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SEÁNA KERSLAKE

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Time to do the write thing

Niamh Ennis has written her first book — now the real work starts. Here, she asks the experts about finishing the job

What if 2022 was the year you stopped yourself ‘thinking’ about writing the book that’s been percolating inside you since, well, forever? Imagine if this was the year you decided to actually do it, to finally get those words out of your head and on to paper and you stopped procrastinating, dreaming about it and wishing it into existence.

Well, let this be your invitation to silence the inner critic that’s telling you it’s never going to happen. It can and it will. This new year is going to mark the beginning, of not just your next new chapter, but an entire book full of them!

By the time you've finished reading this article you will know, not only why you need to do it now, but most importantly how. With the help of some highly credible voices in the business; including a multi-published author, a literary agent, a lecturer in creative writing and a writing coach, we will bust the myths, talk honestly about what's involved when writing and take you through all the necessary steps required to get you started on your own book.

In the interest of full disclosure, I'm in the midst of this process myself. I've dreamed of writing a book since I was six. I finally did it during this last year. Four and a 'bit' decades later. So, I know what it's like to want something so badly that you're afraid to start it, because starting it could bring you closer to realising you are in fact not able to do it. I've recently finished writing the book, I've had an editor review it and made the many edits that were asked of me.

It's ready to go out into the world now, and more importantly I'm ready for it to be seen, but I know I'm still only in the middle of this process and that's something I've learned recently also. Writing the book is only step one. Knowing your audience, being clear on what your book is about, securing an agent, finding a publisher, choosing the best publishing option for you, marketing, promoting and selling the book are all parts that will require the same amount of effort.

GET OUT OF YOUR OWN WAY

At the risk of starting with a negative, let's firstly look at removing some of the obstacles, those things that block you from writing and discover just how you can get out of our own way.

When it comes to excuses, I've come up with some great ones over the years, but the most frequent one is always: "I'll wait until I have more time to devote to it. I want to do it right!"

UK-based literary agent and coach, Jessica Killingley, jumps in here to say that every day someone tells her they want to write a book but that they just don't have the time.

"Not having the time is one of the biggest excuses I see people hide behind. It's absolute nonsense. If you want to do it, you'll find the time. What you currently don't have is a compelling enough reason to make the time. Nobody, no matter how experienced a writer they are, dives into a book without feeling the fear. The difference between those that cross the finish line and those that don't, is doing it even though you are scared!"

Writing coach and former Commissioning Editor at Hay House, Elaine O'Neill, recognises that most aspiring authors are, "terrified that they don't write like James Joyce or Brené Brown" when they first begin.

"They falsely assume they need to measure up to these enormous titans of the fiction or nonfiction space in their first draft. This is a crippling aspiration. Firstly, neither James nor Brené arrived fully formed. They both spent years writing before the world started to listen. You don't walk out on a tennis court as a total newbie and expect to play like Venus Williams, so why are you doing the same with writing. Secondly, you shouldn't be trying to be anyone other than yourself. The reader wants you, not a version of someone else."

While it seems pretty impossible to avoid feeling fearful, let's also be careful not to overlook your ability to self-sabotage. Your lack of confidence and self-belief can cause you to pay more attention than you should, to the inner critic telling you to get back in your box.

GETTING STARTED THE MOST COMMON QUESTIONS

- Should I write every day or when I have the time?
- Should I know exactly what I'm writing about, before I start, or just let it flow?
- Do I need an agent, when should I start thinking about finding my publisher?
- Which is best; self-publishing or traditional?
- When should I seek professional advice and assistance?

Dr Eibhear Walshe, Director of Creative Writing at University College Cork, addresses this head on when he proffers that self-criticism is the greatest obstacle for many aspiring writers. His suggested solution is one of encouragement: "just go ahead and write the book and let it take its chances in the world".

Risk and fear will always play a part when it comes to releasing any part of ourselves out into the world, but the greatest risk surely is to choose not to release. What would happen if you tried to substitute your worry about being seen with a worry about being ignored?



NOT HAVING THE TIME IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST EXCUSES I SEE PEOPLE HIDE BEHIND. IT'S ABSOLUTE NONSENSE. IF YOU WANT TO DO IT, YOU'LL FIND THE TIME. WHAT YOU CURRENTLY DON'T HAVE IS A COMPELLING ENOUGH REASON TO MAKE THE TIME

Of course, no one-size answer fits all, and some may differ when it comes to fiction versus non-fiction, but what has been pretty unanimous in all of the guidance I've received, is that to begin, you should aim to write something every day. It all comes down to consistency and routine. It's that step that bridges the dreaming and thinking of writing with the actual doing.

So, what does a writing routine look like? Author Roisin Meaney feels very strongly that, without a deadline, you run the risk of just floating along.

"Set yourself a deadline and within that deadline, devise a writing structure. If you are thinking of writing a novel and you're thinking of the usual 80,000 words then give yourself six to eight months which is both realistic and doable.

"Then within this, break it down again, give yourself a monthly target of 20,000 words and try to stick to that. It works out at less than 1,000 words a day, which is also very doable and it allows you room for some time off. Be disciplined and be tough on yourself. Write every day!"

