

9 Mistakes Beginning Nonfiction Authors Make and How to Avoid Them

by Laura Orsini



It's never been easier to write a book than it is today. With the advent of print-on-demand and self-publishing, almost anyone can throw a book together — a real bound book, with pages and everything — for a few hundred bucks. This news should be encouraging, because there's no reason you shouldn't author the book you've always dreamed of writing.

The question, though, is whether it will be a book anyone other than your mother wants to read. Beginning nonfiction authors frequently make the same sorts of errors. While avoiding these errors won't guarantee that your book will become a best-seller (there are far too many variables for anyone to *ever* guarantee that), it will give you a considerable head-start over other neophyte authors.

What follows is a list of some of the most common errors beginning nonfiction authors make, and ways you can avoid them.

1. **Failing to determine who your niche audience is, and if/where they buy books.** You're writing a book, so presumably you have a message. But do you know who will receive that message? Do you know who your audience is? Do you know where they spend time, and if or where they buy books? Is your niche audience comprised mostly of men? More than 80 percent of books are purchased by women . . . so if your audience is mainly male, do they read, or have women in their lives who buy books for them?

Become intimately acquainted with your audience before you get too far into the writing of your book, and make sure you know who you are writing to. It's sometimes helpful to write to *one* person. You do this by defining the entirety of your reader's demographics. First, determine his or her gender. Then give him a name, like Stan, Joe, Sally, or Phyllis. Determine exactly how old he or she is. Where do they live? What do they drive? What do they do for a living, and how much do they earn? Married? Kids? Hobbies? Religious affiliation? Political persuasion? Paint as complete a picture as possible. Giving such specific characteristics to your reader will help you determine what to include in — and exclude from — your book.

2. **Writing what you want to write, as opposed to what your market wants to read.** Remember, we're talking nonfiction here. But even with fiction, if you write obscure, esoteric stuff that holds interest for only one crotchety, tenured 14th century literature professor at the University of Iowa, you'll have a nice little book that you, your mom, and Professor Snodgrass can enjoy.

The thing is, in order for a book to be born, you must have an idea that is exciting enough, first, to hold your interest (does it energize you so much that you *can't wait* to do the necessary research and legwork?) — but that will also hold the interest of your niche audience. The problem is that we often get so carried away with how great our idea is that we forget to find out if anyone else (i.e., our readers) also thinks it's a great idea . . . and provided they do, that they think it's a great enough idea to pay us some of their hard-earned cash for the privilege of reading our words.

Before you go through all the time, effort, and expense to write this book, you absolutely must find out if there's a market for it. Visit forums, Web sites, chatrooms, [Facebook](#) groups, blogs on your subject. Read every article you can get your hands on, and talk with specialists.

3. **Skipping the due diligence.** This is a *BIG* one. You've done your research and know there is a need for your book, but have you checked to see what else is out there on this subject? Have you looked at those books? Bought those books? Read those books?

This is a scary step for a lot of people — it's the place where they become intimidated (“Look how many books have already been written about garlic presses! Who am I to write another one?”) and often decide not to write their book at all. That's *not* the intent with this directive. However, the fact is that unless you're performing cutting-edge scientific research or are the first to write a tell-all book about an emerging celebrity or the latest victim of our scandal-driven mass media, the chances that no one has ever written *some* sort of a book on your subject are very small. That's why this step is so important. You absolutely *MUST* do the research to find out which other similar books are already in the stores, cover the same topic (general and specific), or have been written in the past.

This is for your own good. Let's say you have an idea for a new motivational book about two hamsters named Argue and Resist. It's a clever little parable, a quirky story about these cute little guys who have a hard time dealing with change. One, let's say it's Resist, manages to turn the corner on change much more quickly than his pal, Argue. He learns that in reality, you must change or die. It's a clever enough idea for a book. However, you will never sell a single copy. Why? You probably already know the answer, unless you've been living under a rock for the last decade or so. But in the unlikely event that you somehow missed *Who Moved My Cheese?* — through your due diligence, you would discover that your clever little idea has already been raking in the big bucks since 1999.

