your books, they’ll want the others, and e-books make it easier and faster than ever to buy them. Your books will continue to sell as new readers discover them.

29. **Independent bookstores are thriving again.** Bookstores are as essential to discovering books as libraries, and indies are better booksellers than chain stores.

30. **You spend your life enjoying the pleasures of the writing life:**

- Buying and reading books
- Finding the right words to express your ideas
- Experiencing the satisfaction of finishing your books
- Finding an agent and publisher you love
- Receiving royalty checks
- Seeing your name in print
- Getting good reviews
- Serving your communities
- Hearing from fans around the world who love your work and buy whatever you create
- Watching your craft and career develop and bring you greater recognition and rewards
- Browsing in bookstores
- Buying books (and they’re tax-deductible!)
- Building a library of books you love
- Living to work instead of working to live

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8 Options for Publishing Your Book

1. **You can self-publish your book**, using one or more of these options:
   
   -- Photocopying your manuscript and selling it in a three-ring binder  
   -- Publishing it as a hardcover, a mass market book or a trade paperback  
   -- Using print-on demand (POD) at no cost or for money  
   -- Using print-quantity-needed (PQN) for short runs  
   -- Using offset printing for longer runs  
   -- Publishing it for free online as a blog, articles, and a manuscript  
   -- Publishing it with the growing number of publishers that have self-publishing imprints  
   -- As an app

2. **You can pay for all of the costs to publish your book with a vanity or subsidy publisher.** But vanity publishing has no credibility in the industry.

3. **You can use subsidy publishing.** You pay part of the costs, an option with less credibility than a trade publisher.

4. **You may be able to partner with a business or non-profit** that will support the writing, publishing, and promotion of your book because it will further their cause.

5. **You can publish it in other media** such as software, a podcast, audiobook, or sell the rights to a company that does these products.

6. **You can sell the rights to**
   
   -- a small press, midsized, regional, niche, or specialty publisher  
   -- an on- or offline trade or consumer periodical that will serialize your book  
   -- a publisher for a flat fee as a work for hire  
   -- an academic or university press  
   -- a professional publisher that publishes books for a specific field

7. **You can work with a packager** who provides publishers with a file ready for the printer or finished books.

8. **You can hire an agent.**

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The 10 Commandments

for Becoming a Successful Writer

Now is the best time for you to be a writer, but technology is forcing you to reinvent yourself. You need a new model for becoming a successful writer. The goal of these ten commandments is to offer you one. You can adapt them to other fields and your personal life.

**Content**

1. **Love what you do.** Make your work a labor of love for your craft and your readers.
2. **Know your goals.** Have goals that inspire you to achieve them.
3. **Create content your readers love.** The holy trinity of content is reading, writing, and sharing.

**Community**

4. **Serve your communities.** Build and maintain networks of people who want to help you.
5. **Build your platform.** Develop continuing visibility with your communities.
6. **Test-market your work.** Prove the value of your work in as many ways as you can.
7. **Share your passion for your work.** Communicate the value of your work.

**Contentpreneuring**

8. **Be a contentpreneur.** Make selling, communicating, and re-purposing your content a business.
9. **Make people, planet, and profit the criteria for your actions.** Letting the effects of your efforts shape what you do will create an enduring literary ecosystem.
10. **Commit yourself to achieving your goals.** Devote your career to the holy trinity of content, community, and contentpreneuring.

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What’s in It for You?

Setting Your Personal, Literary, and Publishing Goals

You can sum up your short- and long-term goals and how you will achieve them by answering these sixteen questions. When possible, start your answers with the word “I.”

1. Why do you want to write?
2. What do you want to write—novels, nonfiction, children’s or YA books?
3. Which book(s) or author(s) is a model for you or your books?
4. Is there an author who is a model for the writer you would like to become?
5. What do you want your writing to communicate?
6. What do you want your writing to achieve?
7. What groups of readers are you writing for?
8. How many books do you want to write a year?
9. What advance would you like for your book?
10. How much money a year do you want to earn from your writing?
11. How and where do you want to live?
12. Do you want to write your book yourself, work with an editor, collaborate, or hire a ghostwriter?
13. Do you want to self-publish, pay to be published, or be paid to be published?
14. How will you support your writing until it supports you?
15. How will you use your success to serve others?
16. What literary legacy do you want to leave?

Put your answers up where you write. Read them if you become discouraged. Change them as you wish.

