Prepare To Publish

Go from book idea to book outline in 12 weeks.
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DEAR WRITER,

I can hear you protesting already...

Oh no. I’m not a real writer... you’re saying. You’d be surprised how many accomplished, well-paid, successful, even Best-selling authors whisper these words to me, behind closed doors and in hushed tones, like it’s a secret they aren’t sure how they’ve managed to keep all this time.

What is a “real” writer? I ask them.

Oh, you know, they say, reciting some version of the same list I’ve heard dozens of times about training and education and degrees. I ask them where they got the impression that writing was some sort of elite club they hadn’t been invited to join. They’re not sure. None of us are. Still, somehow we’ve all bought into this idea that writing is a special skill reserved for the perfectly talented or trained.

Can I tell you a secret?

Here’s what it takes to be a writer: a writer writes.

Welcome to the club.

This is not to say I don’t understand the insecurity. I do. I have whispered these exact words to myself about being (or not being) a “real” writer, despite having written and published 10+ books, a number that keeps growing. I’ve also worked with hundreds of writers—ranging from total beginners to Best-selling authors—and every single one of them has shared this same sentiment with me. What if I’m not a “real” writer? Because of this, I know the decision to write a book is not an easy one, but I also want to reassure you it is a good one.

Writing is not only human instinct, it’s good human instinct. Nothing has more power to bring positive change to your emotional life, your relationships, your finances, your physical health, your business, and your own personal growth than writing a book.

The research here is staggering and conclusive. Nothing has more power to grow your skills, to increase your credibility, to leave a lasting legacy, or to change your community and the world than writing a book.

The most powerful, most influential, most loving, most world-changing humans who have ever walked the face of this planet have all been writers.

You are a writer.

Whether you are a business leader who is looking to establish authority in your field, an entrepreneur who wants to grow your business, a thought leader who has an idea that will impact the world, a mother with a story you want to communicate to your children, or an artist with an idea burning inside of you that won’t leave you alone, you are in the right place.

I’m going to help you write a book proposal. Your book proposal will be not only the most important document for pitching to agents and publishers...
should you choose to go the route of traditional publishing, it will also be your road map for writing your book. Without a book proposal document, my first book took me three years to write. With a robust proposal document, my most recent book took me 10 days.

That's not a joke.

Your book proposal document is not only your outline for the book, it's also your back cover copy, your author bio, your list of friends and influencers who will support and promote you, and your marketing plan for the book. Nothing is more satisfying, fun, clarifying, and important than writing a book proposal document.

Here's how it will work:

MONTH ONE
I will help you ask and answer the four questions every author must ask and answer before they get started outlining.

MONTH TWO
I will help you decide where to start with your idea, where to end, what to include, and what to leave out.

MONTH THREE
We will map your idea into a cohesive proposal document—the key to publishing anything worth reading.

In three months, you'll have a full executed book proposal document, and you'll be more than ready to begin writing the manuscript.

If you're feeling “stuck” in your writing, you're not alone. Writing is diagnostic. When you are stuck in your writing, it's because you are stuck in your life. 99% of the time, when you can't get the words on the page, it's because there's something you want to say but feel you can't say.

When you find the right words, not only do you get unstuck in your writing, you get unstuck in your career, your relationships, your finances, and every area your life.

Don't spend another second stalling.

Are you ready? Let's get started.
INTRO
BEFORE WE GET STARTED

HERE’S HOW THE NEXT THREE MONTHS WILL WORK...

For all you Type A’s out there:

MONTH ONE
Pre-work: 4 Questions Every Author Must Ask (and Answer) Before Writing A Book

Most authors begin without answering these four vital questions, and this is a big mistake. Like following a GPS that doesn’t have the destination in it, or that has the wrong destination, you won’t get very far. With that said, these four questions can help you become laser focused on your topic and the story you’re trying to tell, which will help you make progress fast.

We’ll do that by answering the four following questions:

• 1: What Kind of Book Will You Write?
• 2: Who Will Your Reader Be?
• 3: How Will You Transform Your Reader?
• 4: How Will You Keep a Reader Engaged?

MONTH TWO

Authors come to me wondering: Where do I start the story? Where do I finish? What details are interesting to the reader? What details should I leave out? In the next four weeks, you will gain clear answers to these questions. When it comes time to write, get ready to make headway. No more long bouts of staring at the blinking cursor. No more long pieces of writing thrown in the garbage can. No more wasted time.

• Week 1: Shaping the Story
• Week 2: Shaping the Chapters
• Week 3: Mapping It Out
• Week 4: Putting it into Paragraphs
MONTH THREE
Finishing the Proposal Document:
The Key to Publishing Anything Beautiful

Many great books are lost in the shuffle and never acknowledged for the masterpieces they are, simply for the sake of poor framing. Authors get their ideas in front of agents and publishers but are rejected NOT because their idea isn’t any good, but because the author didn’t spend enough time perfecting this part of the process. In this section, I’m going to make sure that doesn’t happen to you.

A proposal document not only helps you clarify your idea even further, it also keeps you motivated throughout the writing process and gives you the support you need to continue shaping your idea into the brilliant piece of art you know it can be.

BONUS
Putting it all together

I’ll give you a sample book proposal document to show you exactly how you can put this all together. Impress agents and publishers, show your friends and family, and use this as the road map for writing your book. Now that you’ve done all the training, you’re ready for the marathon.
MONTH ONE
So, you want to write a book?

Amazing. Terrifying. Beautiful. All the things.

Most authors get so excited about writing a book that they’ll launch right into the writing process without first spending the necessary time to figure out where they’re going. Or, sometimes they don’t start at all. Needless to say, either approach doesn’t get them very far. At their first road block, they melt into a puddle of frustration and decide it must be because they’re not a “real” writer and didn’t have a very good idea in the first place.

This is tragic, if you ask me. It’s a huge problem.

Consider if John Steinbeck had decided, halfway through East of Eden, that he wasn’t a “real” writer and didn’t have anything important to say anyway. You might be rolling your eyes at me thinking, “Yeah, right, like John Steinbeck ever questioned his ability as a writer.” But, of course he did. In the later published collection of letters titled Journal of a Novel—letters of correspondence between Steinbeck and his literary agent and editor—Steinbeck laments, “I am choosing to write this book to my sons. They are little boys now and they will never know what they came from through me, unless I tell them. It is not written for them to read now but when they are grown and the pains and joys have tousled them a little. And if the book is addressed to them, it is for a good reason. I want them to know how it was, I want to tell them directly, and perhaps by speaking directly to them I shall speak directly to other people.”

-Excerpt From, Journal of a Novel- John Steinbeck

If even Steinbeck worried his writing was no good and would be a waste of time, then why should we be surprised when we sit down to write that we have the same worry?

I use Steinbeck because he’s my favorite author, and East of Eden is my favorite book—one of those books that has kept me afloat when I was drowning in despair. But if Steinbeck isn’t your thing—that’s fine. Different books resonate with different readers, hence why we need so many of them. But take a minute and fill in the blank with your favorite author and favorite book. What if that author had decided...
that book wasn’t worth writing? Where would you be? Yes, there are plenty of bad books out there. And plenty of books that get started but never see the light of day (perhaps rightfully so). But the reason for bad books isn’t bad authors with bad intentions. The reason for this isn’t that they’re bad authors with bad ideas. The reason is they wrote without clearly answering the four questions I’m about to help you ask and answer.

1. What kind of book are you going to write
2. Who is going to read your book?
3. How are you going to create a transformation?
4. How will you keep the reader engaged to the end?

Answer these questions and you’ll avoid the mistake so many bright, creative, beautiful, big-hearted, world-changing kind of people with good ideas make: they write the wrong book or they never write their book at all.

I know how overwhelming it can be to have an idea that you believe in your heart is a good one but have no idea how to write it in a way that lands with a reader. I know how it feels to be plagued by a story you know you have to tell but not be sure if anyone else will ever read it. I’ve been there—and I’ve walked with hundreds of other authors, just like you, who have walked through the process as well.

It can be frustrating and confusing, and you might wonder if the struggle will ever be worth it. I can assure you it will.

I can also assure you that spending the time to struggle now will make the process of writing the book far more enjoyable. No more staring at a blinking cursor. No more angrily pacing around the block. No more skipping writing time to clean out the fridge (which, somehow when I’m supposed to be writing, becomes all-important).

It’s time to make progress on your idea, I can help.

Does it make you furious when you walk through the bookstore and realize there are books on the shelves—selling well—that are cheap (content-wise), shallow, or even unhelpful but are flying off the shelves?
I think it’s wrong that those books get shelf space while beautiful ideas sit dormant in people just like you because you don’t have the support you need to get them written.

I can help you get the idea in your head onto paper, and help you write it in a way that it will resonate with readers. Let me walk you through the four questions every author needs to ask (and answer) before they get started writing.

You ready?

Let’s go.
WHAT KIND OF BOOK WILL YOU WRITE?

Comparables Titles + Research

Getting started with the writing process can feel a little bit like feeling around in the dark for an object you’re not familiar with—even for an experienced writer. In fact, a very experienced writer friend of mine said to me the other day, as she launches into her seventh book, “I feel like I’m doing this all for the first time. I can’t remember what I’m supposed to do next…”

There is no such thing as creativity without chaos, sadly. The good news is I wrote this section of the program specifically to bring you clarity.

My hope is to give you something sturdy to hold onto so you can see your book begin to take shape. Almost as if someone is slowly turning the lights on. Or perhaps like you suddenly have a superhuman ability to see in the dark.

There is one main decision you need to make this week, and I can help you make it. Your decision goes like this: What “kind” of book are you going to write?

If we wanted to get specific, there are hundreds, if not thousands of book genres—everything from the creative non-fiction and fantasy to the lesser known “eco-fiction” and “nordic noir” (who even knows…) but for the sake of this exercise, I want to divide your book into two categories.

The two categories are as follows:

1. Story-driven books
2. Content-driven books

The reason I have you divide your book into one of these two admittedly broad categories is because it’s going to help me help you make some big decisions about your book in the next few months—without having to tailor a different manual for each of the thousands of different existing genres.

That said, here’s a brief description to help you.
STORY DRIVEN BOOKS
If you are writing a fiction book, your book is story-driven—meaning that the reason the reader turns the page from one page to the next is because they are wondering: what happens to the main character next? With story-driven books, the primary drive for reading the book has to do with... you guessed it... the story.

Hence the category: story-driven.

Here’s the catch.

Just because you’re writing a non-fiction book doesn’t mean your book isn’t story-driven, and just because you plan to tell stories in the book doesn’t mean your book is story-driven. If you’re writing a non-fiction book, but the primary interest of the reader is the story, rather than the content, then your book is story-driven.

Books like Wild by Cheryl Strayed or Eat Pray Love by Elizabeth Gilbert for example—are story-driven books, because the stories these authors are telling are the thing that keeps a reader turning from one page to the next, rather than the content.

Make sense?

CONTENT DRIVEN BOOKS
Content-driven books, on the other hand, are driven (big surprise...) by their content. In other words, the thing that keeps a reader turning the page of a content-driven book is the need to know the information that will appear on the next page. Content-driven books can be about any number of things, and, of course, they do use stories as a tool.

I will show you how that works.

But the reason you open a content-driven book is because you want to know:

- The facts about what took place during a certain period in history
- How to mix a cocktail
- Information about a certain person’s life
- A program for healing chronic pain
- How to be a better negotiator
- A process for buying and selling commercial real estate
- Principals for living a meaningful life
- 7 Habits of Highly Effective People
- Etc, etc
Content-driven books tend to be more didactic in nature, and usually more specific. If your book idea feels easy to categorize in a bookstore, it’s probably content-driven. If you feel like your book could go in the travel section, or dating and relationships, or possibly self-help... more than likely it’s a story-driven book. The story itself is the through-line—the thing that is keeping a reader interested.

The reason it’s important to know whether your book is content-driven or story-driven is because it will inform how you frame the book, how you title it, how you outline it, how you title the chapters, and certainly how you write it.

Knowing which kind of book you’re writing will help you keep your reader engaged through the entire book so they don’t read the first 50 pages and give up.