Does this mean you should not write a cute motivational book in parable form? Not at all. It just means that you would need to go back to the drawing board to come up with new characters in a new situation, perhaps learning a different lesson — or a particular facet of this lesson — or achieving a slightly different result from learning the same lesson.

This also would be true of your brand new marketing concept; real estate investing book; how-to manual for baby-boomer job seekers; explanation about the spiritual, holistic side of financial planning; or almost any other subject under the sun. It's likely there are other books out there on your subject, so you have to find out how yours is both different from *and* similar to the existing books. This will help you (a) determine the specific audience for your book, (b) sell your book to an agent or a traditional publisher, and/or (c) create a successful marketing strategy for your book. The other thing this research will accomplish is to let you know how well books on this theme, of this type, or in this general genre are selling right now. Are people still willing to plunk down a C-note for a coffee table book, or would a smaller, less costly gift book be more likely to fly off the shelves?

Once you've covered the basics of determining who your specific audience is, understanding exactly what they want to read, and knowing what other similar books already exist, it's time to begin strategizing the business angles of your book. Beginning nonfiction authors frequently err in judgment when it comes to the practical, business, and fiscal components of creating your book.

4. **Not understanding the difference between traditional publishing and self-publishing.** In traditional publishing, there are three primary parties involved: the author, the agent, and the publishing company. The author writes the material; the agent acts as the author's representative and sells the material to a publisher; the publisher is the money behind the project and is responsible for distribution of the book into brick-and-mortar stores as well as online distribution channels.

The publisher also sometimes handles certain marketing responsibilities for the book, including its listing in appropriate catalogues and other resources. The scope of the publisher's marketing efforts will depend largely on the author's credentials and renown. If they are already a well-known name with a big following, the publisher will be much more likely to take a risk than they would be for a first-time author with very little name or brand recognition.

In certain cases, the publisher will offer the author an "advance" — money paid to the writer in before the book is even completed. This is a gamble, really, on the part of the publisher, because it assumes the book will sell enough copies to both cover the advance and be profitable to the publishing company.

Alternately, when you self-publish, you assume all the risk — financial and otherwise — yourself. The good news is that when you self-publish, you get to do it your way. You select the title. You determine what the cover looks like. And you keep a much greater percentage of the profits. The outlay on your part, however, can be substantial.

Hard costs can involve any or all of the following: ghostwriting, editing, cover design, interior design, proofreading, ISBN, copyright, proofs, printing, binding, shipping, distribution, Web design, e-commerce capabilities, marketing, attorneys' fees. To do it properly, the costs can be considerable. Anyone thinking about writing a book who plans to sell more than a couple dozen copies to family and friends must realize that a book is a business.

While there are no hard numbers available for self-published books, a quick perusal of the article archives at writing-world.com confirms that between 5,000 and 10,000 books are printed each year by the major vanity presses (a publisher that publishes a book at the author's complete expense), such as Xlibris, iUniverse, and the like.

5. **Failing to understand that a book is a business.** As mentioned above, a well-written book that will actually appeal to people and sell more than a handful of copies must be treated as a business. This means incorporating all the steps involved in starting any new business. A budget, a business plan (generally speaking, a well-written [book proposal](#) will suffice), a Web site equipped with e-commerce, and a thorough marketing plan are a few of the main components involved in a successful "book business." Our goal here is not to stamp all the enjoyment out of your writing project. Certainly you can and should have fun with your book. But if you have any intent to see it widely read and distributed, you must set out with a realistic attitude about exactly what is involved in taking your idea from conception to publication to dollars in your pocket.

Do not make the mistake of thinking this book will make you rich — the likelihood is that it won't. That's not to say you shouldn't write it, or that your book will not be a financial success for you — but you must be prepared to lay out some serious cash first, particularly for a self-published title. Generally speaking, if you recoup your expenses within the first year, your book has been "successful." With a great concept, proper marketing, and a real business plan to which you are willing to adhere, you can supersede this goal and actually make money from your book, but it will require a substantial time and energy commitment on your part.

