

(This story will not be in a short story book. It is my thoughts on writing based on personally writing and publishing four books and serving as editor/publisher for five other first time authors. If you've wondered what it takes to write a book, or get a short story published, read on to see my perspective on the topic...)

“A writer writes, if you want to be a writer, write.”

Author Unknown

I have the above posted on my bathroom mirror and in my office – a constant reminder that writing is something you have to do, not just talk about.

You want to be a writer, but don't know how to start. While I don't profess to be an expert, maybe I can help you get started. I have the personal experience of having written four books of my own, plus, have helped several other first time authors get their books past the “I want to write a book” stage and proudly into the “I did it – take a look at my book” stage.

For openers, you should answer a few questions for yourself:

- 1 – Why do you want to write a book?
- 2 – What do you want to write about?
- 3 – Who is your target audience and what is your objective?
- 4 – What is your timeframe for getting it done?
- 5 – Are you doing this because you want to or because someone is pushing you?
- 6 – Do you enjoy writing?
- 7 – What experience, if any, do you have – with your topic and with writing?
- 8 – How much time do you have to devote to your writing project?
- 9 – If not a book, how about writing and publishing a short story, or series of short stories?
- 10 – Finally, what does it cost?

Once you have these questions answered, take a look at your answers and see if you're really serious about this or are still just in the “I want to write a book” stage. Don't despair if you don't have good answers to all the questions. I toyed around with being an author a long time before I really became serious.

The first book I wrote, “*What Now, Lieutenant?*” was started on November 20, 1986 and didn’t make it into printed book form until late November 2007 – 21 years from start to finish. My other three books took much less time – about a year from start to finish for each of them.

Why the difference? I knew why and what I wanted to write, had a target audience, a timeframe, was passionate about getting them done, enjoyed the challenge, had the experience, and made the time to get them done. My first of the three year long books, my 700 page “*War Stories – Utah Beach to Pleiku*” was done while I still worked full time for IBM. I had to steal time, but it was so important that I did it, working long hours, late nights, and on the weekends. Not good for family life, but it was what I was passionate about so I made it happen. My next two books were written after I retired from IBM and decided to start my second career as an author and publisher. I had firm answers in my mind about all the questions, time was available, and I knew I wanted to change my self description and image from IBM executive to “author and publisher.” Plus, I was paid to write those two books – quite a motivator.

Let’s take the questions one at a time and give you some food for thought. First, **why do you want to write a book?** In my case, I wrote my first book to preserve my personal memories of the most memorable year in my life – my year as an Infantry officer in Vietnam. I didn’t have a timeframe or sense of urgency in getting it done, I just knew I wanted my children and grandchildren to some day have the answer to “What did you do during the Vietnam War, Daddy?” I wasn’t doing it to get rich, and I didn’t have any thoughts about ever formally publishing it or selling it. My next three books were in my passion zone – I wanted to preserve history for others to learn from. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the reason I write is that I am passionate about preserving history – clear and simple. Every person’s story is a thread in the tapestry of human experience. Each time a person dies without preserving their stories, the tapestry loses another thread and is less complete than it should be.

What are your reasons? Are you writing because you’re passionate about something and want to pass that passion on to others? Or, are you doing it to get your family and friends to quit bugging you to write about something you are uniquely qualified to write? Either one could be a reasonable “why” – you just need to understand personally why you’re compelled to write a book. Doing it because of your passion is probably easier than doing it because someone else is pushing you.

If writing a book isn’t in your future, maybe a short story or series of short stories is the answer for you. We all have a story that needs to be preserved for future generations to learn from. At the end of this paper, I will address my thoughts and ideas on getting your short story (or stories) published.

What do you want to write about? This is a pretty simple question but will most likely change and evolve as you start your writing project. In my second book (but first one published), “*War Stories – Utah Beach to Pleiku*”, I wanted to preserve memories of our WWII veterans of the 4th Infantry Division (4ID) when I saw too many of them in our veterans association dying and taking their stories with them. I had hoped to get enough stories to make a 250 page book. As I started my research, I found that our

Cold War and Vietnam veterans also had stories they wanted to tell. So I expanded my project to include stories from 4ID veterans from WWII through Vietnam. And the book expanded from 250 to 700 pages – a bigger book than I normally even consider reading, but because I am passionate about the topic, I couldn't leave any of the good stories out.