It’s incredibly important.

TO-DO

Below, circle which kind of book you’re writing:

Content-Driven  Story-Driven

COMPARABLE TITLES

Now that you’ve decided if your book is content-driven or story-driven, your next task is to choose comparable titles.

The term comparable titles is one that is used all the time in the publishing world and it means what it sounds like—books that are comparable to the book you want to write.

Don’t over-complicate this. Keep it simple.

Your task for this section is to choose a few books that either 1) inspire you as it relates to the project you want to work on or 2) remind you of the book you want to write. You’ll use at least three of these comparable titles in your book proposal document. But more importantly than this, these books will help you conceptualize the project you’re working on.

What books do you want your book to be like?

If comparable titles don’t immediately come to mind, you might need to do a little bit of research. That’s normal. The point is to not get months into the writing process and realize you never did have a clear vision of what you wanted your book to look, feel and be like.
BOOKS THAT MATCH THE CONTENT OF YOUR BOOK
The first kind of comparable titles you want to think about are books that match the content of your book. If your book is story-driven, choose a few books that remind you of the book you’re writing. For example, if your book is a story about your journey to finding faith, choose three books that are about a similar process.

If you’re working on a book of cocktail recipes, same thing. Choose three books that are also about cocktail recipes.

Choose three books that seem “like” your book.

In addition to the title of the book, list what make your book different from the book you’re comparing it to. Not only will publishers want to know what books are like yours, and also how they’re different (should you choose to go the traditional publishing route) but also this activity will help you get more specific about the identity of your book.

☐ TO-DO

List your three comparable titles—and what makes your book different—below.

1. TITLE:  
   HERE’S WHAT MAKES MY BOOK DIFFERENT:

2. TITLE:  
   HERE’S WHAT MAKES MY BOOK DIFFERENT:

3. TITLE:  
   HERE’S WHAT MAKES MY BOOK DIFFERENT:
BOOKS THAT MATCH THE STYLE + TONE OF YOUR BOOK
You might find that although the three books you chose above match the content of your book, they aren’t at all the style or tone of the book you want to write. You might want your book to be a little bit more modern, or more conservative, or more subtle. You might want your book to be a little softer, or have some more humor, or to get to the point a little faster.

That’s why I also have you choose three books that match the style or tone.

What I want you to do next is to choose three books where the author seems to capture the tone of what you want to write. The catch here is the books you list below do not have to match the content of your book. You might list a book below simply for the author’s sense of humor, or for the long flowing sentences, or for the directness of the syntax, or for how poetic it reads.

If there is one thing I’ve learned from working with hundreds of writers, it’s that what we read has the greatest impact on what we write.

So if you’re reading Amy Poehler and Jim Gaffigan, your writing is going to have a whole different tone than if you’re reading JK Rowling or Anne Lamott. When I was reading Pat Conroy and John Steinbeck, I found myself, without thinking about it, writing long, sprawling descriptions of the scenery and the landscape. When I was reading Bill Bryson, I started writing with that bit of dry British wit so distinctive of his prose.

TO-DO
Below, list a few books that match the tone and style you’re trying to capture:

1. TITLE:
   WHAT I LOVE ABOUT THE STYLE OF THIS BOOK

2. TITLE:
   WHAT I LOVE ABOUT THE STYLE OF THIS BOOK

3. TITLE:
   WHAT I LOVE ABOUT THE STYLE OF THIS BOOK
BOOKS THAT MATCH THE FORMAT OF YOUR BOOK

Finally, I want you to choose three books that match the format of the book you want to write. They might not match the content of the book at all, and they might not even match the tone, but maybe you want to write a coffee-table type book with lots of pictures. Or perhaps you want your book to be short-essay style, where all the essays fit together because of subject matter, but can be read and understood independently.

Maybe you want your book to have small print and be hardback like another book you’ve seen, or maybe you envision your book having plenty of illustrations and larger print. Make note of these things.

What are some books that match the format of your book as you see it in your head?

TO-DO

Below, list a few books that match the format of your book as you see it in your head:

1. TITLE:
   WHAT I LOVE ABOUT THE FORMAT OF THIS BOOK

2. TITLE:
   WHAT I LOVE ABOUT THE FORMAT OF THIS BOOK

3. TITLE:
   WHAT I LOVE ABOUT THE FORMAT OF THIS BOOK

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Before I became a writer I remembering wondering what it actually meant to
“research” for a book. Far more often than “researching” for my own writing I would find myself writing without a plan, writing into something to see if there was anything there worth writing about in the first place, and writing mostly about my life experiences, which to me didn’t seem to need much (if any) “research”.

But maybe I was missing something?

If you’re writing a content-driven book, the research you need to do might be pretty obvious. Perhaps there are a list of books or studies in your field you need to read and become familiar with.

Maybe there are other “experts” on the topic you’re writing about who have made claims you agree with; but maybe they’re missing some important element that you would like to add. Maybe there are podcasts to listen to or lectures to attend so that you can be fully informed about the information that’s out there and how you’re going to contribute something unique or different.

You need a system in place to collect your research.

It doesn’t have to be complex. It just needs to exist.

If you are writing a story-driven book, doing your “research” may be less direct and harder to control. Research can be things like experiences you have, conversations with people, things you notice in the world, epiphanies you have, even quotes you see on Instagram. Of course, there may also be books to read, podcasts to listen to, lectures to attend, etc.

But when it comes to story-driven books, the research is usually less didactic and more experiential, which can make it hard to pin down.

HINT: Almost without fail, when I’m working with authors who are writing personal stories from their life, we map out their entire outline using a narrative structure, and when we get to the end of the arc (where the crescendo of the conflict happens, and the resolution—I’ll get to that later) and there are “missing” chapters. Usually the last two chapters simply haven’t happened yet.

The real life “research” that needs to be done is to actually live the end of the story.
The most fascinating and miraculous part of all of this—since we don’t always feel a sense of control over the resolution to our stories—is that once I have these clients imagine an ending to the story that would be satisfying to them, and begin to write the first part of the story, the last to chapters tend to take place in real time.

Almost without fail.

I could write for paragraphs about the brain science behind this, but I’ll leave that for another time since my point is that sometimes “research” looks like reading a book or listening to a lecture and sometimes it looks like simply paying attention to what is happening around you and continuing to stay in the writing process even when you aren’t sure how the story is going to turn out.

If starting a book feels like feeling around in the dark, the process of writing it feels like slowly turning the lights on. You’re making sense of things that haven’t made sense before. Finding clarity where things used to be fuzzy.

**KEEPING TRACK OF YOUR RESEARCH**

Regardless if you’re writing a content-driven book or a story-driven book, you need a place to keep track of your research. It doesn’t have to be complicated. It just has to exist—meaning it might be a written journal or it might be the notes app on your iPhone. It might be a tool like Evernote or Scrivener.

The method doesn’t matter nearly as much as the fact that you have a method.

Think of yourself as a collector. Now that you’re in the “research” phase of this book, your job is to begin to collect things from the world that you can see, analyze, process and return to your reader with some meaning; to collect stories and ideas and experiences and quotes and to digest these things and process them and turn them into something wholly new.
Decide how you're going to “collect” your research.

Among the things you might collect...

- Quotes
- Research
- Ideas
- Stories
- Articles
- Thoughts
- Etc.

Some Questions to Consider

1. How are you going to keep track of your writing and research as it relates to this book?

2. Who might you need to talk to to help you “research” for this project? Make a list.

3. What books might you need to read that you haven't read yet? Make a list.

4. What would need to happen to “resolve” the story you’re writing about? What would a resolution look like or feel like?

5. What are some podcasts you could listen to, or lectures you could attend that would help you with research?

6. Is there anything else you need to think about as far as research goes?

Next week we'll launch right into talking about your reader—and you'll be shocked how quickly you see your idea begin to take shape.
Most authors don’t spend nearly enough time thinking about their reader before they begin writing. I would argue this is the primary reason we end up with so many terribly boring, disorganized books that could have done well in the marketplace or at least had an impact if only the writer had exercised some forethought.

Let me be clear.

By “reader,” I don’t mean a mash-up demographic profile of a potential reader who might walk into Barnes & Noble or login to their Amazon account to purchase your book. I’ve sat through dozens, if not hundreds, of sales meetings where this is most of the conversation about a book—demographics or mash-ups of potential readers—and I think it’s a huge mistake.

What happens when we focus on “pretend” readers is we get “pretend” writing. At its best, it’s forced and contrived—the way it would sound if you were writing an email to an unknown reader, rather than a love note to your spouse. At its worst, it completely misses the mark and is boring and flat.

When I say “reader,” what I mean is a person whose name you know and face you can see. One specific person you hope will pick up the book you’re about to write and experience some specific kind of transformation.

Who makes you think to yourself…

“If this one person reads my book, all the time and energy I spent would be worth it…”

When I ask authors to do this, some of them have a hard time coming up with one person, and I tell them, until they complete the exercise, they’re not ready to begin writing. It’s simply too challenging to write anything meaningful or worthwhile when you can’t hone in on one specific desired reader.

Others have the opposite problem—too many readers come to mind when they think of their “who,” and in that case, I recommend they complete the following exercise for two or three or even five readers.
FOR EACH READER I EMPHASIZE:
This is someone you know in real life—or someone you’ve had communication with through email or social media channels. It is not an imagined person. This is not speculating what kind of car a person might drive, or how much money she makes each year, or what she does in her free time.

In fact, I’ll give you a list of questions you can ask about your readers that will help you get the kind of specific information you need in order to be able to write anything interesting.

If your writing is falling flat, you’re probably lacking a reader. Decent books are well-written. Incredible books are love letters. So I’ll tell what I tell every author who ever comes across my path, even those who swear they aren’t “real” writers: Write it like a love letter.

You can’t do this until you know who you’re writing to.

DEMOGRAPHICS AREN’T ENOUGH—AND HERE’S WHY.
The “demographics” conversation has been an accepted approach for ages in the marketing context, but it’s insufficient when it comes to writing a book. Demographics get to the general, but great writing is anything but general.

The universals are found in the specifics. All the depth and humor and fleshiness and resonance that good writing requires comes from the specificity and humanity of writing to a single person.

The best way to explain it is to use an analogy.

If you were going to a birthday party for someone you’d never met before, and you were given a list of “demographics” about that person—their yearly income, what kind of car they drive, what they do in their free time—you could maybe make a good guess about what kind of present to buy for them. You might even get lucky and make a purchase they appreciate.

But what would you say when it came time to write the card? What memories could you share that would be personal enough to elicit a visceral response from them—tears or a knowing smile? I’d be surprised if you were able to pull off anything better than, “Hope you love this massage!” or “Enjoy this on your next vacation!”

“Write it like a love letter.”
On the other hand, if you know someone personally, you could write a card that sounded more like...

Dear Darla—
I saw this and immediately thought of Bermuda. Maybe next time you have a tragic accident on the first five minutes of an 8-hour plane flight, you’ll be prepared ;)
Here’s to many more adventures together.
Aubrey

Truthfully, even to someone who doesn’t know the writer, and doesn’t know Darla, your brain is already hooked with open story loops.

Who is Darla, and what happened in Bermuda?

You might even find yourself smiling a bit, thinking of a time when you or someone you knew had a “tragic” accident on a long flight...

What is the gift, and where can you get one?

This is good writing—perhaps from someone who isn’t even a “writer.”

TO-DO

Defining your readers.

Start by choosing the three readers you’d like to focus on.

Reader 1:
Reader 2:
Reader 3:

Here are some questions to ask yourself about each reader as it relates to the content of your book. Don’t worry about writing out all of the answers to these questions, but spend some time thinking through how you might answer them for each reader.
Assignment: Spend time considering the answers to these questions for each of your three identified readers.

List your answers (or some short notes) in the left column (“before”) of the tables below.

IDENTIFY THE TRANSFORMATION
I want you to keep four words in your brain as you read about paradigm shifts:

1. Think...
2. Know...
3. Feel...
4. Do...

The question we are trying to answer here goes like this: what do you want your reader to think, know, feel, or do differently after reading your book that they couldn't do before reading your book?

How is your reader going to change?