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Selling Your Idea for a Nonfiction Book: The Parts of a Proposal

Most proposals range from 35 to 50 pages and have three parts: **Overview**, **Outline**, and **Sample Chapter**. The first page of a proposal is the title page with the title of the book and your contact information. The second page is the table of contents for the proposal.

**Overview**

Your overview must prove that you have a salable idea and that you are the right person to write about it and promote it. Provide as much ammunition about you and your book as you can in whatever is the most effective order, including:

- The opening hook, ideally a paragraph, that will most excite editors about your subject

- The book hook:
  * The title and selling handle, up to fifteen words of selling copy about the book.
  * (Optional) If your credentials will significantly help sell the book, before the title, add an introductory phrase describing them, for example: “Based on an article in x / y years of research / y years as a z, [title of your book]...”
  * The book(s) or author(s) you’re using as models for your book
  * The estimated (or actual) length of your manuscript and when you will deliver it
  * The book’s benefits (optional)
  * Special features: e.g. illustrations, design elements, back matter (optional)
  * Information about a self-published edition (optional)

- **Markets:** The types of readers and retailers, organizations, or institutions who will be interested in your book. The size of each group and other information to show you know your audience and how to write the book for those readers. Other possible markets: schools, businesses, and subsidiary-rights markets such as film and foreign rights.

- **Platform:** A list in descending order of importance of whatever will impress editors about your visibility to your readers. Online, this may include numbers for subscribers to your blog, website visitors, your contacts on social networks, and online articles you’ve published.

  Offline, your platform may include the number of articles you’ve had published in print media, as well as the number of talks you give each year, the number of people you give them to, where you give them, and your media exposure. Editors won’t expect authors of quote books to have a platform; business authors must. For certain kinds of books, an author’s platform is important for big and midsize houses.
• **Bio**: Up to a page about yourself with information that isn’t in your platform, starting with the most important information. A link to a video version, up to two minutes long, of you giving the strongest information from the proposal with as much passion as you can.

• **Promotion**: A plan that begins: “To promote the book, the author will:…” followed by a bulleted list in descending order of impressiveness of what you will do to promote your book, online and off, during its crucial launch window and after. Start each part of the list with a verb and use impressive numbers, if possible. Publishers won’t expect big plans from novelists and memoirists, and the smaller the house you’ll be happy with, the less important your plan and platform are.

• **Comps**:

  --(Optional) A list of about six strongest competitors for your book in order of importance—not just bestsellers. In addition to the title, author, publisher, year of publication, page count, format, price, ISBN, include two phrases—each starting with a verb—about the competitor’s strengths and weaknesses. Add a sentence comparing your book to the competitor.

  --A list of about six books like yours that prove the market for your book

• (Optional) **Spin-Offs**: titles for up to three related follow-up books

• (Optional) **Foreword**: The commitment to write a foreword by someone whose name will give your book credibility and salability in fifty states two years from now. Obtain commitments for cover quotes as well, if you can. Provide names of the most helpful candidates, if you can’t get commitments.

• (Optional) **A Mission Statement**: One first-person paragraph about your passion or commitment to writing and promoting your book.

**Outline**

A page called “Table of Contents” listing the chapters and the back matter. Then one to three present-tense paragraphs about every chapter, using outline verbs like *describe, explain, and discuss*. For an informational book, you can use a bulleted, self-explanatory list of the information in the chapter.

**Sample Chapter**

The one chapter that will most excite editors by proving you will fulfill your book’s promise to readers and make your book as enjoyable to read as it is illuminating. Include about 10 percent of the book, about 25 pages. Memoirs should be finished. Agents and editors will expect more chapters and to be able to read the whole manuscript.

---Michael Larsen, adapted from *How to Write a Book Proposal*

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The S Theory of Storytelling:

Compelling Fiction and Narrative Nonfiction Readers to Turn the Page

The first page sells the book. The last page sells the next book. –Mickey Spillane

Agents, editors and book buyers only read far enough to make a decision. If they don’t like what they read on page one, they won’t turn the page. Browsers may not read the second sentence of a book in a bookstore. This leads to “The S Theory of Storytelling” for fiction and narrative nonfiction that writers want to read like novels:

Style
Story
Setting
Someone
Something
Something Said
or Something Else

on page one must be compelling enough to make agents, editors, and book buyers turn the page.

Every word you write is an audition to get your readers to read the next word. Every line you write must convince your readers to read the next line. Every page you write must arouse enough interest to keep readers turning the pages, and you face that challenge on every page you write except the last one. The last page must make readers want to read your next book.