Who is your target audience, and what is your objective? Do you want to write your life story and make a Xerox copy to give to each of your children? Do you want to write the great American novel and sell more copies than the *Harry Potter* books? Do you have a very specific audience that you want to buy your book? For example, when I wrote, "*Operation Iraqi Freedom I – A Year in the Sunni Triangle*" my specific audience was the Soldiers and families of the 4ID and TF Ironhorse who had made the history that I recorded in that book. I also knew that other veterans of the 4ID would be interested in the book and that members of the general public would be interested in it. Also I wanted to make some money on the book. That was my third book but the first I profited from.

You need to know up front who will read your book and why you're putting in all the work to make it available to be read. Your target audience will help you decide how to write, and your objective will give you a feeling of how many copies you need to print. No one wants to print a book that is destined to be stored in boxes in your garage or basement and never read by anyone. I've been fortunate to have a well defined target audience for three of my four books and sales were about as expected. On my "*What Now, Lieutenant?*" book, I am going with Print on Demand (POD) technology because I don't have as good a handle on who my target audience is. The beauty of POD is you can print in small quantities and quickly get more if the demand is greater than expected. And, I'm on the third printing (small quantities) of "*What Now, Lieutenant?*" so acceptance is good and I'm starting to see the potential of that book.

What is your timeframe for getting your book written and published – get it done? Note that I included a timeframe that includes both writing and publishing your book. My first book was written between 1988 and 1993 and not published until 2007 – hopefully the exception rather than the rule with first time authors. The second question is – why have you set that timeframe? In the case of my "*Operation Iraqi Freedom I – A Year in the Sunni Triangle*" book, I had a fast timeframe in mind. I wanted to get the book written and published before the Soldiers of the 4ID and TF Ironhorse who had made the history were scattered to the four winds and unable to be located to sell the book to. I made my target timeframe but hit several obstacles in getting the book published. My advice is – be realistic on the timeframe you set for getting your book written and published. Each book, except one, that I've written myself, or edited and published for someone else, has taken more time than I had expected. As someone once said, the devil is in the details.

Are you doing this because you want to or because someone is pushing you? If you're going to write a book, it doesn't really matter why you are doing it, but, I'm a big believer in following your passion. Roberta Quimby wrote, "*My Son is Alive...*" because she felt compelled to tell the story about the struggle she and her son went through after he was wounded in Iraq. Her writing was therapy for her. Rhonda

Eggleston wrote, “*Ladies of the Ironhorse*” because she was passionate about telling the story of the strong women who support our Soldiers when they are deployed to war. Both stories turned out to be excellent and were done despite all obstacles that got into their way. If they had been writing because someone elected them to write such a story, they probably would have dropped out along the way or at least not gotten it written with the quality and timeliness that they did. Someone also said – if you are doing what you love, you’ll never work a day in your life. After many years being passionate about what I do, I know I’m much more interested in working with people who are passionate and want to preserve their story in a book than with someone who is going through the motions without the passion.

Do you enjoy writing? Ever since I was in high school, I’ve enjoyed writing. My first published work was as sports writer for the school newspaper. I later wrote articles for the 4th Infantry Division “Ivy Leaf” newspaper when I was in Vietnam. During my IBM career, I wrote a lot and also edited and changed the writing of others, both those above me and those working for me. For ten years I wrote a 24 page quarterly newsletter for my 22nd Infantry Regiment Society. Bottom line, I enjoy writing, it is fun and not hard work for me.