Not only does this help you know where to start your book, where to finish and what to include, it also keeps your reader engaged throughout the entire manuscript. Our brains get “hooked” when they are introduced to a problem and a possible solution.

This is why we can’t get enough of the highly formulaic and predictable shows where houses, people, wardrobes, make-up, hairstyles, and even personalities are transformed in the matter of a 30-minute episode. On a logical level, most of us recognize this to be unrealistic. On a primal level, we’re pulled by the idea of tension, conflict, and progress and change.

- The frumpy, homeschool mom becomes the stylish business woman.
- The underdog sports team becomes the reigning champion.
- The unassuming woman becomes the intoxicating love interest.
- The insecure, bumbling man becomes the hero who saves the day.

When we watch a character move from one position to a new (seemingly better) position, we are immediately engaged. What kind of transformation are you trying to help your reader have?
What would you like the reader to think, feel, know, or do differently after they read your book that they couldn’t do before? What kind of shift or transformation do you want your reader to have as they read your story?

Below, take some time to look at what you recorded for “before” your reader picks up your book. Perhaps you wrote something like, “Struggles with knowing the meaning for life” or “Can’t seem to scale her business.” How might that change for your reader after he or she reads the book?

Record your thoughts in the “after” column for each reader.

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Think. Know. Do. Feel.
List the paradigm shifts.

Your last task for this week is to take the "shifts" you identified above and turn them into statements called paradigm shifts. A paradigm shift is simply a change in thinking or approach. So how do you want your reader to change how they think, what they know, how they feel, or what they do after reading your book?

Try to get as specific as possible. Examples:

- The reader will move from feeling anxious about the unknown to embracing the unknown with curiosity, joy, and grace.
- The reader will move from thinking that the person who makes the first move in a negotiation has the most power to knowing it can sometimes be strategic to let your opponent make the first move.
- The reader will sign up for a gym membership.
- The reader will be move from being satisfied with the status quo to craving more adventure in their life.
- The reader will know the five most common responses to trauma.

Brainstorm at least 10 paradigm shifts. I'll give you space for as many as 20.

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HOW WILL YOU TRANSFORM YOUR READER?

Themes, Threads + Notes to the Reader

One mistake many writers make is not thinking ahead of time about what the reader needs to hear in order to make the kind of transformation you hope they will make. If you leave this to chance, your reader won’t engage in any transformation at all, and they’ll abandon your book before they finish.

What hooks us to books is:
desire ——> obstacle ——> transformation.

Even in a fiction book, the reader needs to be reminded, over and over again, that there is a transformation taking place. Readers are wondering: What is the point of the story? Why should I continue reading? What am I supposed to be paying attention to? It’s our job as writers to make this clear for them.

We do this with themes, threads, and what I call “notes to the reader.”

Here’s a trick. If you wait until during or after the writing process to think about these, you’re setting yourself up for writer’s block. I can explain the brain science around this later, but for now, know it’s simply too hard to think about what the reader needs to hear and the details and information you’re trying to communicate, both at the same time.

On the other hand, if you think about themes, threads, and notes to the reader ahead of time, you can appropriately forget about these concerns while you’re writing, and then think about them again while you’re editing.

THEMES AND THREADS
The human brain needs to hear a message at least eight times before it can remember and repeat it, so in order for your book to have its intended impact, you will need to state, repeat, and reiterate the most important messages for the reader using themes, threads, and notes to the reader.

In this section, I’ll show you how to do this.
THEMES
You probably remember talking about “themes” in your high school English class—and what we’re talking about here is no different. Themes are simply topics you cover and reiterate in your manuscript so that they stay with the reader, like: freedom, authenticity, or what it means to be a leader. Themes are usually communicated subtly (unlike threads, which I’ll get to in a minute). This is why, in English class, hours of conversation can be had around what themes different readers see present in the book. Themes are things like:

• Love conquers all.
• Finding hope in the darkness
• Vulnerability is strength.
• We can be our own worst enemy.
• Our bodies hold truths our minds can’t handle.

TIP: take a book or two from the last section and spend some time determining what themes the author wove throughout the entire book. How did the author bring your attention to these themes? Was it through the design or interior layout of the book? Through stories or a single story they told? Through repeated words or phrases? One of the most effective ways to learn how to incorporate themes in your writing is to pay attention to how great authors do it.

Themes do not have to be addressed exactly the same way each time you bring them up. In fact, they tend to work best when they’re subtle. But it’s good to know ahead of time the three to five themes that you’ll focus on in the book so they’re primed in your mind as you write and can drive you as you create your content.

To brainstorm the themes you want to focus on in your book, I recommend brainstorming a long list of words or short phrases and then narrowing them down to the most important few.

掀 TO-DO

Write below three to five themes you will use to capture your reader’s attention and invite transformation in your book:

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
THREADS
Threads differ from themes in that they tend to be a little more explicit.

Threads are repeated objects, images, words, or phrases that you intentionally use throughout your manuscript so your reader pays attention to what you’re trying to say.

Think of threads like a popcorn trail you leave for your reader so they find their way.

Maybe, for example, there is a red scarf that shows up in more than one chapter of your manuscript so that the reader remembers a key detail from other scenes where that red scarf was also present. Perhaps the red scarf is the thread that makes it obvious the character you’re referring to.

Have you seen the episode of FRIENDS where the “red sweater” is how Monica and Phoebe find out the father of Rachel’s baby? That’s an example of a thread at work.

Maybe a thread is a word or phrase that you repeat multiple times at different points in the manuscript so it draws your reader’s attention back to the point you’re trying to make. Repetition, when done well, is not only deeply satisfying for our brains (think of the feeling you get when you are driving a route that is familiar to you—it triggers a sense of ease and peace knowing you know the way), but also repetition helps us carve new pathways in our brains so we can make a needed change. This is why threads can be such a powerful tool when it comes to helping your reader make a transformation as they’re reading your book.

In my most recent book, I repeat the phrase “I am in my life with my whole heart” several times throughout the entire manuscript, after my yoga instructor Sarah says this to us during a yoga class. This is one of the phrases I hear from readers has the greatest impact on them—and a big part of that is because I was intentional to repeat it so they couldn’t miss its importance.

SOME EXAMPLES OF THREADS YOU COULD USE...

Color
Try using different items of the same color or the same item that is a distinct color to draw the reader’s attention to something you don’t want them to miss

Weather
If a thunderstorm rolls in during the opening scene of the book and again at the closing scene, the reader will make an instinctual connection between the two
Setting
What if three different conversations happened in the same setting, so the reader noticed the connection between the three?

Phrases
Like I did in my book you can use a phrase more than one time to make sure the reader doesn’t forget or miss what you are trying to communicate

TIP: sometimes threads don’t become clear until you’ve done some writing and are a little further along with your content. Don’t get discouraged if you aren’t able to get what feels like a complete list while you’re brainstorming now. It’s good to brainstorm now, since it primes your brain to think of the answer to these questions as you write.

The best answer may not come until later, as you write.

WHAT THE READER NEEDS TO HEAR.
When I do this activity with authors in person, we paste their three reader profiles on the wall of our workspace and try to imagine that each of their three readers are sitting in front of them. Then I ask, “If the reader were going to make the transformation you’ve spelled out here, what would he or she need to hear?” I listen as they talk and try to capture the phrases, directives, instructions, and sound bytes they share.

They say things like:

- He needs to know that in order to get to his goal, he’s going to need discipline, stamina, and strength.
- She needs to know she has everything she needs to find a relationship that is satisfying to her.
- She needs a financial plan that can get her out of debt.
- He needs to know traveling is the way to expand his view of the world.
- She needs to know she can be in love or be in control, but not both.

Another way to get at this would be to go through the writing you’ve already done—or perhaps things you’ve shared on social media—and capture the ones that feel most pertinent to the reader’s transformation. It will become clear later, when you get to the framing lesson in Month Two, why these “notes to the reader” are so important. For now, simply find a way to begin capturing them in one place.
TIP: If you’re starting to see overlap or repetition in these three lists—good! That’s great news. The entire point of this section is to focus your own attention on the things you’ll ask your reader to focus on throughout the text. It doesn’t need to be extensive or complicated. It simply needs to be clear. This clarity will help not only you as you dive into the (sometimes chaotic) writing process, but will also help your reader to get exactly what you want for them to have as they read.

Now it’s time to brainstorm the phrases, directives, or instructions your reader is going to need from you in order to get where they want to go.

TIP: These are often the phrases that get pulled from books to post on Twitter or that are turned into shareable images for Facebook or Instagram. They’re short, to-the-point, poignant phrases spoken directly to a reader.

Here are some examples:

- “In yoga they say you’re entitled to your effort but not your outcomes. Part of me wonders if this is true with love, too. Maybe while we’ve been trying so hard to make love work, we forgot love was already working.” —Excerpt from Indestructible: Leveraging Your Broken Heart to Become a Force of Love and Change in the World

- “Regardless of who we are, how we were raised, or what we believe, all of us fight hidden, silent battles against not being good enough.” —Excerpt from Brene Brown’s I Thought it Was Just Me (but it isn’t)

- “What companies say and do matters. A lot. It is at the WHAT level that a cause is brought to live.” —Excerpt from Simon Sinek’s Start with Why

- “Doing comedy is, in a lot of ways, like a pony and a camel trying to escape from a zoo. It’s a ridiculous endeavor and has a low probability of success, but most importantly, it is way easier if you’re with a friend.” —Excerpt from Amy Pohler’s Yes, Please.

TO-DO

Record at least 10 phrases you know your reader needs to hear in order to experience a transformation.

1. 6.
2. 7.
3. 8.
4. 9.
5. 10.
One of the biggest mistakes so many authors make in the writing process is focusing too much on the information they want to communicate (like what you listed above) and not nearly enough on the vehicle of that communication. The information you want to communicate is important, but it won’t be effective without a tool to engage your reader’s attention.

Stories are that tool.

Story, as Donald Miller says, is the most powerful tool to engage the human brain.

I’ve seen this to be true universally across all spectrums. When it comes to keynote speeches, movies, television, theatre, music, art, and, of course, books, fiction and non-fiction alike—if there is a clear story, the author, presenter, or artist has a tremendous advantage as it relates to moving an audience toward a desired result.

If you can build a compelling story arc—meaning if you can open story loops, introduce problems, artfully demonstrate how characters are moving toward resolution of those problems, and keep enough of the tension unresolved until the end of the book, readers will not only finish your entire book, they’ll lose track of time while they’re doing it.

Every time I use this technique, this is the feedback I get.

• I opened the book and couldn’t stop reading...
• I didn’t mean to finish in a single sitting, but I couldn’t put it down...
• I read the entire thing on a plane ride home, and then handed it to my husband—who doesn’t read—and he finished it before he went to bed that night!

Story is profound and powerful, and if we want to be communicators of any kind, we need to learn how to use it.
Two things to think about:

1. What are the stories you will tell in your manuscript?
2. What is the story of your reader, and how will you make connections between their story and the story you are telling?

THE STORIES YOU TELL
Whether you’re writing a content-driven or story-driven book, there are dozens of stories you’re going to tell in your book. You might be thinking “No, it’s really just one story”—the story of my epic climb to the top of Kilimanjaro, or the story of my marriage and divorce, or the story of my complicated relationship with my father. These descriptions are, of course, looking at your story from a 30k foot view. What we need to do is zoom in a little bit and begin thinking about the more detailed stories you are going to tell.

What are the “scenes” or “moments” that take place to make up the larger story?

It’s not specific enough to say that this book is a story about a princess who is rescued from a terrible stepmother by a charming prince. As the writer, you also need to know that there is going to be a scene where the evil stepmother locks the young woman in the cellar so she can’t go to the ball, a moment where the young woman is dressed by birds and a few mischievous mice, and finally a moment when the prince knocks on the front door holding the glass slipper.

A traditional trade book is usually between 50-75k words, and when we start to think about scenes, this no longer feels like a daunting number.

Now we know how we’re going to fill all of that space.

- What are the necessary scenes?
- What is the dialogue that takes place in each scene?
- What does each setting look like? Smell like? Sound like?
- What are the individual characters thinking, and how are they feeling?
- How can you demonstrate those thoughts and feelings with actions?
- Where are they standing in relationship to each other?
- What are they doing with their bodies?