6. **Neglecting to create a realistic timeline.** One major place where new authors get tripped up is in understanding how long the writing/publishing process takes. First, there are the research components mentioned above. Next, there's the actual writing process. Unless you are as disciplined as Gandhi, you have to plan for distractions. This likely means creating a dedicated writing space and/or carving out a specified writing time. If you're not independently wealthy or haven't already sold your book to a publisher for a healthy advance, chances are you will be writing this book around your existing job and amidst life's many demands (job, spouse, kids, parents, social commitments, civic commitments, religious commitments, errands, pets, etc.). Oh my goodness . . . where are you possibly going to find the time to write a book?

This is why you absolutely must create a timeline and find a way to carve out dedicated writing time. Otherwise, your book will never take top priority for you. It will always remain just another great idea, a hobby, or something that hovers somewhere on your "someday" list.

How much time you can dedicate to your writing project will differ for each person. But even if you can afford only two hours a week for dedicated writing time, schedule that time. Write on your calendar or enter it into your PDA. Make a sign for the door: "Do Not Disturb — Mommy's Wearing Her Author Hat Until 2 p.m." Get up an hour earlier. Stay up an hour later. Write during your lunch hour. Think about getting a digital recorder and "talking" your book; you can always have it transcribed later. Find a coach or an accountability

partner . . . someone who checks in with you once a week to see how much progress you've made. Do whatever works for you – but you **MUST** create a timeline for your writing project and find a way to stick to it.

Once your book is written, though, you're really only halfway there — unless your only dream was to write it, and you couldn't give a flying Fig Newton if you ever sell a copy. Most authors do care about selling their work, though. Even if you are the Bob Ross of nonfiction writing, you still must factor in all the components that come *after* the writing is complete. These include editing, cover design, layout and interior design, proofreading, and printing, to name a few of the basics.

While it's pretty much guaranteed that your timeline will change, you must have one if you want to have any idea how all the pieces will dovetail, once the production process gets underway.

Once your book is written and you've determined that you will be self-publishing, there are a few serious errors you are going to want to steer clear of.

7. **Thinking you don't need an editor.** Even the best writer needs a second pair of impartial, well-trained eyes to look over their work before sending it out into the wide, wide world. The reason being that as the author, you are too close to your work to see it objectively. Are there any holes in your points or arguments? Are the introduction and conclusion as strong as they could be?

Editors provide feedback, sharpen the focus, and turn an already strong piece of writing into a stellar piece of writing. While you might have a great story to tell or have incredible information to share with the world, you also might struggle with getting the words out of your head. Or, perhaps you're talented at outlining your overall concepts, but you need some help fleshing out the ideas, or finessing the language to make it as clear and compelling as possible. These issues are nothing to be ashamed of — but they are signs that you will definitely benefit from working with a qualified editor.

Think about it. Michael Jordan once was asked how he became the best basketball player in the world. Did he chalk it all up to raw talent? His answer might surprise some folks: "I had great coaches." Likewise, great writers have good editors behind them. A good editor can make all the difference between a book that should be used as fireplace kindling and the next viral marketing success like *Unleashing the Ideavirus*. (No disrespect to [Seth Godin](#) — I'm sure he's a brilliant writer whose work needs very little editing.)

8. **Designing your own cover — or having a friend design it for you.** A lot of first-time, self-published authors, in an attempt to conserve money, forego the investment in a graphic designer with book cover expertise. This is a HUGE mistake.

According to [selfpublishingresources.com](#), 225 out of 300 booksellers surveyed (half from independent bookstores and half from chains) identified the look and design of the book cover as the most important component of the entire book. All agreed that the jacket is the prime real estate for promoting a book.