For others, writing is a chore. Instead of being enjoyable, they consider it hard work and a necessary evil. I’m sure there are variations between the two extremes. You need to understand where you fit on that spectrum of enjoyment. Regardless of where you fit, you can get your story written. If you hate to write, that’s when you want to hire someone with experience to talk to you and then convert those conversations and interviews into meaningful prose. However, you need to be careful to select a writer who understands the topic you are covering, or at least has an interest and willingness to listen and learn from you and other research that might be required. Military history, personal experiences, and success stories are what I never tire of working with. I wouldn’t tackle a writing assignment about poetry, highly technical subjects, or other areas that I have no expertise with and no interest in learning about. If you’re going to hire someone to write your story, check out his or her knowledge and interest in the topic of your book. Don’t hire a starving writer who will tackle any topic without bringing some knowledge, expertise, or passion to the party.

What experience, if any, do you have – with your topic and with writing? If you are writing your own personal success story, you are most likely an expert on your subject matter, but if you’ve never enjoyed writing, you most likely aren’t the best person to be writing your story. Furthermore, if you’re overly introverted and unwilling to acknowledge your accomplishments, then you probably need someone to work with you and those close to you to pull the story out. There’s nothing wrong with getting someone who likes to write to listen to your story and convert it into book form.

My fourth book project, “*You Don’t Know Jack... or Jerry*” is about the outstanding success story that Jack Henry and Jerry Hall created when they founded the highly successful financial software company, Jack Henry & Associates. When I asked Jerry if he had ever considered writing a book about their success, he said, “We have, but we don’t know how to start, and neither one of us have the time to devote to writing it.” That is when I proposed that they hire me to write it for them, which they quickly jumped

at. With a series of in person and over the phone interviews, I worked through their story, talked to other key people, did research in their archives, and completed the book so that their story is now preserved. Fortunately, we did the work when we did – Jack Henry died within a month after I had completed the final interview with him – but his story didn't die with him.

How much time do you have to devote to your writing project? We all have plenty of things that put demands on our time. If writing a book isn't high on your priority list, the odds are high that you'll never get your book written. If, however, you have a passion for preserving your story, you'll find the time to write – whether late at night, on weekends, or whenever you can steal time to do what you are passionate about. Writing takes time – and focus. Unless you are writing fiction or part of your life story that you know intimately, you have to allow time for research. Even in your life story, you may need to check with others or dig into family records or archives to insure some details that are hazy in your mind are reported correctly. My point here is, when writing, plan to spend more time than you thought it would take. As stated above, the devil is in the details.

If you decide you don't have time to devote to writing a book, don't despair, maybe the answer for you is a short story, or series of short stories. The next section addresses that option.

If not a book, how about writing and publishing a short story, or series of short stories? I firmly believe that every living person has at least one short story that is worthy of preserving for future generations to learn from, laugh at, escape into, read for sheer enjoyment, or to learn some of the background of his or her ancestors. Most of those stories are never written down, and once the person telling the story is gone, or is incapacitated, the story is gone with them.

I encourage you to think about what you would like future generations to remember from your wealth of experience, and/or from your imagination (fiction is as important as fact when writing – both serve a very important function in our society).

When my dad died without ever preserving his life's story, I encouraged my mother to write her story, which she started but never finished. Dementia took her mind before she completed a book, but I do have the material for a short story about what was important in her life. She named her story, "*The Six Men in My Life*" – her father, her husband, and her four sons. She got up through the birth and first few years of her youngest son's life before losing the ability to write. One of these days, I will take her handwritten story and include it in one of the books of short stories that I plan to publish.

Whether you ever plan to publish a story or not, you should go ahead and write it, and let people who are important to you know about its existence. Short stories that are written and never read, or no one knows about, are as bad as a story that is never written – you are depriving those who care about you from seeing the threads that make up the tapestry of your life. If they should find it after you are gone, that is good, but don't make them search for it. Print it and give a copy to key people in your life.

A very successful engineer approached me with his ideas for printing a complete book of fictional short stories that he had written. "*Tales from the Mind*" was written over several years, final touches were put on the stories when he retired, and he approached me to complete the editing and publishing piece that he had neither the

experience nor time to do himself. Since he was such a good writer, it took very little time and cost to edit his work, lay it out into book format, design a cover, and publish it, using Print on Demand technology.