Think of yourself like a movie director—and now you’re having to communicate a lot of information to the reader not only using your words, but using the setting, the camera angles, and how people are moving around the screen.
If you were going to play this out like a movie, what would be the opening scene? Who would be on the screen? What is the action that’s taking place? Where are people standing? What are they doing with their hands and arms? How do we know that they’re angry, upset, sad, depressed, frustrated, confused, or stuck? What are they doing with their face or body that gives us these clues?

**TO-DO**

The vital scenes:
List the vital scenes to the overarching story. Get as specific as possible:

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SHOW VERSUS TELL.
One of the most profound tools to improve your writing and engage a reader is what creative writers call show versus tell. What this refers to is the way truly gifted writers will show their reader what they mean, rather than simply telling them.

It's the difference between:

“Cotton candy reminds me of my father...”

AND

“My father wasn’t around much, but he used to show up every Sunday night with that sweet, pink sticky substance and hand it to me with a wry smile. I would wait for him on the front steps of our house, listening for the sound of his old Dodge truck sputtering in the distance, feeling charged with anticipation as I clutched my tiny and expectant hands tightly in my lap. To this day, I still can’t taste the sugary melt-in-your-mouth substance without feeling like I’m about to jump out of my skin, without hearing the clunk clunk clunk of that dirty green truck coming around the corner...”

The difference is clear.

Which one is more interesting to read?

TIP: one of the hardest skills to master when it comes to writing a book is what I call pacing, which just means the way that you build the story and the arc of the narrative with enough tension to keep a reader intrigued, but not so much tension and mystery that they get confused. Most of us do this quite naturally in settings where we have a shorter period of time—think of the last time you told a funny anecdote with a group of friends over dinner. You know how many details to include, and where to detour from the story to add an interesting fact so that your listeners get the point without taking up the entire two hours at the dinner table. In a book, you’re doing the same thing. The only difference is now you have way more space than you’ve ever had before.

WRITING PRACTICE
Like I said, practicing show versus tell is the fastest way to grow as a writer, the best way to get better at engaging a reader, and will make you feel like an experienced author, even if you aren’t.
Here's a quick activity to try.

**TO-DO**

Take the list of emotions below and try to write a “scene” for each.

By “scene,” I mean see if you can show your reader that a character is feeling the particular emotion you’ve chosen, without saying it. Rather than saying “he’s sad,” can you paint the picture of what would have to happen on a movie screen in order for the viewer to know it’s true? Pretend you’re directing a movie.

- Where do you have this person stand?
- What surrounds them?
- What took place to trigger the feeling?
- What choices do they make?
- How do they move their body through space?
- What are they doing with their face or their hands?
- What words come out of their mouth?

See if you can write an entire scene (500-1000 words) that demonstrates the emotion without ever saying what the emotion is.

This is show versus tell.

Choose from the list of emotions below.

- Terrified
- Infuriated
- Bored
- Devastated
- Enthusiastic
- Humiliated
- Confused
MONTH
TWO
WHERE TO START, WHERE TO FINISH, WHAT TO INCLUDE, WHAT TO LEAVE OUT

Authors almost always come to me with the same few questions about their books:

1. Where do I begin?
2. Where do I end?
3. What details should I include?
4. What details should I leave out?

I get it. I’ve asked these same questions myself and all the smaller questions that go with them (how do I know what details are interesting to a reader, and which ones are only interesting to me?). And the stakes are high here. If you can’t get the answers to these questions right, not only will you have a hard time creating a cohesive outline, you’re also likely to question the validity of your idea.

Authors often ask: how do I know this will matter for a reader?

Your answer is in your outline.

In this section, I’m going to teach you a formula you can follow to outline your book. This is not only a massive chunk of your proposal document—which you’ll need to pitch your idea to agents and publishers (we’ll complete this in Month 3), it’s also the road map for writing your book.

It will make your chapters more compelling, your words more transformational, and ensure your audience stays engaged from start to finish.

It also shaves months, even years, off of your book-writing process. Authors try to skip this part of the process because it’s hard, and it takes time. It’s a big mistake.

I’ve written 10+ books (that number keeps growing) and reduced my writing time from 2.5 years to around two weeks. I’ve helped hundreds of authors shave months, and even years, off of their writing time as well—all by following this same process.
HERE’S HOW IT WORKS...

WEEK 1: CREATING AN ARC
In the first week of this month, I’ll teach you a few key rules to narrative structure that, regardless of the type of book you’re writing (story-driven or content-driven) will impact the way you think about structuring chapters and the book itself.

WEEK 2: LEAVING OPEN LOOPS
For Week 2, I’ll address the major problem that most readers never make it past page 25 of a book. I’ll also talk about how opening and closing story loops is the key to capturing a reader’s attention and holding it for a few hundred pages.

WEEK 3: MAPPING IT OUT
In the third week, I’ll show you the system I use when I work one-on-one with authors to outline their books. It’s the same exact system I’ve used for every book I’ve ever ghostwritten, and it’s the same system I used to outline my latest book, Indestructible. This is the point in the process where authors I work with often turn to the note cards we’ve placed on the floor, look at me with a smile and say, “That’s my book!”

WEEK 4: WRITING CHAPTER TITLES AND SUMMARIES
Finally, I’ll show you how to take what we’ve done with the notecards on the floor and turn them into chapter titles and summaries. You’ll need these for your proposal document, which we’ll complete in Month 3, but they are also the road map for writing your book.

I know writing an outline seems like a massive and impossible task—especially if this is your first time doing it. I know you’ll be tempted at times to skip this part of the process and jump right into the writing. That course of action would make little more sense than putting no destination in your GPS and aimlessly driving around town, hoping you’ll eventually make it somewhere interesting.

Eventually, you might.

More than likely, you will not (did you even know where you wanted to go?)

If you take this process step-by-step, it doesn’t have to be overwhelming. And if you do the heavy lifting now, you won’t have to do it while you’re in the much-more-sticky process of writing.

You won’t regret it, and I can help. Let’s get started.
M O N T H  2,  W E E K  1

S H A P I N G  T H E  S T O R Y

Creating a Narrative Arc

I know you want to write something compelling.

If you’re like me and the writers I work with, you want to write something that transcends the ordinary—not just another book on someone’s bookshelf that winds up collecting dust. We want to create something that comforts people, helps them, entertains them, and that lasts over the decades. We want to create something truly remarkable.

The problem is there are millions of books in the world and only a few that really capture our attention. Most readers stop reading a book after about 25 pages, and 95% of books never sell more than 1000 copies. I’m sure you’ve had an experience yourself where you abandoned a book 20-30 pages in only to say to yourself, “That book should have been an article.”

If you have, my guess is it wasn’t that the writer’s idea wasn’t robust enough. It was that the author didn’t understand the principals I’m about to teach you in this section that are guaranteed to deliver an idea in a way that lands. It’s likely the author gave you too much information too soon or not enough in the beginning. You don’t want your book to be like that.

As a happy benefit, when you follow the principles I’ll teach this week, it will also help you make sense of your personal story. I’ve watched hundreds of authors start to filter their personal narratives through this lens and for the first time realize how they are the hero of their own story, how much control they have to create change, how much resolution has already come, and how much more is on the way.

Authors who commit to this process report measurable changes in their physical health: reduced cortisol levels (the hormone most directly related to stress, weight gain, poor sleep, etc), fewer visits to the doctor for issues like flu and upper-respiratory infections, and even reduced levels of anxiety and depression.
It inspires measurable and tangible changes in things like finances, romantic relationships, and career trajectory. This has proven to be true not only in my own life and the clients I work with, but it is also well-documented and researched. Writing is one of the most powerful ways to generate positive change in your life.

When you want to quit, remind yourself: the first life that your book will change is yours. Here’s to many others thereafter.

Authors worry out loud to me all the time, “Someone else has already written this book, and they’ve done it better than I could.”

I understand the fear, but I need to remind you that that’s simply not true.

You have something profound and unique and powerful to say, and I can make sure you’re fully equipped to say it in a way that is going to capture a reader’s attention.

I know it’s defeating to worry that an idea you hold close to your heart—something you invest in and slave over the way you’re doing with this idea, right now—won’t have the impact you want it to have. Let me teach you the most powerful tool I’ve ever learned that makes your writing impossible to ignore.

STEP 1: PROBLEMS, PROBLEMS, PROBLEMS

One of the main reasons readers quit reading a book before it’s done is the book lacks tension.

When we think of a word like tension, we don’t tend to have a positive association with it. Nobody likes tension in their relationships, tension at work, or tension at the dinner table.

But when it comes to being a writer, we must retrain ourselves: tension is good.

In fact, tension is necessary to a good piece of writing.

So consider it your job to not only point out the tension that is already at work in the story you’re telling, and in the life of your reader, but also to amplify that tension—meaning to turn up the volume on it a little bit. You’ve felt a writer do this anytime you’ve watched a good thriller movie, or listened to a mystery podcast (like Serial), or clicked from episode to episode on Netflix.

The way those writers keep us engaged is through amplifying tension—getting us to feel something we don’t want to feel (fun, right?). The way good writers amplify tension is by clearly identifying the problems.
Ah, problems. Another fun word. I mean, who doesn’t like to be described as the one who is constantly pointing out problems? Unfortunately, as a writer, this comes with the territory. Where it seems there are no problems, a writer must go seek them out… or choose to write about something else.

So in order to capture a reader’s attention, we need to get really clear about the problems you will address in this book, and the question I ask you in Step 1 is designed to do that.

First, let’s identify the main problem you’re addressing in this book:

- Content-driven writers
  Identify the main problem you’re helping a reader to overcome with your book

- Story-driven writers
  Identify the main problem you had to overcome in your overall story

Write your problem below:
The problem my readers will overcome is:
The problem I had to overcome was:

Inside of the “big” problem you wrote above, exist dozens of “little” problems (like sub-problems). These are the problems within the problems. They’re the smaller problems that have to get solved if the bigger problems will ever be resolved.

For example, if the big problem is financial insecurity, the little problems are things like debt, overspending, impulse purchases, lack of job opportunity, not following a budget, not knowing how to budget, etc., etc.

What are all of the little problems within this problem?

1.
2.
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4.
5.
STEP 2: CREATING A PATH
Okay, so you don’t introduce problems to your reader without also offering them solutions, but anyone who has ever faced a real problem in their life knows that solutions don’t always come easily, and they don’t come without some help.

That’s what your book is here for. To solve some problems. In order to do that, we need to make it clear for our readers how these problems get resolved.

I’m certain the list below isn’t exhaustive, but it is designed to get you thinking about how problems get resolved so that you can craft chapters that introduce a problem, offer a way to resolve the problem, demonstrate the true difficulty a person might face when it comes to implementing solutions, and also invite them into that worthy process of transformation.

Here are a few ways problems get resolved:

**Advice from Others:**
This could be advice from a friend or family member, but it could also be advice from books, podcasts, or other authors.

**Experiences that are challenging or out of the ordinary:**
Like climbing a mountain or a difficult yoga class.

**Moments of transformation:**
In storytelling, sometimes this is called an “inciting incident,” but characters in stories can sometimes have a moment of transformation because they realize they want something they don’t have, because they get embarrassed, because they realize a milestone is coming up, because they have a run-in with an old boyfriend or girlfriend, etc.

For both content-driven and story-driven writers, the question is this: how did your problems get resolved, and how will you help your reader resolve the same problems?

STEP 3: “ALL IS LOST” MOMENT(S)
I stole this term from screenwriting, and it’s one of my favorites. The “all is lost” moment is the moment in every sports film you’ve ever watched where it seems like the team who has fought so hard to get to the crucial moment where they now stand seems like they might blow their chances. They’re choking. There is no time left.
And in that moment, you feel it with them—the devastating impact of a loss that hasn’t even happened yet. This is intentional on the part of the writer, by the way. It does for you (the viewer) exactly what I talked about at the beginning of this section, which is increase the tension. It points out the reality of how truly difficult it is to solve problems, makes it clear what will be lost if the solution doesn’t work, and even makes it more satisfying when the hero sinks the game-winning shot.