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Making Your Work Rejection-Proof:

How 8 Kinds of Readers Can Help You Make Every Word Count

1. **Friends and family:** You need and deserve encouragement; let your friends and family give it to you. They will tell you they like your work because they like you. What are friends and family for?

2. **Writers:** Tell writers you will critique their work. This will give you experience improving prose and help you build a community of writers willing to return the favor.

3. **A writing group:** Join or start a writing group, online or off—that meets regularly to discuss its members’ work, so you can get feedback as you write. Working with more experienced writers than yourself will prove more productive than working with less experienced writers. Being able to give and receive constructive criticism is crucial. You may have to try more than one group until you find one that gives you what you need and whose members will benefit from your advice.

4. **Potential buyers of your book:** They may not be experts on writing or on the subject, but they know what they like. Would they buy your book if they found it in a bookstore? Try to enlist knowledgeable booksellers—who you also want to buy your book—to render an opinion at least on your idea, title, and promotion plan. (The better customer you are, the more likely they’ll oblige.)

5. **Well-read, objective readers:** They know good writing.

6. **Experts in your field:** Approach people who know what you’re writing about, including authors of books like yours. If you’re presenting a controversial idea, find people who oppose it to go over your work to try to poke holes in it. You may not convert them, but you might earn their respect and avoid embarrassing yourself later.

7. **A devil’s advocate:** Find a mentor who is the most valuable of all readers, the most critical critic, whose taste and judgment you respect, and in whose knowledge you have absolute confidence. A devil’s advocate is a word wizard who can combine truth with charity, analyze the structure and development of your book, and spot every word, punctuation mark, idea, character, and incident that can be improved or removed.

8. **A freelance editor:** Find an editor who has either worked for the kind of publisher or edited like books yours that were published by the kind of house you want for your book. But don’t just rely on an editor. The more readers you have, the better.

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From Me to We:
Crowdsourcing Your Success by Building Engaged, Win-Win Communities

- **Your personal community:** your family, friends, and relatives
- **Your test-marketing community:** people who give you feedback on every aspect of your work
- **Your publishing community:** authors, publishers, publicists, experts on the kind of books you’re writing, and booksellers with whom you can talk shop
- **Your promotion community:** everyone who helps you promote your book
- **Your community of collaborators:** people to help you monetize your work
- **Your community of mentors:** professionals you can count on for advice
- **Your media network:** people who give you time and space, online and off
- **Your bookselling community:** booksellers who welcome you when you tour and who display your books to greatest advantage
- **Your Net community:** a network of techies who help you with technology
- **Your speaking community:** speakers, audiences, clients, bureaus, and members of speaker’s organizations
- **Your travel community:** people around the country who tell you about local media, booksellers, and literary events, and give you a place to stay
- **Your community of fans:** people who follow you online, read your work, and attend your events, and buy whatever you sell
- **Your street-team community:** people who adore you and your work, and champion you and your books every chance they get, online and off
- **Your mastermind network:** five-to-nine people with varying business expertise who meet every two weeks, on the phone or in person, and serve as the board of directors for each other, sharing advice
- **Your community of causes:** institutions and causes you’re passionate about with which you share your time, money, and energy

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Building a Platform to the Stars:

Creating Worldwide Visibility from Your Desk

* Read books and articles in trade and consumer magazines, online and off, websites, blogs, e-zines, and forums to build your communities of writers and experts, and become an authority on your subject or the kind of novel you’re writing.

* Participate in social media, forums, message boards, chat rooms, and groups in your field.

* Write a blog; an e-newsletter; articles for trade, consumer and academic print and online media; reviews; op-ed pieces; letters to the editor; postings to blogs in your field; a self-syndicated column and articles; articles for websites that email them to their mailing lists; contributions for Wikipedia; videos you produce and post; your media and speaker’s kit.

* Give talks, classes, seminars, webinars, teleseminars, teleconferences, and workshops; do consulting, coaching, and training at businesses, nonprofits, conferences, and conventions; podcast your book. If you want to be a speaker, join Toastmasters; if you want to be a pro, join the National Speaker’s Association. When you’re ready, send your speaker’s kit to nonprofits, speaker’s bureaus, meeting planners, and other people who can hire you to speak.

* Appear in print, broadcast, and electronic trade and consumer media or on a radio or television show you create, online or off.