Similarly, a WWII Naval Aviator and lifelong architect wrote a series of short stories about his life's experiences, "anecdotes" as he calls them. As he described in his preface, he wrote, "Flying is made up of a great many small incidents and a small number of interesting ones. An anecdote, therefore, unless it would become tedious, must be extremely selective, discarding all the inconsequential incidents in one's life and concentrating on those that have remained vivid in one's memory." With minimal help from me on editing, layout, and using print on demand technology, his desire to preserve his anecdotes became a reality. "*I Have Slipped the Surly Bonds of Earth and Danced the Skies*" was printed within six months from when we first decided to turn his anecdotes into a book.

Most of you don't have enough short stories, or the time to devote to writing them, to justify a complete book of your short stories. (A personal thought – in my opinion, you need at least 150 pages to call it a book – nothing official about that, I just believe most books should fall in the 150-500 page range). That's where my idea of combining stories from a number of authors came into play. For details on how I propose to combine short stories from many different authors into book form, check out my "Short Stories" section at www.deedspublishing.com. Regardless of whether you ever want to publish your short story or not, you should write it down and let people know it exists.

Finally, some common sense advice – and what does it cost? Hopefully by now you know that I am passionate about preserving stories for future generations, whether in book or in short story form. In no particular order, here are some words of advice, and some thoughts on what it costs to publish a book.

Backup, Backup, Backup – Don't risk losing hours, days, weeks, or months of your writing. Regularly, as in each time you've spent a few hours working on your writing, backup your computer file. I typically do that by sending it to someone in my family (who is on a different computer system than the one I use) and, preferably, in a different household than I live in (fires as well as hard drive crashes have to be taken into consideration).

You can't edit your own work – Your brain sees what you meant to write, not necessarily what you actually wrote. To try to edit your own work, regardless of how good you are or how straightforward and simple your writing is, is folly. Find someone you trust who has a good eye for grammar, punctuation, spelling, and context and let them edit what you write. Your editor should also be able to tell you if what you wrote makes sense – sometimes we leave out key items that should have been included.

Develop a thick skin, and ask for honest input on your work – I always get someone who will be honest with me to read what I write. I also try to get people with different perspectives to read my work. For example, when I write about the military, I'll get a non-military person to read it to see if what I've written makes sense to them.

Don't go overboard (too many cooks spoil the broth) but it's always good to get the perspective of more than one person, particularly if you plan to publish your work. You have the final say on your work but keep an open mind and give real consideration to the suggestions made by those who have read your work. In working with editors, I typically accept 95% or more of their suggestions. If I don't agree with them, I leave it as is – the author is the boss.

Be reasonable with your expectations – Don't be too disappointed if your book doesn't become the next *New York Times* best seller. Each year, over 100,000 books are published – the competition for readership is intense. Plus, fewer and fewer members in our population are regular readers, and you're competing with electronic media. If you've given careful consideration to why you are writing your book, and who your target audience is, then this shouldn't be a problem. For many books, getting it in print and into the hands of people who are important to you is all the recognition you need. You probably won't make money on the book, and it will most likely cost you to get it into print, but you'll still be happy that you became a published author.

It will take longer than you expected – Unless all the stars align and you have a streak of luck, something will get into your way, and it will take longer to complete your work than you estimated. Writing takes concentration and the proper frame of mind – outside factors tend to get into your way. So, be patient with yourself and don't commit a completion date that you won't be able to make. Writing should be fun, not a deadline driven challenge. With that said, you have to stay with it or it will never get done. Remember what I said at the top of this paper – “A writer writes. If you want to be a writer, write.”

I'm sure there are other things and bits of advice I will come up with as I rewrite this paper, but for now, this wraps up my thoughts and my advice.

Okay – **what does it cost?** The answer is – it depends on lots of factors. For openers, you need a good computer with a good word processing program (Microsoft Word is the standard). Writing on a typewriter or in longhand is a thing of the past. But, if that's the way you choose to write, keep in mind that you'll have to pay someone to enter your work into a computer, and then you, or someone you pay, will have to check the work to make sure the person keyed in what you wrote. Most editors and publishers won't take material that isn't in computer readable form (I used to do that, I don't do it any more – the exception is if I get a WWII veteran who can't type, I'll take his or her handwritten story).