What this does, in the context of telling a story, is it raises the stakes. It makes a reader realize how much they actually care about seeing the successful outcome.

It’s not only incredibly effective for keeping a reader engaged, it’s also the best way to see your reader experience a true transformation.

In a story-driven book, the “all is lost” moment is often easier to determine. You can strategically place heartbreaking moments from the personal story you are telling at the end of a chapter, or the second to last chapter of the book, in order to raise the stakes and the drama and keep the reader turning from one page to the next.

If you’re writing a content-driven book, “all is lost” is more about what your reader will experience if they don’t begin solving their problems now. This needs to be clearly defined, and part of how you do that might be sharing a scene or story of someone else who waited too long to deal with their problems.

The point is that you need all is lost moments—right before a chapter ends and right before a book resolves (second to last chapter).

**TO-DO**

If you’re writing a story-driven book, list three “all is lost” moments in your story:

1. 
2. 
3. 

If you’re writing a content-driven book, list three “all is lost” stories you could use to raise the stakes for your reader:

1. 
2. 
3.
STEP 4: RESOLUTION
Have you ever wondered why we love happy endings so much?

It’s because your brain actually gets a little hit of dopamine when it witnesses a clear resolution to a problem. When it comes to content-driven books, defining a clear resolution can be black and white.

It’s simply the answer to the following questions:

1. How did this problem finally get resolved?
2. What took place when the problem was finally resolved?

When it comes to our personal stories, things can get a little more complicated. Most of us have never clearly articulated a clear resolution to our problem (perhaps because a clear resolution hasn’t taken place yet and perhaps because a desirable resolution seems impossible).

That said, I’ve watched dozens of writers I’ve worked with follow this process. They begin writing a personal story for which there has been no real-life desired resolution (nor is there one in sight) and see the resolution come as they write toward it, almost as if they had written the ending themselves.

If this isn’t motivation to write our stories, I’m not sure what is.

For story-driven writers, answer the following questions:

1. How did this problem finally get resolved (or what is the hope of resolution?)
2. How did things change when the problem was finally solved?

Whatever you do, don’t get to the end of a chapter or the end of a book and not clearly articulate the resolution. Our brains are satisfied by resolution (think of how you feel when a musical chord finally resolves).

Not only will your brain be satisfied by the resolution, so will your readers. Together you can celebrate that you are overcoming problems, staying engaged in your life, and experiencing all the satisfaction and power that comes along with being the hero of your own story.

“Our brains are satisfied by resolution”
The good news is that if you follow the arc I taught in the last chapter, you will write an outline (and therefore a book) that pulls your reader through each chapter, enticing them with the right amount of tension, offering them a hope for resolution, and then finally giving them the long-awaited satisfaction of resolve.

The problem is that if you stop here, you'll still likely lose readers along the way.

There's one more trick I need to teach you in order to ensure readers can't help but turn from one chapter to the next.

The most common piece of feedback I get on my most recent book goes like this: “I read it in a single sitting.” The book isn’t especially short. Not any shorter than my first book, which never received comments like that, or than any other trade books of its kind. The book is also 100% story-driven—my personal story, which in and of itself isn’t particularly out of the ordinary.

So what keeps readers so engaged?

Story loops.

I’ve watched hundreds of authors who don’t know this trick make the mistake I can help you avoid. It’s the first thing I fix when I’m editing a book. It’s the fastest way to make improvements to a manuscript.

Most writing teachers will call this something like, “opening and closing paragraphs.” That’s fair. It’s exactly where you’re working.

But the question is: How do you write compelling opening and closing paragraphs?

How do you make it impossible for your reader to stop reading once they’ve read the first few sentences on the page? How do you make it impossible to stop turning from one chapter to the next?
The answer is found in opening and closing story loops. One reason I think story loops work so well is this is the way we experience our lives. We’re constantly asking ourselves questions like:

- What is going to happen with my relationship?
- Will the check come in time?
- Will I get the job?
- If I tell the truth, will it help me or hurt me?
- Will I find the missing diamond ring?

All of these questions are open story loops, and we’re motivated and compelled by getting the answers to these questions.

Recently, when I complained to a friend about how hard it is to make a decision when you don’t know how things will turn out, and he said to me, “It sounds like you want the story to go: then she woke up and knew exactly what to do and did it…” He paused. “What a boring story.”

He is right.

Where there is no tension, no confusion, no wondering how things are going to work out, there’s no story. Not in our lives. Not on the big screen. And not when you put the words on paper.

Story loops help readers stay engaged—but they also help us stay engaged with our lives. Better questions equal better stories.

When you use story loops, you make the experience for the reader more than simply gaining some new information. You make it visceral. Your book becomes a full-body experience. Think of a time you’ve been personally moved to tears by a book, or gotten chills while reading, or suddenly felt as if the author were sitting right there with you on the other side of the couch.

It’s not perfect grammar that does this. It’s story loops.

In this section, I’m going to teach you how to open and close story loops, and it’s going to change the way you write.
NOTE:
Everything I’ve learned about opening and closing story loops I’ve learned from a long-time mentor and friend of mine, Donald Miller. You might recognize him as the author of New York Times bestselling books *Blue Like Jazz* or *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*. If you don’t know him, you only need to know he’s sold a few books in his day.

He has also created a marketing framework called StoryBrand, which teaches business leaders how to talk about their products and services in a way that gets people to listen. I’m a proud coach, facilitator, and teacher of the StoryBrand framework, and using it has radically improved the way I write.

I wouldn’t be the writer I am without his influence.

If you’re interested in learning more about StoryBrand or Donald Miller, I can’t recommend his material enough.

RESOURCES

You can listen to his podcast here:

Buy his latest book, Building a StoryBrand:

(HINT: although his framework is applied to a marketing context, this is how I write virtually every book and chapter):

Take the marketing roadmap course here:
http://bit.ly/MarketingRoadmapCourse

See about attending a workshop (live or online) below:
Online: http://bit.ly/Marketing_Course_Online

The point is to not wait until later to determine how you’re going to open and close story loops, or you’ll spend hours staring at your blinking cursor, wishing you had a more interesting way to begin. Instead, decide now how you’re going to engage the readers attention, and you won’t just write a great outline.

You’ll write a book that entertains people, makes them think, invites them to feel something, and even transforms their lives. Get ready to learn how to pull a reader’s attention all the way through your book.
WHAT IS A STORY LOOP?
An open story loop is a question your reader has for which they are motivated to find an answer.

The questions can be as simple as, “Will she win the court case?” or “Will he get the job?” It can also be more emotional or philosophical like, “Is life really fair?” “Can you heal a broken heart?”

Most of us do this fairly intuitively.

When you’re telling a story to a friend—even casually—you probably start by opening a story loop. You might say something like, “You’ll never guess what happened with Angela earlier today.”

**STORY LOOP:** what happened with Angela earlier today?
You might go on to tell the story, pausing every few minutes to say something like, “and you’ll never believe what happened next.”

Even a phrase like, “and then...” is a natural way we open and close story loops when we’re communicating.

Still, for some reason, many of us forget to do this when we’re writing, and we get what’s called flat writing. Flat writing is writing that doesn’t seem to know where it’s going or writing that arrives at its destination far too soon. Flat writing is your nemesis. Flat writing will bore even you the writer out of your own mind. You’ve probably had this happen to you before.

Maybe you were telling a friend a story, and you felt yourself start to worry that there may not be a “point” to the story.

Suddenly you felt insecure.

What was the punchline so-to-speak? Where were you going with this story? Why did you think to tell it? This is your natural instinct kicking in and telling you that flat stories are boring. Stories that don’t build and build and keep a listener guessing aren’t interesting, so don’t be surprised when this kind of a story makes a boring book.

On the contrary, have you ever been watching a Netflix show far past your bedtime, and each time the device asks you if you’re “still watching,” you can’t help but click to the next episode? You might wonder what’s gotten into you, since generally you’re pretty responsible. What’s happening here isn’t a lack of discipline. It’s the power of story loops.

When a loop is opened, our brains are wired to close it. When it comes to story loops, most authors make one of two mistakes:
1. They don't ever open a story loop:
   This is the forgettable book you pick up at the bookstore but never read past the first sentence.

2. They close the loop too soon:
   This is the book that only holds your interest through the first chapter. If you answer all the reader's questions in chapter 1, what incentive do they have to keep reading?

For your book, there needs to be one overarching question that is driving the reader's attention through the entire book.

**TO-DO**

**QUESTION 1:**
What is the overall question your book is asking and promising to answer?
Brainstorm a few questions and then pick your favorite.

1. 
2. 
3. 

There will also be a handful of other questions—anywhere from 5 to 15 roughly—that are sub-questions to the larger question. I'll show you where to put these and how to use them later. For now, let's just brainstorm.

**QUESTION 2:**
What smaller sub-questions is your book going to ask and promise to answer for your reader?

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 
6. 
7. 
8. 
9. 
10. 
11. 
12. 
13. 
14. 
15.
THE NEW PROBLEM
I’m sure you’re wondering, now: what am I supposed to do with these questions? Next week, I’ll show you how you can take all the content we’ve created so far and begin organizing it like a jigsaw puzzle into what will eventually be your chapters. But until then, let me give you a small snapshot of how you’re going to use these questions to compel your reader and shape your story into something beautiful.

Last week, I taught you how to create a narrative arc in each of your chapters by using the following pattern:

1. The problem
2. The path
3. The “all is lost” moment
4. The resolution

Now, you’re going to add a fifth element to this pattern—that element is the open story loop, or story question.

So the pattern will look like this:

1. The problem
2. The path
3. The “all is lost” moment
4. The resolution
5. The question (or new problem)

This means you’ll effectively end each chapter with a question that pulls the reader’s attention to the next chapter.

HINT: If you’re struggling to think of open story loops, try using “you’ll never believe what happened next...” or “and then...” as a placeholder. This tactic often triggers the mind to think in the pattern of the loop, and your brain can fill in something that works better.

Now that I’ve taught you how to create an arc in each chapter, and in your overall book, you’re ready to begin putting all of your content together in an outline. I can teach you a simple (and even fun) way to do this that will not only get us robust outlines, but as a happy benefit, get us away from our computer keyboards for a few hours.

We’ll launch into that first thing next week.
When authors first come to me, they often wonder if they are really “ready” to outline their books.

They worry they should do more research, take more time to let the story unfold, or collect more content before they can justify the kind of effort it takes to outline the book itself. Almost without fail, they’re wrong in their assessment.

It’s not that there’s never a time when a book simply needs more “meat” before it’s ready to be written. It’s that authors notoriously underestimate how much information they’re holding in their subconscious minds that belongs in the book.

That is, until we get to this part of the process.

I mentioned this in an earlier section, but my favorite part of the day when I work one-on-one with authors is when we begin laying notecards on the floor, and suddenly there are several dozen of them, and I start to write things like “Chapter 3,” and place it over the stacks we’re creating. Without fail, authors look to me, point to the cards, and say almost tearfully...That’s my book. Indeed. That’s your book.

In this section, I’ll teach you the process I have used for myself and with hundreds of other authors— involving only notecards, Sharpies, and some open floor space or a big table—to map out the outline of a book from start to finish.

The goal by the end of this section is for you to have a clear idea of what goes in each chapter.

• What stories you are going to tell
• What problems you are resolving for the reader
• How this makes their life better
• How you are capturing their attention into the coming chapter.

I know how overwhelming it can feel (in a good way and in an uncomfortable way) to piece together
the elements of your book—especially if you’re telling a challenging personal story. I’ll never forget the first time I did this for my own book, after having done it for a hundred of other authors (without any distress on my part). I could feel my entire body vibrating as I placed the card on the ground. Which is why my goal is to keep this as simple as possible. I know it isn’t easy. But I would like to make it very simple.

So follow this simple step-by-step process below, and no matter how overwhelmed you feel, let the vibration you feel drive you to the finish line and remember that this process sets you up for smooth(er) sailing when it comes to writing.

You can do this. I believe in you. Let’s get started.