* Build relationships with organizations, event organizers, and people in the media, academia, government, and professionals in your field who can help you.

* Maintain a website that: provides a go-to source of information about your field; continually increases opportunities for visitors to learn and enjoy themselves; gives them the chance to give you feedback on the site and your work; hosts your updated speaking and media kits, including a list of speaking and media appearances, your articles, testimonials, and audio and video links.

* Build an email list and a community of people in your field who will give or sell you access to their list.

* Win contests, awards, and prizes.

* Build your ranking on search engines.

* Participate in and lead community, writing, and professional organizations.

* Partner with a business, nonprofit or foundation.

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Taking the Guesswork Out of Publishing:

12 Ways to Test-Market Your Book to Prove It Will Sell

1. **Test-market your idea:** Try it out on your communities of writers, booksellers, and book buyers to gauge its potential against past and future competition.

2. **Test-market your book title, chapter titles, and content:** a blog, a website, articles, talks, videos, podcasts, and social media will provide feedback and help build a community of fans eager to buy your book.

3. **Test-market your nonfiction proposal and manuscript:** Create a community of readers who can give you the feedback you need as you write and after you’re done to make sure every word is right, and your writing has the impact you desire. Have your readers grade your work on a scale of one to ten, both as a reading experience and, if applicable, its impact on their lives or thinking. Ask them to grade everything you want to be funny, moving, insightful, or inspirational, and the whole proposal or manuscript on a scale of one to ten.

4. **Test-market your book by self-publishing it:** If you can write your book before you sell it, and you have ways to sell it, prove it will sell by self-publishing it.

5. **Test-market your ability to get a foreword and endorsements:** Having a foreword and cover quotes from people whose names will give your book credibility and salability around the country on publication will help you and your publisher sell it. You can use your proposal or manuscript to get quotes or the commitment to give them.

6. **Test-market your website:** Make sure it's effective as soon as you can and is attracting as many visitors as possible. Use the sites of authors and professionals in your field as models.
7. **Test-market your promotion plan:** Here are six ways to do it:

- Share your plan with your communities to help ensure it will enable you to achieve your goals for the book.
- Once your book is in stores, test your campaign in your city or the nearest major market to see if it generates publicity and sales.
- Integrate what you learn from your first city into your plan and your promotion materials to make them more effective.
- Or start by promoting your book to its core audience. If you’ve written a self-help book that will interest psychologists as well as the general public, consider trying to get psychologists, the core audience for the book, excited about it first, so they will recommend it to their patients.
- Use what you learn from your first city to launch a regional campaign, then, if you can, go national with it.
- Create a timeline for carrying out your promotion plan and get feedback on it.

8. **Test-market a series with the first book:** If you are proposing a series of books, the fate of the second one depends on the sale of the first.

9. **Test-market your identity:** How you think, write, speak, dress, act, communicate, and relate to people are aspects of your identity as a writer and a person. You need an identity that is: durable, flexible enough to encompass what you want to do, commercial enough to achieve your financial goals, authentic, and ideally, original.

10. **Test-market your brand:** Either you or your books will become your brand. The experience your work provides and all of the ways you communicate can become an ever more effective way of selling what you create.

11. **Test-market your goals:** One way to evaluate your efforts is by answering this question: Do they help you achieve your short- and long-term personal, literary, and publishing goals?

12. **Test-market your commitment to your book, your writing, and your career:** These opportunities to test-market your work also test your commitment. If they make you give up, they’re telling you to realign your goals and what you’re willing to do to achieve them.

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The Big Apple 5

America's literary industrial complex includes five multimedia, multinational conglomerates that dominate trade publishing:


- Hachette Book Group, USA owns Little Brown and Company and Grand Central Publishing, which has ten imprints

- Macmillan U.S. includes Henry Holt and Company; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; and St. Martin's Press, which includes Tor, Picador, Griffin, and Thomas Dunne Books

- Simon & Schuster, which includes Pocket Books, Scribner, Touchstone, and Atria Books.

They all have audio and children’s divisions, and do E-books, and inspirational books.

Midsize New York houses that contribute to the New York Times bestseller list: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; W. W. Norton; Perseus, which has 13 imprints and is a major distributor for other publishers; and Workman Publishing, which includes Algonquin Books.

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The Invisible Book Chain:

An Overview of the Publishing Process

You write your proposal or manuscript.

You or your agent submits your book.

Your editor likes it enough to do a proposal to buy it.

An editor-in-chief or editorial board decides whether to buy it and for how much.