Although not all books are sold in bookstores, at least 50 percent still are. But if you want to have a prayer of your book making it onto the bookstore shelf, retailers and reviewers will be the first to see it, and make their determinations about your magnum opus based on just a few seconds' glance at the cover. And in the bookstore, a shopper will spend an average of just 8 seconds looking at the front cover and 14 seconds on the back cover. *This is a total of less than a half-minute to decide if your book is even worth flipping through!* If you do not have a professional image that is congruent with your contents, you will very often miss the sale.

A professionally designed cover will:

- **ENHANCE the salability of your book.** Does your cover make a person want to pick up the book and buy it? Will booksellers be proud to display it in their stores?
- **INCORPORATE the book's theme.** Does the cover design effectively convey your voice and style? Does it entice and appeal to your target audience?
- **EMPLOY creativity and originality.** Is the design a unique expression of you, your theme, and your contents? Is it aesthetically pleasing and tasteful?

There are no two ways around it. If you want your book to sell, you must spend the money on a professional designer for the cover and the interior layout of your book.

9. **Believing the book will sell itself.** Many writers finish their books. For most, though, that is the end of the line. Few actually see their work in print, and of those who do, even fewer ever sell more than a handful of copies. One of the main reasons for this has to do with marketing. Of all the mistaken beliefs held by new nonfiction authors, the most difficult one for most writers to grasp and correct is an understanding of the time/money/energy commitment involved in *marketing* a book. Many writers envision themselves as creative geniuses who believe they should be left alone to write while someone else handles the marketing and promotion. In the sphere of traditional publishing, some publishers may provide significant marketing support, but that is mostly a thing of yesteryear. Today, most publishers offer very little in the way of marketing assistance; virtually every publishing house — from the smaller, little-known shops to the behemoths of great repute — leaves it to the author to promote his or her own book.

If an author is unable to provide any marketing support and cannot clearly define the market for their book, publishers are unlikely to be interested at all. This should be a red flag to those pursuing the self-publishing option. Know your audience, and shatter that ubiquitous box, in terms of your creative marketing concepts. Who will read your book and where can you find them? These are the questions you need to keep at the forefront of your mind, even as you write the book, print it, and design your Web site.

There are hundreds of humor writers, columnists, and experts in myriad fields who *could* write books. What differentiates them is not their writing talents, as much as their ability — or inability — to sell their books. As we have by now determined, publishing is a business, and publishers will always go with the books they anticipate to be the biggest sellers. You must keep this same attitude and vision, even if you decide to self-publish. If you lose sight

of creating a book that will actually sell, you may find yourself in an uphill battle once it's done. The last thing you want is to take out a business loan to get your books produced, only to have 30 cases of them stacked in your garage for the next 10 years.

Be ready and willing to market yourself and your book. Become a media darling. Look for opportunities to appear on local, regional, and national radio and TV. Yes, this means you, even if you are shy! Take an acting class or join [Toastmasters](#) if you have a fear of speaking in public. You are going to sell this book — no one else is. That means you must be as available and open as possible. If someone from the media calls to invite you for an interview, drop everything else and get to that interview. Spread the word about your new title on the Web. Send preview copies to select reviewers and/or celebrities or personalities with long reach. You went through all the other steps to get here. Believe in yourself, your book, and your market, and be fearless in promoting it to the world.

Virtually anyone can write a book — it's true. Seeing to the details, though, will make a huge difference in whether your book sinks or swims financially. Taking some time to do the research to know who your audience is, understanding what they want to read, and knowing what other similar titles already are out there will help you build a stronger outline, and ultimately write a better book.

Decide before you begin whether you will self-publish or seek a traditional publisher. Treat your book as a business, and create a realistic budget for it. Create a timeline for the entirety of your publishing project. Hire the very best editor and graphic designer you can afford. And lastly, make sure you are ready, willing, and able to promote, promote, promote! While there is no way to *ever* guarantee which book will succeed and which one will fail, these steps will help assure that your book has a fighting chance for success.

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