TO-DO

STEP 1: DUMP THE JUNK DRAWER
I call this step in the process “dumping the junk drawer” because this is exactly what it feels like.

It’s like taking everything that’s in your mind (your junk drawer) and dumping it on the table so you can see it. When you are able to see and touch all the elements of your book in front of you, they’re no longer abstract concepts in your mind, and it’s going to make your decisions about what to include and what to leave out feel easier.

Just like organizing a junk drawer.

In Step 1, your task is to take all the elements we’ve brainstormed in the past six weeks together and “dump them out” (write them on notecards) so we can start piecing your book together like a jigsaw puzzle. You’ll need a handful of Sharpies in different colors, a few healthy stacks of notecards (I like to use the plain ones, without lines, and the small 3x5 cards work best), and a little bit of open floor space or a big table.

HERE’S HOW IT WORKS:
1. Choose a color for each of the elements we’ve covered so far
   I like to use black for scenes & stories, since these are generally what drive your chapters. Then you’ll need at least three more colors, possibly as many as 8 (see Step 2 for a full list of elements).
2. Write each of the elements on a notecard in their appropriate color
   You might write your paradigm shifts in red, your takeaways for the reader in purple, and your open story loops in green.
3. In black, or a bold color, write chapter numbers 1–15
   Write one chapter number on each card, so that you have a card that says, “Chapter one,” another that says “Chapter two,” etc., all the way until you get to 15 (your book doesn’t need to have 15 chapters, but most general trade books have between 10-15 chapters).

Now, take all of your “puzzle pieces” and lay them out in front of you so you can see them. You’re ready to get started sorting.

Step 2: Use Your Coin-Sorter
The next step in the process is to begin making decisions about what belongs, what doesn’t, and where each element goes.

   HINT: I usually start by putting the scenes in chronological order, horizontally, since these usually drive the chapters. Sometimes you’ll have two or three or even five “scenes” that happen in the same chapter. In that case, stack those scenes vertically.

Every chapter should have AT LEAST:

   1. Paradigm shift (from Month 1, Week 2)
   2. Scene from a story, possibly more than one (from Month 1, Week 4)
   3. What the reader needs to hear (from Month 1, Week 3)
   4. Open story loop (from Month 2, Week 2)

Other things a chapter may include:

   1. Themes and threads
   2. Guiding characters or ideas
   3. An action plan
   4. Research and statistics
   5. Quotes, songs, poems, etc

   NOTE: Just because you write something on a card doesn’t mean it will go in the outline. You might realize it’s unnecessary and put it in the garbage can. You might also realize it belongs in another book—maybe your next book. We certainly have to do a lot of this when I work with authors one-on-one.

When working by yourself, you’ll have to make many of these decisions on your own. Trust yourself. You know this content better than anyone. And if you are unsure, place the card where you think it might go, step back, and take a look at where it is. Does that feel right? If not, try it somewhere else.

This is the express benefit of using this process. No placement is permanent. Shape it like clay. Make it something beautiful.
Step 3: Admire Your Outline

When you’re happy (mostly happy) with where the cards have landed, you can add the chapter numbers at the top and stand back and admire what you’ve created.

It’s truly a thing of beauty. Isn’t it? There it is. That’s your book.

HINT: If you’re interested in thinking ahead, begin to consider what you might call each of your chapters. Sometimes the title is obvious—meaning it’s a compelling word or phrase that’s already written on one of your notecards. Other times, titling can be more complicated. We’ll talk more expressly about chapter titles in the next section, so if you’re too tried to consider it, you can wait until then.

Hang your notecards prominently where you can see them while you write your book.

Authors sometimes look at me like I have two heads when I give this advice—and I get it. It takes a considerable amount of wall space and isn’t exactly what I would call decorative. Still, what better motivation could you possibly have to get writing and keep writing than giant notecards hanging on your wall, reminding you of what you’ve been tasked to write?

Yes, there are still obstacles ahead you’ll have to surmount.

For now, don’t focus on that. For now, focus on how proud you are of yourself for taking a complex, complicated idea and turning it into something that makes sense. Focus on how much clarity this brings to you and to your life. Focus on the fact that you just outlined your book. Focus on how good it feels to stand outside of this story, rather than to stand in it.

And celebrate yourself. It’s time. THIS IS YOUR BOOK!

We have one week left in the month, and the next step is turning your beautiful mess of notecards into something you can share with an editor, agent, or friend. I’m going to help you do just that.

Next week, I’ll teach you how to take the hard work you just did and turn it into the most important part of your proposal document: chapter titles and summaries.

Until then...
The next step in the process is writing your chapter titles and summaries.

Even if you have no idea what chapter titles and summaries are, I can help you turn your notecards into these valuable little paragraphs in a matter of just a few days.

That’s what we’ll do this week.

I’ll never forget the first time I had a meeting with a literary agent (compliments of a kind friend who made the connection for me), and he asked if he could see my chapter titles and summaries. I had to go home and Google what this even meant—even then I didn’t get a very clear answer.

Needless to say, as kind as this agent was, I ruined any chance of signing a contract with him, or even developing a positive rapport, because I simply wasn’t prepared. This was nearly 10 years ago, and since then, I’ve written hundreds of chapter titles and summaries for authors just like you and have made it my mission to prepare you for the kind of moment I squandered. You never know when you’ll tell a friend you’re working on a book, and they might say, “Let me introduce you to my agent.”

Even if you never pitch this idea to a publisher or agent (the main reasons you’d need this document), your chapter titles and summaries further help you shape, clarify, and define how you’re going to write each chapter. This becomes your road map for writing your book. Remember the analogy of the GPS with no destination (or the wrong destination)?

This document is how you become sure you know where you’re going with this book. Plenty of authors write without this document, to their own detriment. Some get by okay if they’re gifted communicators and especially if they have written a book before. Even then, they waste time staring at a blinking cursor when they could be making progress, writing content that goes in the garbage can, or writing chapters that simply could be stronger if they had stopped for a minute to clarify their direction first.
Most don’t fare so well. I’ve watched dozens of authors waste brilliant, life-changing ideas because they can’t calm their mind and their schedule enough to get these valuable words on paper.

Yes, this part can be challenging. After all, you want to get it exactly right.

Yes, you might be tempted to use what’s hanging on your wall and just get started.

No, it won’t be worth skipping this important step in the process.

Your chapter titles and summaries are the most important writing you will do for your book. While it is challenging, they are also the biggest part of your proposal document and a clear roadmap for writing your book. The goal of this section is to show you how to turn your notecards into these short summaries.

When you’re done with this section, you’ll be well on your way to having everything you need to get started writing. Step 1: Writing chapter titles. Your first task this week is to sit in front of the notecards you organized and choose a title for each chapter.

This task can seem overwhelming at times, so let me break it down for you.

**STEP 1: 5 KEYS TO WRITING GREAT CHAPTER TITLES**

1. **Being Clear is Better than Being Cute.**
   Look for words or phrases that are already in the chapter you’ve crafted. Sometimes authors over-complicate this when the answer is right there. Is there something you’re saying to the reader, or a story you’re telling, that has a certain “ring” to it?

   My main caution here is to avoid being cute. For some reason, when it come to chapter titles, authors often want to alliterate or get poetic, and the truth is it’s almost always more effective to be literal. There are a few exceptions to this rule, but the point is don’t overthink it. Choose something that would immediately make sense to someone rather than something they’re going to have to think about.

   NOTE: there are plenty of times to get poetic as a writer, but chapter titles are rarely one of them. You only have a little bit of time to grab an editor or agent’s attention, let alone your reader. Don’t make them work too hard for it because they won’t.
2. THE APPROPRIATE LENGTH FOR A CHAPTER TITLE IS...

People always want to know what the “right” length for a chapter title is, and the truth is there isn’t a good answer. Some chapter titles are one word. Others are entire sentences long. You can play with length and see what fits your tone and style.

The one thing I would do is keep your chapter titles relatively the same length as each other. Meaning, I wouldn’t have one chapter title be a single word and another be a long sentence. If your chapter titles are usually short phrases, keep them all around that length. If you prefer shorter titles, keep them all short.

3. USE PLACEHOLDERS

If you can’t think of a chapter title that works for a certain chapter, rather than linger in the frustration, choose a placeholder and move on. A placeholder is something that “works” for now, even if you know it won’t work long term.

You might, for example, title a chapter “The one where I got the chicken pox.” What’s funny is that sometimes placeholder titles end up sticking since they can be ironic and fun.

4. CONSIDER YOUR TABLE OF CONTENTS

One thing to consider as you’re working on chapter titles is how these will all stand together as a cohesive whole. Consider what a potential reader does when they walk into a bookstore and pick up your book.

Where is the first place they turn?

Table of contents.

For that reason, wouldn’t it be helpful if your table of contents all by itself hooked a reader into a story? Wouldn’t it be great if the narrative arc was present in the table of contents, as well as in the actual context of the chapters? Consider how you might draw a reader’s attention, even through chapter titles.
5. OPEN A STORY LOOP

One way to draw a reader’s attention through your table of contents is to use your chapter titles to open and close story loops. See if you can introduce a problem, amplify that problem, demonstrate an “all is lost” moment, and even hint at a solution. If you can do this, an agent, publisher, or reader won’t be able to stop reading, desperate to know more.

Above all, trust what I call your creative intuition—the natural inborn sense that you and only you know where this book is supposed to be going, and therefore YOU are the best one to write the titles. Sure, when I work one-on-one with authors, I often help them write chapter titles. But often when they ask me what I think the title should be, I’ll turn the question back on them: it’s your book; what do you think the chapter titles should be?

Trust your creative intuition.

Write chapter titles for each of your chapters.
Add the titles to notecards and place the notecards on your wall.

STEP 2: WRITING CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Your next baby step is writing chapter summaries, one at a time. Chapter summaries shouldn’t be any longer than about 5-7 sentences, tops, which means you need to be incredibly choosy about what information you include and what information you leave out. (Side note: I used to teach high school writing, and the students would always want to know “how long” things had to be. Little did they know: shorter is always harder!)

Let me walk you through this process step-by-step, so you don’t get overwhelmed.

1. Choose the first chapter you’d like to write a summary for
   It doesn’t have to be chapter one. I would choose the one that feels the most clear to you.

2. Follow the framework below:
   - In this chapter, I’m going to talk about… [paradigm shift]
   - The story I’m going to tell that demonstrates this is… [scene]
   - What that means for the reader is… [transformation]
   - The problem is… [open story loop]
3. Do this for each chapter and put all of your drafted summaries in order:

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Etc.

4. Go through and shape each summary to make them sound different from each other. The last thing you want is for every single chapter summary to sound like it was written from a formula.

Use your skills as a writer here, and what we’ve learned so far about great storytelling, to pull a reader’s attention through the summary document the same way you would through an essay, a blog post, or the entire book. When you’re happy with what you have, you can add your chapter titles as well.

**STEP 3: PUTTING THEM TOGETHER**

The final task is to put these together in a document which is formatted as follows:

Chapter #: CHAPTER TITLE
Summary
Summary
Summary

Chapter #: CHAPTER TITLE
Summary
Summary
Summary

Chapter #: CHAPTER TITLE
Summary
Summary
Summary

Chapter #: CHAPTER TITLE
Summary
Summary
Summary
When you’ve completed this, do yourself a favor and share your summaries with at least two others in the group, asking for feedback.

ASK THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

1. Does this make sense?
2. Are there missing pieces to the story?
3. Is there a clear arc here?
4. On a scale from 1-10, how badly do you want to read this book?
5. What (if anything) might make you want to read it more?

Congratulations!!! You’ve done it. You are not only more than 75% done with this process, but you’ve completed the most challenging part of your proposal document. Only four more short weeks and a handful of tasks left before you’re ready to begin writing your book and sharing it with the world.

You should be so proud.
The goal for you this month is to help you write a proposal document. I can almost hear you questioning: do I really need a proposal document? Or maybe: what the hell is a proposal document? Let me see if I can answer both.

A proposal document is like a resume for a job-seeker or a business plan for an entrepreneur trying to raise funding. It's the document you will use to hand to agents, publishers, and pretty much anyone else you meet should you choose to go the traditional publishing route, so they can get a sense of the project you're working on and what makes it so important.