At this stage, a well written manuscript could be sent to any number of publishers who would take full responsibility for it, drive it through to completion at no cost to you, and send you royalty checks once it sells thousands of copies. However, for every manuscript that is accepted by a major publisher, thousands are rejected. In all likelihood, your manuscript will fall into that rejected pile.

I'm also aware of some publishers who specialize in first time authors. However, beware of what they have to offer. I looked at a contract sent to an author I know and the contract called for 8% of profits from the book to be paid to the author and gave the

publisher rights to the book for 14 years, plus, there was no guarantee as to when they would get around to publishing the book. Any way you look at it, that's a great deal for the publisher and a terrible deal for the author. Your costs are small but your risk of timely publication is great, and your potential profits are extremely small – plus, you have to pay full price for books for your own use.

But do not despair. You always have the option of self publishing or working with a publisher who loves to work with new and first time authors (Deeds Publishing is such a place). Following is my experience of costs associated with books I have self published plus the ones I have edited and published for others.

Once the story is written, the next step is editing. A friend or family member who has a good eye for the English language can often provide the first (free) edit. Use that free resource, assuming they are willing to help you and will be honest and blunt with you. After you are comfortable that your book has the basic mistakes and errors fixed, you will still want to pay for a professional editor to give it the final read and make recommendations on changes. I have editors working for me who work at a reasonable hourly rate. Keep in mind, nothing of value is free, you get what you pay for is typically the case.

After editing comes layout. Layout can be simple or complex. Pictures add to the cost, as do charts and other graphics. If you have an artistic flair and want a fancy layout, it will cost more than a basic book layout as you read in most mass produced books. Again, I have a team who has done all my books. I have settled on a 6" x 9" format with standards on headings and other parts of the book. This, of course, can be changed, but change for change sake only adds to the cost.

Design of the front and back cover is done during the same timeframe as layout of the text. Cost of the cover depends on creative content, art work required, availability of a photo if that is the choice for the cover, and how many iterations of samples are required before you agree on the cover. A hard cover book requires a dust jacket which takes more layout and design, but also gives you more space to help sell the book to anyone who might pick it up. Keep in mind – books are judged by the cover. Don't overlook the marketing value of a well designed cover on your book.

Throughout the layout process, there is more editing and proofreading to insure that no errors make it through to the final copy. Every book that I have written or edited and published, has been read at least 25 times, by me and others, before it is finally printed (you'll learn to hate the book before it finally comes out in print – then you'll love it again). Also, along the way, you need to decide what price to sell the book for and what your marketing plan is. These decisions play into the overall cost and possibility of making a profit on the book – know your marketing plan and target audience before you get too far into the process.

Layout results in an Adobe PDF file that is ready to be sent to a printer. Long before this step, you have decided how many copies of the book you want to print and whether you want it in hard cover or soft cover. If you plan to print only a few hundred copies, print on demand technology is your most affordable choice. The per book price will be a little more, but you won't be stuck with a basement full of books that will never be sold. If you plan to print in the thousands, a conventional printer will be your best choice. If yours is a non-standard book (lots of pictures on glossy paper, coffee table size, etc), your publisher may have to shop around to find the right printer for you.

The final cost is the freight to get the book from the printer to you. Books are heavy, and you pay the freight. Also, shipping books to family members, friends, or to people who buy them has a cost factor associated with it. Media Mail is a fairly affordable way to mail books. To keep the books from being damaged in the mail, don't overlook the cost of proper packaging.

Hopefully this has been of value to you. As I stated at the beginning, I don't call myself an expert but I have worked at this long enough to know what works and what doesn't. I'd be interested in your feedback on whether this paper has value to you. Please send your feedback to babcock224@aol.com. Thanks – and enjoy your writing. Let me know if I can help in any way.