You sign a contract and receive the first part of your advance against royalties.

If you sold your book with a proposal, you write your book.

Your editor edits your book.

You respond to your editor’s suggestions.

Your editor accepts your manuscript.

You receive the second part of your advance.

Your editor sends your book to the production department.

The production department outsources the copyediting.

You respond to your copyeditor’s comments.

The art department creates or outsources the interior design and the cover for a paperback and ebook or the hardcover jacket.

In a series of launch meetings, your editor and the sales, marketing, publicity, and advertising departments:

- position your book on one of your publisher’s seasonal lists.
- create a trade and consumer-marketing strategy.
- choose the print, broadcast, and electronic trade and consumer media to carry out the strategy.
- prepare sales materials for sales conferences.

Throughout the rest of the process, your agent and your publisher try to sell subsidiary rights.

Your book and the plans for it are presented to the sales reps.
Sales reps sell your book to on- and offline bookstores, distributors, wholesalers, specialty stores, warehouse clubs, and mass-market distributors; and to school, college, and public libraries.

Your publisher’s education department sells books with adoption potential.

Your publisher’s special-sales department sells books with premium and bulk-sales potential.

The production department arranges for your book to be printed.

Your publisher’s warehouse receives books from the printer, ships orders, and later receives returns.

Your publisher’s advertising and publicity departments:

- do prepublication promotion.
- send out review copies of your book.

Your book is published and has a brief launch window in which to generate momentum because of reviews, promotion, handselling by independent booksellers, reading groups, and social media, including Goodreads.

Readers learn about your book in a bookstore, in a library, from on- and offline media, a reading group, a review, or a friend. They read it, love it, and tell others they must read it.

Your publisher promotes your book for as long as sales justify it.

You promote your book for as long as you want it to sell.

Reprint meetings decide when to:

- reprint and how many copies.
- sell or remainder part or all the stock if sales are too low.
- put your book out of print, at which time you can ask for the rights back and republish it.

You write the proposal or manuscript for your next book.

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What Good is a Publisher?

Berrett-Koehler President and Publisher Steve Piersanti

Some observers question what value publishers offer and whether authors would be better off self-publishing their books, given that the authors, more than their publishers, will drive sales. The case for self-publishing is further strengthened by today’s ability of authors to reach the marketplace through Amazon.com, the new social media, and the authors' own websites.

Self-publishing is the best avenue for many books, and I often encourage authors to go this route -- particularly when they are able to sell many copies of their books through their own channels. However, a good commercial publisher still brings tremendous value to the book publishing equation in multiple ways:

1. **Gatekeeper and Curator:** In today’s insanely crowded marketplace with an overwhelming number of publications competing for our attention, publishers select and focus attention on books of particular value and quality, thereby helping those books stand out. The validation, visibility, and brand provided by publishers add great value to those books.

2. **Editorial Development:** Berrett-Koehler raises the editorial quality of each book in several ways, including extensive up-front coaching of authors to improve the focus, organization, and content; detailed reviews of the manuscript by potential customers to make the book more useful to its intended audience; and professional line-by-line copyediting. Such editorial development is often pivotal to a book’s success.

3. **Design:** Self-published books often stand out in a negative way because their covers and interiors appear under-designed (or overdesigned). Some self-published books lack the professional and appropriate appearance that good publishers bring to books.

4. **Production:** Although authors can now produce books on their own computers, publishers can save authors a lot of work while bringing higher quality to layout, proofreading, indexing, packaging, and other aspects of production.

5. **Distribution:** Publishers can usually make books available through many more channels (trade and college bookstores, multiple online booksellers, wholesalers, and other venues not open to self-publishing companies) than authors can on their own.
6. **International Sales:** Berrett-Koehler’s books are sold around the world through distributors in Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and New Zealand, and Canada.

7. **Networks of Customers:** Berrett-Koehler brings books to the attention of our networks of individual customers, institutional customers, bulk sales customers, association book services, catalog sellers, other special sales accounts, and countless other groups. We have been building up these networks for eighteen years, and they add lots of value in helping books to succeed.

8. **Publicity and Promotion:** Although the publicity and promotion efforts of authors may actually exceed those of their publishers, publishers still reach many prospective buyers that authors cannot reach on their own. This is particularly true for a publisher like Berrett-Koehler that has a multichannel marketing system that combines online, direct mail, bookstore, publicity, social media, e-newsletter, website, special sales, conference sales, and other channels of marketing for each new book.