Here's the catch.

The most important reason for a proposal document, in my opinion, isn't how it will impact agents and publishers. The most important reason for a proposal document is it will help you write a better book.

Plenty of people skip the proposal document process as a way to shortcut the amount of time it will take to get a book written, and this is a huge mistake. While shortcuts always seem to save time, in the long run, this one ends up costing (especially self-published) authors hundreds of hours of wandering, thousands in lost marketing dollars, and even a few months of your personal sanity.

A proposal document will bring you clarity, and clarity is well worth the effort.

Plenty of great books over time have gotten lost in the shuffle not because the writing wasn't up to par or the content wasn't interesting, and not even (contrary to popular belief) because the author's “platform” wasn’t big enough. Books get lost in the shuffle because they aren't framed well, and so people never know why they're supposed to read them.
To say it another way, “bad” books aren’t always bad books. They’re books where the author didn’t spend enough time or concentrated energy on this part of the process.

Below is a checklist of the elements you need in order to complete a proposal document. I’m going to walk you through each stages, step-by-step.

- Title (Week 1)
- Subtitle (Week 1)
- Back cover copy (Week 1)
- Premise (Week 1)
- Influencers (Week 2)
- Social platforms (Week 2)
- Market need (Week 3)
- Market distinctives (Week 3)
- Market benefits (Week 3)
- Author bio (Week 3)
- Two sample chapters (Week 4)

In this section, I’m going to help you finish and finalize all elements of your proposal document.

This process not only helps you clarify your idea even further, it also will help you stay motivated through the writing process, gain the support you need to make your dream a reality, and continue shaping your idea into the brilliant piece of art you know it can be.

No more stalling on the most important thing you can do with your time as a writer—the truly revolutionary prep work. It’s time to nail down the idea you have that has the power to shape the world, leave your legacy, grow your business, help you find your voice, and even change lives for the better.

Let’s get started.
This week, you have two seemingly small tasks that will each play a big role in the direction of your book.

The first is to write a title and subtitle.

The second is to write three short sections of text—only a few paragraphs each—that explain (respectively) what makes your book idea so important, how you’re going to approach the concept, and why a total stranger should pick up and read.


Writing these bits of text can feel overwhelming. “How can I possibly fit everything that’s important about my book into a few short paragraphs?” authors will ask. I get it. It’s challenging to distill your message down to something that could fit onto the back of a book. But let me assure you this will not be wasted energy. The clarity you gain here is going to keep you focused on exactly what matters as you write the book.

I’m going to walk you through this week’s tasks step-by-step.

**STEP 1: WRITING A TITLE & SUBTITLE**

Although the smallest task of a writer by standard of word count, brainstorming and choosing your title and subtitle is likely the most daunting task of an author. This is after all, the first impression you make with a reader. And by the time it comes to write titles and subtitles, most authors are far too close to their work to come up with something good.

This isn’t because you’re inexperienced, by the way.

I’ve sat in dozens of sales meetings with publishers where smart, creative teams of people who do this for a living will spend hours or even weeks going around the block again and again with book titles. They know how important it is to get it perfect. In one particular meeting, I remember we came up with what I thought was a pretty good title for a book (after hours of work, mind you), and I was ready to call it a day. One of the senior publishers
in the meeting said no way. “We don’t stop until we find a title that makes people pull out their credit card.” I’m not sure I love the idea of putting a monetary value on every single thing we create, but here’s why I think his advice is really good. He knows how competitive bookshelves can be. He knows the blood, sweat, and tears authors put into their work. He understands that for a consumer to pull out their credit card, it means they see the value in something. And he knows you didn’t spend months or even years writing your book because you hoped nobody would ever read it.

It will not always be easy to find a great title, but it will be worth it.

If you feel yourself getting frustrated, remember even professionals spend hours and days and even weeks circling the same blocks with titles. They run a few tests, and when the tests don’t go well, they go back to the drawing board. Because of this, I want to urge you to use feedback from other members of the group.

Work through the exercises in this book. Brainstorm your best ideas. Then share with others and don’t be afraid to give honest feedback. Don’t stop until you find something that makes you want to pay $17.99 for a book.

5 PRINCIPLES OF WRITING GREAT TITLES

People always ask me how long or short a title should be, and the truth is there is no formula for title length. I know dozens of books with strong one-word titles and also happen to think a title like *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* or *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years* are great tiles for books as well.

Generally speaking, the title should roll off your tongue and be easy to repeat, but more importantly, titles should follow one or more of any of these principals.

1. SPEAK TO THE PROBLEM
   If you can speak clearly to the problem you’re going to help a reader solve, do that. Readers will “file” you into their mental rolodex of problems you solve, and it will make it easy for them to remember the title and remember you. This is especially true if you’re running a small business and trying to establish yourself as an authority on a topic.

   A book like *The War of Art: Break Through Your Blocks* and *Win Your Creative Battles* or *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking* both speak to a problem the reader is facing. They also speak to solutions, but I’ll get to that in a minute.
2. SPEAK TO THE BENEFIT
I mentioned sitting in dozens of publisher sales meetings, and I can tell you there hasn’t been a single one where we haven’t talked about “benefit language.” By “benefit language”, a sales team mostly just wants to know that it’s clear to a reader within the first few seconds of looking at a book (scanning the cover, title, back cover) how their life is going to be better because of this book. If they’re going to pay $17.99 for a copy, it must be clear to them why. A title like Good to Great is benefit language. So is The Gifts of Imperfection: Your Guide to a Wholehearted Life.

3. SPEAK TO THE TRANSFORMATION
A title like Marianne Williamson’s Tears to Triumph is a perfect example of a transformational title. Cheryl Strayed’s book Wild does this same thing with a single word. She’s communicating the transformation the reader will experience if they read from start to finish. See if you can think of a way to communicate the kind of transformation your reader is bound to experience when they read what you’ve written.

4. SPEAK CLEARLY
As a rule, it’s better to be clear than to be cute. If your tendency is to speak in metaphor and poetry, practice brainstorming at least a few options for titles that are less metaphorical and more direct. This doesn’t mean your poetic titles won’t work. It just means it can’t hurt to practice being more direct and see which one lands better with a reader.

5. SPEAK TO YOUR READER, NOT YOURSELF
Use the language your reader would use rather than the language you use. If you’re unsure what language they would use, talk to a potential reader and get them talking about the topic you’re writing about. Record the words exactly as they say them. See if you can use their exact words and phrases in your title.

At the end of all of this, trust your creative intuition. Take my advice but don’t live and die by it. There is a force inside of you that knows what you’re here to write, and chances are it just might know something I don’t.

Who knows why titles like Blue Like Jazz or Bird by Bird sold as well as they did—or why they are the kind of books we still talk about decades later. Other than that they were beautifully written by authors who bled on the page and who stuck to their guns with poetic titles. Sometimes knowing the rules and breaking them can work.

“At the end of this, trust your creative intuition.”
Brainstorm some titles:

1.
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Brainstorm some subtitles:

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Put some together. Choose your top five.

When it comes to putting titles and subtitles together, a general rule of thumb to live by is that either your title or your subtitle can be abstract or poetic, as long as the other one is direct and clear. So, for example:

Direct Title: Abstract Subtitle.

Abstract Title: Direct Subtitle.
STEP 2: WRITING YOUR PREMISE, OVERVIEW & BACKCOVER COPY

Let’s start with the premise. A premise to a book should do two main things:

1. Introduce a problem to the reader—and amplify that problem
2. Talk about how we are going to solve that problem
3. Share where the book is going

By now, it shouldn’t be surprising to you that good books help people solve problems. The premise is a time to get crystal clear about what problem you are helping readers solve and why it needs to be solved right away. Just like you amplified problems to create a narrative arc in your chapters, create an arc here.

See the examples below.

THIS BOOK TITLE is a life preserver for anyone who has been touched by the pain of addiction, either personally or peripherally, and a wake-up call for anyone who doesn’t realize the tremendous debt we pay as a society for turning a blind eye to the problem. For families who scramble for options, organizations who want to help but don’t know how, taxpayers who flush money down the drain fighting The War on Drugs, policymakers who shape the future of our world, and even addicts themselves who are caught in the confusing and demoralizing whirlwind of illogical behavior, this book offers a brand new approach to prevention, treatment, recovery, and continued support.

THIS BOOK TITLE is a heartfelt plea and wake up call to the American church from a pastor who is a nationally awarded journalist. The book assembles data from dozens of sources to demonstrate that the movement is on a dangerous trajectory. It then launches a dialogue that prepares evangelical leaders to survive and thrive in the 21st Century. The author’s prayer is that this book will challenge evangelical leaders to be forward praying and optimistic about the future evangelical church.
I wish there were a formula I could give you for writing your back cover copy, but the best way to learn how to do this is to learn by example.

First, I'm going to show you examples of three (mostly random) books I pulled from my shelf. Then, I'm going to have you do the same thing—head to your bookshelf and pull a few examples. Finally, it's going to be your turn to write back cover copy for your book. To see what works for back cover copy, my favorite thing to do is go to the bookshelf (or the bookstore or library) and pull a few books at random.

Here are three examples I pulled (mostly at random) from my bookshelf:

1. Back cover of The Body Keeps the Score by Bessel Van Der Kolk reads:
   Trauma is a fact of life. Veterans and their families deal with the painful aftermath of combat; one in five Americans has been molested; one in four grew up with alcoholics; one in three couples have engaged in physical violence. Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk, one of the world's most foremost experts on trauma, has spent over three decades working with survivors. In The Body Keeps the Score, he uses recent scientific advances to show how trauma literally reshapes both body and brain, compromising sufferers' capacities for pleasure, engagement, self-control, and trust. He explores innovative treatments—from neurofeedback and meditation to sports, drama and yoga—that offer new paths to recovery by activating the brain's natural neuroplasticity. Based on Dr. Van Der Kolk's own research and that of other leading specialists, The Body Keeps the Score exposes the tremendous power of relationships both to hurt and to heal—and offers hope for reclaiming our lives.
2. Back cover of I Feel Bad About My Neck by Nora Ephron reads:
From Nora Ephron, the writer and filmmaker whose films Sleepless in Seattle and When Harry Met Sally defined romance for a generation, and whose latest Julia & Julia, celebrated the pleasures of cooking and the thrill of self-reinvention: a disarming, intimate and hilarious book on being a woman today. Ephron chronicles her life as an obsessed cook, passionate city dweller and hapless parent. She hates her chaotic mess of a purse. She searches for the divinely flaky cabbage strudel of her youth and finds it 23 years later. She endures the daily tribulations of feminine maintenance: removing unwanted hair, moisturizing patches of skin the consistency of a loofah, and recovering from treadmill injuries. Utterly courageous, uproariously funny, and unexpectedly moving in its truth-telling, I Feel Bad About My Neck is a scrumptious, irresistible treat of a book, full of laugh-out-loud moments that will appeal to readers of all ages.

3. Back cover of Love Does by Bob Goff reads:
As a college student, he spent sixteen days in the Pacific Ocean with five guys and a crate of canned meat. As a father, he took his kids on a world tour to eat ice cream with heads of state. He made friends in Uganda, and they liked him so much he became the Ugandan consul. He pursued his wife for three years before she agreed to date him. His grades weren’t good enough to get into law school, so he sat on a bench outside the dean’s office for seven days until they finally let him enroll. Bob Goff has become something of a legend, and his friends consider him the world’s best kept secret. Those same friends have long insisted he write a book, and finally he did. It’s full of paradigm shifts, musings and stories from one of the world’s most delightfully engaging and winsome people. What fuels his impact? Love. But it’s not the kind of love that stops at thoughts and feelings. Bob is convinced love takes action. Bob believes Love Does. When LoveDoes, life gets interesting. Each day turns into a hilarious, whimsical, meaningful chance to make faith simple and real. Each chapter is a story that forms a book, a life. And this is one life you don’t want to miss. Light and fun, unique and profound, the lessons drawn from Bob’s life and attitude just might inspire you to be secretly incredible, too.
Pull three books off your shelf and read the back cover content.