Dr Walshe concurs and also recommends that you set a "fixed period of time for writing the book, say a year, and a set amount of time and stick to that schedule".

SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

Walshe also proposes that you, “consider attending a writing workshop and take some advice there, share your work, and then start looking at what you are writing and listen to what others tell you.”

This is a sentiment that Meaney fully endorses. It was what she did to kickstart her writing journey. “I enrolled in a weekend writing course called ‘Getting Started on your Novel’. I was so raw. All I knew was that I wanted to write a book and I found this was really excellent for practical advice such as coming up with a plot, refining your ideas, character creation and development, securing an agent and publisher — it had everything. Most importantly, I left that course with a plot. I was off!”

WHY YOU NEED TO KNOW YOUR WHY

O’Neill recommends that your starting point should always be with your ‘why’.

“Why do you want to write this specific book? Some people feel they have a book inside them, but spend too much time trying to write a book they ‘think’ others want to read. If you start with your emotional why, you can always return to that when things get tough or you reach a block. Why is this book important for you? Then you can write the why out and keep it front and centre when moving through the work.”

Understanding the importance of creating a detailed outline at the start was in fact what gave me the real push I needed. I falsely believed that for me to be creative, I needed to be able to write freely and not be constrained by structure. I couldn’t have been more wrong. When I eventually listened and developed an outline, everything changed. I knew then what needed to go in each chapter and whenever I found myself going off on tangents, I would simply refer to my outline and get back on message.

O’Neill observes that so many authors, particularly memoir writers, fail to plan. “They begin writing, keep writing, and then end up with something that is so far overwritten that it needs to be slashed back by half. Everything should start with the plan, structure is what will allow your book to bloom, without it, you’ll lose your reader a few pages in.”

When you have figured out why you want to write your book what’s the next step? Killingley and O’Neill are once again united in their advice here.

“Consider the reader” advises O’Neill. “This is especially important in nonfiction because if you don’t speak to a specific reader, then you won’t connect with any. At the end of the day, a book is product that a customer buys, so you’ve got to know your customer and write the book that they need to read. Is there something you can teach them that nobody else can? What are the issues that are coming up in their life? Get really detailed about who your reader is, create an avatar of them for yourself, so that whenever you’re stuck on what to write, then you can question what that reader wants to know, and let that guide you.”

Killingley reinforces this message. “Remember that a book exists to solve a problem. The best non-fiction books start not with the writer, but with the reader. You might be telling yourself that you’ve always wanted to write a book but your reader doesn’t care about that.

“They’re buying your book because you have something to teach them that they need to learn. It could be how to change their lives, or it could be how to train their dog or how to start a business. Before you start to think about what you want to write, think about what someone needs to read.”

UNDERSTAND THE BUSINESS OF WRITING

Killingley unsurprisingly is also keen that you understand the business of it all. “The actual writing of a really great book is important (naturally), but it’s only one part of the puzzle. Think about your reader, think about how you’re going to make the book sell, think about how it’s going to take you to the next level in the impact you are here to make.”

THE PUBLISHING DILEMMA

It is hard to get published. There’s no sugar-coating that. Many publishers prefer only to deal with an agent and most don’t welcome unsolicited submissions. So, the question will always arise as to whether you should consider self-publishing.

Killingley has a unique take on this: “Having worked on both sides of the table, I’m a huge fan of self-publishing. If you are writing a book because you want to use it to help grow your business, then self-publishing is an infinitely more agile and efficient way of doing it. Lots of people want a traditional book deal because they see it as some kind of validation.



WHY DO YOU WANT TO WRITE THIS SPECIFIC BOOK? SOME PEOPLE FEEL THEY HAVE A BOOK INSIDE THEM, BUT SPEND TOO MUCH TIME TRYING TO WRITE A BOOK THEY ‘THINK’ OTHERS WANT TO READ. IF YOU START WITH YOUR EMOTIONAL WHY, YOU CAN ALWAYS RETURN TO THAT WHEN THINGS GET TOUGH OR YOU REACH A BLOCK. WHY IS THIS BOOK IMPORTANT FOR YOU?

“The books and authors that I see being the most successful however, are the ones that are committed to getting their message out to help people no matter what. If you have an idea for a book, get it written and self-publish it, do the work to grow your community and make a real success of that book, then you are going to look a lot more appealing to a traditional publisher further down the road.”

PARTING WORD

My final nugget of advice before you pick up your pen, is one that each of the contributors above mentioned; and that is to go and get yourself the most recent version of the Writers & Artists Yearbook. It is such a valuable resource and you’ll find the answers to all your questions about who you should be speaking with, how to contact them and what to say when you do, within those glorious covers.

In the words of American poet and memoirist, Maya Angelou, “there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you.” So, don’t, do the right thing and write now. 📖

Niamh Ennis is a writer and Change and Transformation Coach. She’s known for her practical solutions to life’s challenges and her ability to tell you not what you want to hear but always what you need. For more, see niamhennis.com.