9. **Foreign Translation Rights, Audio Rights, Digital Rights, and Other Subsidiary Rights Sales:** This is an area of great focus and success for Berrett-Koehler (with over two thousand subsidiary rights agreements signed thus far) and helps books to reach many more audiences than the publication of just the English-language print edition. Authors also receive extra revenue, a higher profile, and greater satisfaction when their books are published in a variety of languages.

10. **Coaching:** Perhaps the greatest value provided by publishers is less tangible than the previous items on this list. Just as coaching regarding a book’s content and organization can be pivotal to its success, so too can a publisher’s coaching on the title, price, design, format, timing, market focus, marketing campaign, and even tie-in to the author’s business strategies make a big difference in whether a book succeeds.

Working with good publishers is a partnership. For books to succeed, authors and publishers must collaborate in many ways. For example, the publishers set the table through their marketing channels, but whether the books actually move in those channels often depends on the marketing that the authors carry out.

To receive Berrett-Koehler’s excellent newsletter, visit www.bkpub.com.

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2020 Visions: 9 Guesses About the Future of Publishing

1. Successful writers will be CEOs of one-person, multimedia, multinational conglomerates who crowdsource their needs with a community of collaborators and rely on word of mouse to make their work sell.

2. Agents will be Executive VPs of their clients’ conglomerates, mentors who help them maximize their visibility and income.

3. The five conglomerates who dominate trade publishing will be fewer in number and smaller in size, and will survive by empowering their writers and devoting themselves to what they do best: editing, design, and marketing.

4. Publishers will start a nonprofit Amazon in which publishers fulfill print orders.

5. Because updating ebooks and integrating all media into them will be easy, enhanced ebooks will be huge, and readers will judge writers by their ability to tell a story so compellingly that awareness of medium and technique disappears.

6. Fans will communicate with authors at teleconferences and download autographs.

7. Barnes & Noble’s superstores will be gone. A growing network independent booksellers around the country will thrive for four reasons:

   --They will use different business models, including being community-supported nonprofits like other cultural institutions, such as PBS, museums, symphony orchestras, and dance and opera companies. They may be in libraries.

   --They will be Amazons that always have the book you want because they will have EBMs, Espresso Book Machines, that store books and print a book in a minute.

   --They will be even more needed as community centers (and a respite from staring at screens) that respond to their community’s needs and tastes, provide events and classes, and serve as a meeting place for reading and writing groups and community organizations.

   --Readers will understand that a quarter of every dollar spent in a chain store leaves the community while indies spend that income in the community.

8. Readers will again understand that when it comes to media, it’s not either/or, it’s both and. Books will continue to do what only they can. Concern about design will make books more beautiful than ever. In a high-tech, visual culture, the physical and literary pleasures books provide will be more needed and appreciated than ever.

9. Fifteen billion web-enabled devices will help unite the human family. Their potential for communication, creativity, collaboration, commerce, and creating community will unleash endless possibilities for writers and publishers.

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14 Ways to Excite Agents and Editors About Your Book

1. Your query letter
2. Your idea
3. How timely your idea is
4. Your writing
5. Your first page
6. You
7. Your test-marketing
8. Your platform
9. Your communities
10. Your promotion plan
11. Your book’s promotion potential
12. The markets for your book
13. Your future books
14. Your pitch

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The Hook, the Book & the Cook:

The 3 Parts of an Irresistible Query Letter

Agent Katharine Sands believes that the writing you do about your writing is as important as the writing itself. A query is a one-page, single-spaced letter with three or four indented paragraphs with a space between each of them. Without sounding self-serving, it explains why, what, and who: the hook, the book, and the cook:

1. **The Hook:** whatever will best justify reading your work

   * (Optional) A selling quote about your book (or a previous book) from someone whose name will give it credibility and/or salability. The quote could also be about you.

   * (Optional) The reason you’re writing the agent or editor:
     --the name of someone who suggested you contact the agent
     --the book in which the author thanked the person you’re contacting
     --where you heard the agent speak
     --where you will hear the agent or editor speak and hope to have the chance to discuss your book

   * Whatever will most excite agents about your book:
     --the opening paragraph
     --the most compelling fact or idea about your subject
     --a statistic about the interest of people or the media in the subject or the number of potential readers

2. **The Book:** the essence of your book

   * A sentence with the title and the selling handle for the book, up to fifteen words that will convince booksellers to stock it.