A few things to notice about these examples:

- Back cover content is written in the third-person
- Back cover content entices the reader to begin reading
- Back cover content shares the benefit to the reader
- Back cover content unapologetically raves about the positive elements of a book

Using these examples as guides, draft your back cover content below.
At this point in the process, many authors complain they have no business continuing.

They don’t have a “platform” the way a publisher would define it.

They’re worried what will happen if they write the story the way it’s coming out in this process (meaning: the truth), and they start to talk themselves out of publishing all together. They’re right about only a few things.

Publishers are looking to write contracts for authors who meet three requirements:

1. **THEY HAVE A GOOD IDEA**
   One that is interesting and speaks to a real problem readers are having. You’ll hear publishers talk often about “market needs” or if an idea has “market value.” (NOTE: I tend to be of the mindset that books have value whether they have “market value” or not, and that book ideas come to us more than we come to them. But, of course, publishers are running a business, so it makes sense that they’re concerned with market value.)

2. **THEY CAN EXECUTE THE WRITING**
   You don’t have to be the most brilliant writer to have ever graced the face of this planet. In fact, you can be quite bad at things like spelling and grammar (trust me; I’ve edited some of these books). But a publisher wants to see that you have the discipline, stamina, and command of the English language it takes to get 60ish thousand words on paper, which takes a considerable effort (as you’re about to find out).

3. **THEY HAVE A “PLATFORM”**
   Here’s where so many authors get hung up. If you ask publishers what they mean by “platform,” you’ll get a million different answers, but at the end of the day, what they want to know is: can you sell books? For some, this means having a large in-person audience, such as being the dean of a university or the pastor of a big church. Sometimes it means having thousands of Instagram followers, and
sometimes it’s about having 100,000 emails on your email list. How many of those things do you need? Who knows exactly. It seems to change all the time. Regardless, here’s what I want you to hear:

- Just because you don’t meet the standards a publisher sets for a “valuable” book, doesn’t mean you don’t have a valuable book.
- Just because a publisher doesn’t write you a contract, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t write your book.
- Just because you think you don’t have a shot at a publishing contract, doesn’t mean you don’t have one. Don’t sell yourself short.

I’ve watched authors who I assumed were obvious dead-ringers for a traditional publishing contract get rejected for seemingly no reason at all. I’ve also worked with authors who swore up and down they’d never be a fit for traditional publishing write beautiful proposals, have a lucky meeting with an agent, and surprise themselves completely with a decent contract.

The point is that you never know what can happen when you lean into this process and give it the best you have.

Here’s a list of 10 books that were rejected by publishers, but that readers LOVED.

1. The Shack by William Paul Young
2. Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone by JK Rowling
3. Gone With the Wind by Margaret Mitchell
4. The Running Man by Stephen King
5. The Sun Also Rises by Earnest Hemmingway
6. Same Kind of Different as Me by Ron Hall and Denver Moore
7. The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath
8. The Giving Tree by Shell Silverstein
9. The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown
10. Anne of Green Gables by LM Montgomery

Thank God these authors didn’t abandon writing their books simply because a publisher wasn’t interested. Can you imagine a world without the books above?

The question we need to answer together this week is: How are you going to get the book into the hands of people who most need it? Publisher or no publisher, what are you going to do with this thing when it’s finished? In order to do that, we’re going to do two things together this week.

Yes, only two. You’re welcome.
We’re going to make a list of influencers who can help you get this book into the hands of readers, and we’re going to list all the “platforms” you have for reaching people who may want to read this book.

**STEP 1: INFLUENCERS**
When it comes to making a list of influencers, I want you to spend time brainstorming anyone you know who is connected with potential readers of your book. You can list teachers, young life leaders, treatment specialists, therapists, bloggers, Instagram celebrities, whomever.

These people do not have to be your best friends, and they do not have to agree ahead of time to promote your book. But you should have a reasonable assumption that they would be willing to review a copy of your finished manuscript and perhaps write an endorsement or share in some way with their audience.

Three things:

1. Start with the one who you think could have the most impact. Move to the least.

2. After each person’s name, include a short description in case someone might not know who they are. “Regional Director of Portland Area Young Life” for example or, “author of best-selling book called [fill in the title]”.

3. For the sake of this exercise, brainstorm 25 people.

Make a list of your influencers below:

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 
6. 
7. 
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9. 
10. 
11. 
12. 
13. 
14. 
15.
STEP 2: PLATFORMS
When it comes to platforms that could help you sell the book, a few are obvious:

SOCIAL MEDIA
Like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, and Twitter (include exact numbers)

MEDIA EXPOSURE
Any print publications, radio, or television where you have been featured in the past or expect to be featured in the future. (Especially list those with name recognition like The New York Times, for example, since they bolster your credibility)

EMAIL ADDRESSES
If you are collecting them through a email management system like MailChimp or Convert Kit (include exact numbers)

SPEAKING OPPORTUNITIES
Any time you have been given a microphone and an audience in the past or expect to be given an audience in the future.

These are definitely important to list—and make sure you include details such as how many followers you have on a specific platform or how many email address are on your list. I also want you to think creatively in this section about how you are going to sell books.

Authors I’ve worked with in the past have done, for example:

1. Library or coffee shop meet-ups
2. Online workshops or webinars
3. In-person workshops
4. Etc.
List all of your platforms below:

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13. 
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23. 
24. 
25. 

By the end of this section, you should feel encouraged. Whether a publisher writes you a contract or not, look above at all the people you know who support your decision to move forward with this idea—and look at all the avenues you have to sell the book when it’s finished.
Before you report me to the Department of Total Hypocrites (DTH) for making you write a marketing plan (including “market need”) after expressly telling you I think books have value beyond market value, let me clarify.

Yes, books have value beyond market value. And I think it is vital to consider if and how your book could appeal in the marketplace.

Just because millions of people watch The Bachelor every season doesn’t make it great art. But if we could stop for a minute and think about why so many men and women tune in to a show like that (like asking, “what is the felt need expressed here?”) and meet that felt need with a little depth—we might be able to create something truly remarkable.

Don’t you think?

Although market value doesn’t define the value of a book, I have yet to meet an author who doesn’t want their book to resonate with hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of readers. This is why we write books. We want people to read them. Books like The Shack (26 million copies sold and now a major motion picture) sell for a reason.

They are beautiful art, and they have market value.

The two are not mutually exclusive.

The goal for this section is to get you to do a little ahead-of-time thinking about the value you are offering a reader with the story and the content you are presenting to them. Not only does this have the potential to win over an agent or a publisher who is interested in your project, but it will put you in touch with the urgency of a book like yours. It’s like putting your thumb on the pulse of your reader.

Are you ready? Here we go.
STEP 1: MARKET NEED
Why do readers need a book on this topic?

For market need, consider statistics, cultural trends and phenomenon, anecdotal stories and observations that build a case for why this topic needs to be addressed and why this book ought to be in the world.

Who is this book written for?

Is it the millions of millennial Americans who are struggling with a lack of purpose? Is it the hundreds of thousands of young evangelicals who are exiting the church?

What problem is it written to solve?

EXAMPLE: TITLE OF THE BOOK is written for readers of the most popular article published in The New York Times in 2017 called: Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person? This book addresses questions hundreds of thousands of young people are asking about modern dating and if love is even possible anymore.

TO-DO
List your market needs below:

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 
6. 
7. 
8. 
9. 
10.

STEP 2: MARKET DISTINCTIVES
What makes this book different than other books like it?

Market distinctives are about differentiating your book from other books like it. Contrary to popular belief, you want your book to be like other books (this is why I had you do the comparative titles exercise Week 1). When your book is “like” other books—especially books that are selling well—publishers can see why your book would sell well, too.
The only problem is you don’t want your book to be exactly like other books. Otherwise, there is no point. Consider how your book differs in style, tone, or approach. Also consider how you personally differ from the author of other books in the marketplace. Perhaps you differ in gender, age, geographical location, background, or religious preference from authors who have previously tackled this topic. These are significant differences, as they will impact your take. What makes your book different and even better than others which have preceded it?

Here’s an example of a market distinctive below: EXAMPLE: THIS BOOK TITLE combines research from dozens of national experts, both inside and outside the church, like never before.

TO-DO

List your market distinctives below:

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STEP 3: MARKET BENEFITS
How will this improve the lives of readers and the world as a whole? For market benefits, consider language like:

• After reading this book, readers will gain...
• This book title has the potential to change [be specific]...
• This book title will be a powerful tool for...
• This book title provides a platform or opportunity for...
• This book title will transform...
• This book title confronts [this injustice]

Consider what you hope will happen with this book and list the market benefits below. EXAMPLE: THIS BOOK TITLE will help readers change their perspective on what it really means to win. EXAMPLE: THIS BOOK TITLE: will inspire a generation not to settle for a job that is “good enough,” but to find work that is meaningful to them.
STEP 4: AUTHOR BIO

Your final step this week is to write your author bio. The best way I’ve found to write bios without overthinking them is to make a list of facts (using the list below), select your strongest 5-10 facts, and use those to craft a paragraph or two that becomes your bio. Elements you can (and should) include in your bio:

1. Full author name (as listed on the cover)
2. What makes you interested in the topic you’re writing about—this could include personal experiences, background, etc.
3. What makes you an "expert" in the topic you’re writing about (ex: what gives you credibility around this topic? Do you have a degree readers should know about? Do you have personal experience that lights your way?)
4. What prepares you for the task of writing this book?
5. Who already reads what you have written?

A bio for a book proposal document should be 2-3 paragraphs, with no more than three sentences in each paragraph.

Draft your bio below:
Your final task before putting your proposal document together is to write two sample chapters. This might seem like a big task, but honestly, at this point in the process, writing your chapters is going to be remarkably easy. You’re about to experience the ease of the writing process when you write with a plan rather than without one.

You have all the pieces of the puzzle. All you need now is about two hours without internet and with your outline in front of you.

A few things to keep in mind as you write.

1. START WITH CHAPTERS 1 & 2 UNLESS YOU HAVE A REASON NOT TO
   A reason to include a later chapter would be if it’s vital to understanding the story or if you have content that might be of concern to a publisher.

2. DON’T PERFECT YOUR CHAPTERS
   Too many authors spend months making their sample chapters perfect when the truth is they will change drastically later. Not to mention your publisher will hire a professional editor for you to change them. Publishers aren’t looking for perfect chapters, and authors are notoriously bad at over-editing and ruining perfectly good writing. An editor simply wants to see that you can carry the idea through to completion. Which you can. You are ready. You have all the tools you need.

3. WRITE NOW, EDIT LATER
   Remind yourself as write that the key is to get all the elements on paper and that they can be edited later. This will keep you from getting frustrated and stuck.

Without further ado, I’m going to leave you to it. You have enough work to do this week without me babbling on forever.
Share with each other and get reader feedback.

Your best feedback will be from readers.

**NOTE: BE SPECIFIC WHEN YOU ASK FOR FEEDBACK.**

This is a trick I learned too late in the game. I’ll teach it to you now. When you ask for feedback, you’ll get much better feedback when you ask specifically for what you need—rather than letting readers offer you any feedback they’d like. Additionally, you won’t be caught off guard by feedback you didn’t need or isn’t helpful.

If it were me, I would send my draft with this list of questions.

- Did I hook you in the beginning?
- Is there any place where I lost you?
- Did I include anything that isn’t interesting to you?
- What still doesn’t make sense?
- On a scale from 1-10, how much do you want to keep reading?

Then, of course, you can welcome other suggestions.
“At the end of this, trust your creative intuition.”

ALLISON FALLON
Too many authors circle the block for years working on a book that never gets finished, or never turns out the way they hoped it would. At Find Your Voice, we got tired of watching great writers struggle with good ideas that needed to be in the world. That's why we created Prepare to Publish, a 3-month, sure-fire guide to turning your book idea into a book outline.

We've worked with thousands of writers—from total beginners to bestselling authors—to help them get their ideas on paper and turn them into a book they can be proud of. Our process breaks your task into bite-sized pieces so you don't feel overwhelmed and never get lost. No more circling the same block over and over again, wishing you could write a book.

YOU ARE A WRITER AND WE'RE HERE TO HELP.