   * The model(s) for it: one or two books, movies, or authors that convey your literary and publishing goals: “It’s Harry Potter meets Twilight.”

   * A one-sentence overview of your book and, if appropriate, what it will do for your readers

   * The book’s biggest market(s)

   * Its actual or estimated length

   * The length of your proposal and how many more pages of manuscript you have ready to send
* (Optional) The names of people, if they’re impressive, who have agreed to give you a foreword and cover quotes

* (Optional) A link to illustrations, if they’re important

* (Optional) If you’re proposing a series, the subjects or titles of the next two books

* (Optional) Information about a self-published edition that will help sell it

3. **The Cook:** Why you’re the right person to write the book

* Your promotion plan: the three most effective things you will do to promote your book, online and off, with numbers, if they’re impressive

* Your platform: the most important things you have done and are doing to give yourself continuing visibility with potential readers, with numbers if they’re impressive: your online activities, published work with links to it, and media and speaking experience with links to audio and video

* (Optional) Your credentials; years of research; experience, positions, prizes, contests, and awards in your field

* A link to a video up to two minutes long that enables you to make the case for the book and you as the author

Front-load the letter by putting what is most impressive as close to the beginning as you can, and include anything else that will convince agents or editors to ask to see your work.
The 12 Parts of a Perfect Pitch for a Nonfiction Book

Pitching a nonfiction book takes less than thirty seconds. The goal: generate maximum excitement in as few words as possible. Without being self-serving, you must capture the essence of your book, why it will appeal to book buyers, and what’s most impressive about your platform, promotion plan, and credentials.

Books are either prose-driven or promotion-driven. Platform and promotion aren’t as important for certain kinds of books such as reference books, or for academic presses, or for small, niche, or midsize houses outside of New York.

Half of the twelve parts of a pitch are optional; you may not need them. Here’s how to excite agents and editors at Big Apple houses:

1. A sentence with the title (and subtitle, if needed) and up to fifteen words that prove your book is unique and salable
2. The model(s) for your book: one or two books, movies, or authors--“It’s *The Tipping Point* meets *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.”
3. (Optional) A narrative nonfiction book, such as a memoir, requires two or three sentences about the time, setting, and the story
4. The most impressive aspect of your platform: what you are doing to give yourself continuing visibility on the subject, online or off, with potential book buyers, and if the number is impressive, how many of them, and where. Wrong: “I give talks.” Right: “I give X talks a year to Y people in major markets.”
5. The most impressive one-to-three things you will do to promote your book, online or off, and how many of them, if the number is impressive.
6. The length of your proposal
7. The actual or estimated length of your manuscript
8. (Optional) The names, and if necessary identification, of people who will provide a foreword and cover quotes, if they’re impressive
9. (Optional) Mention if you’re proposing a series of up to three books.
10. (Optional) Information about a self-published edition that will help sell it
11. Your most impressive credentials: your track record; experience in your field; years of research; prizes; contests; awards
12. (Optional) Anything else that will impress agents or editors

Like the overview of your proposal, these elements are the building blocks of your pitch. Arrange them in whatever order will give them the most impact. *How to Write a Book Proposal* discusses platform and promotion.

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Pushing the Envelope:

9 Steps for Selling Your Book Yourself

1. Make sure your proposal or manuscript is ready to submit.

2. Ask your writing community about their experiences with editors and publishers.

3. Research publishers in bookstores and directories, through their catalogs, and on their websites to make a list of editors and publishers.

4. To prepare a list of editors, use directories, acknowledgments in books, and calls to publishers to verify that editors are still there. Email authors and ask them about their experiences with their publishers.

5. Follow publishers’ submission guidelines email or snail mail, with a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE), a one-page query letter to up to about fifteen editors at a time simultaneously, letting them know you’re contacting other editors.

6. Email or snail mail, with a SASE, a multiple submission of your proposal or partial manuscript, following publishers’ guidelines and letting editors know that other publishers have it. If the first submission doesn’t work, keep doing them.

7. Submit your work, impeccably prepared, in a professional way following publishers’ guidelines in directories and on their websites.

8. Research when to expect a response, and if you don’t receive one, follow up by phone, email, or snail mail until you do.

9. Get professional help with the contract from writer’s organizations, the Web, books, or from an agent or intellectual property attorney at an hourly rate.

Then celebrate!

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Locating the Agent Who’s Looking for You:

9 Ways to Find the Agent You Need

1. **Your writing community:** Writers and other publishing pros can recommend agents.

2. **The Web:** Blogs, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, other social media, Google, agents’ websites, databases such as publishersmarketplace.com, agentresearch.com, firstwriter.com, authorlink.com, and agentquery.com, which lists 2,000 agents.

3. **The Association of Authors’ Representatives (AAR):** The 450 agents in AAR are the best source of experienced, reputable agents. Members are required to follow the AAR’s code of ethics. The directories talked about in number six below indicate when an agent is a member, aaronline.org.

4. **Writers’ organizations:** They’re listed online and in *Literary Market Place*.

5. **Literary events:** Writing classes, readings, lectures, seminars, book signings, conferences, and book festivals are opportunities to meet and learn about agents.

6. **Directories:** *Jeff Herman’s Insider’s Guide to Book Publishers, Editors, and Literary Agents; Guide to Literary Agents; Literary Marketplace (LMP).* Directories vary in the kind and amount of information they provide, so check what different ones include about the same agency.

7. **Magazines:** *Publishers Weekly, The Writer, Writer’s Digest,* and *Poets & Writers* have articles by and about agents. If you don’t want to splurge on a subscription to *Publishers Weekly,* read it at the library. There’s a free condensation of it available at publishersweekly.com.

8. **Books:** Check the dedication and acknowledgment pages of books like yours.

9. **Your platform:** Let agents find you—be visible online and off, get published and give talks, publicize your work and yourself. When you’re visible enough, agents will find you.

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8 Steps to Getting an Agent

1. **Find a salable idea.**

2. **Write your proposal or manuscript.** The only time to contact agents is when you have something ready to sell.

3. **Research potential agents online and off.**

4. **Write an irresistible one-page query letter.** Then email it to up to fifteen agents simultaneously, but don’t include the list of agents as recipients in an email. If you want to approach thirty agents, write to ten or fifteen at a time. You may receive helpful feedback that will enable you to strengthen your query letter or your work.

   Get feedback on the letter, and have someone proofread it before you send it. If you’re mailing it, include a stamped-self-addressed #10 business envelope (SASE) for a response. If you don’t, mention you only expect a response if the agent is interested.

5. **Follow the submission guidelines of the agents you contact.** Don’t call or email to see if your work arrived or when you will get a response. Established agents receive thousands of submissions a year and don’t keep a log. Make a note on your calendar or your copy of your query letter of when the agents’ guidelines say you will hear from them and call or email them if you don't. If it’s important for you to know that snail mail arrived, send it certified or get a return receipt.

   If you’re mailing your work, and you don't need the material back, include a #10 business envelop SASE for a response.

6. **Meet interested agents to test the chemistry for your working marriage.** Look at the challenge of finding and keeping an agent as creating and sustaining a marriage that has personal and professional aspects to it.

7. **Read the agent’s agreement.** Make sure you’ll feel comfortable signing it, and feel free to ask questions about it.

8. **Choose the best agent for you.** The criteria: passion, personality, performance, and experience.

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Bio

Michael Larsen and his wife and partner Elizabeth Pomada worked in publishing in New York before moving to San Francisco in 1970 and starting Larsen-Pomada Literary Agents in 1972. They are members of the Association of Authors’ Representatives and have sold hundreds of books to more than 100 publishers and imprints. They are as eager as ever to find promising new writers.

Mike handles adult nonfiction and also has a consulting service for nonfiction writers he can’t help as an agent. Mike is the author of the fourth edition of How to Write a Book Proposal, which has sold more than 100,000 copies. He also wrote How to Get a Literary Agent, now in its third edition, and with Jay Conrad Levinson, Rick Frishman, and David Hancock, is coauthor of the second edition of Guerrilla Marketing for Writers: 100 Weapons for Selling Your Work.

Elizabeth and Michael are coauthors of the six books in the Painted Ladies series about Victorian houses, which sparked a national movement and have sold more than 500,000 copies. The trade journal Publishers Weekly chose the second book in the series, Daughters of Painted Ladies: America’s Resplendent Victorians, as one of the best books of the year.

Mike and Elizabeth speak for writer’s organizations and conferences. Michael gives talks and seminars based on “The 10 Commandments for Becoming a Successful Writer,” a humor-filled, inspirational, comprehensive, state-of-the-art overview of writing, publishing, and building a career.

Mike and Elizabeth are co-directors of the San Francisco Writers Conference, the San Francisco Writing for Change Conference, and San Francisco Writers University.