

# *Do I Have a Book in Me?*

Answering Ten Questions  
Aspiring Authors Ask

*Jan M. Whalen, MASL*

## **Do I have a Book in Me?**

### **A Guide to Ten Questions Aspiring Authors Ask**

Jan Whalen, MASL  
Whalen Voices, LLC  
623.466.5067  
[jan@whalenvoices.com](mailto:jan@whalenvoices.com)  
[www.whalenvoices.com](http://www.whalenvoices.com)

Many of us think about writing a book. The topic seems to come up quite often in conversations when people find out I'm a book shepherd. Here are my answers to the ten most common questions you might have. This is not an exhaustive list, so if you have questions I haven't addressed, call or email me.

Before we begin, I'd like to give you a quick history of my experience with this topic. Ten years ago, I was introduced to this industry by becoming friends with a woman who called herself a *publisher*, yet the term *book shepherd* fit her work more accurately. I went from knowing nothing about this industry to helping others, to publishing my own books. Experiencing both sides (being an author and assisting other authors) gives me a unique perspective. I'm grateful to my clients, who trust me with the most private aspects of their lives, and through this process, they have also experienced increased: self-appreciation, awareness of themselves, and understanding of their life journey.

Here we go!

#### **1. Do I have a Book in me?**

This is the number one question I hear when the topic is book publishing. Maybe you've asked this yourself, tossed the thought aside, only to have it resurface again (and again and again...). A few years ago, I created this list. I was partially joking when I wrote it, but it's really quite accurate. See if this sounds like you:

#### **Top Ten Reasons You Know You Have a Book in You**

1. The lessons from your life could save the world—or at least shorten the learning curve for one other person.
2. You're tired of hearing, "When are you writing your book?" or "You should write a book about that."
3. Your life would make a great sequel to *Sixty Shades of Drama*.
4. You want to bond with your grandchildren by telling them the real story of your life, squelching unflattering rumors they've heard from their parents.

5. You've climbed a mountain, fought the enemy or killed a grizzly, and you want all your stories under one cover.
6. You talk to spirits (and they talk back) saying groovy, quotable things.
7. You have been to hell and back and could make life easier for others if they only knew what you've learned.
8. You want to mentor those starting out in your field of work—the mentor YOU never had in the good ol' days.
9. You are a speaker and your audiences want to take you home, but that wouldn't be okay with your significant other.
10. You have a green thumb, a purple heart, or a pink Cadillac and want to share your secrets of success with the world.

If you've answered YES to any of these questions, then let's talk. Together we can bring your book to life! We're here to guide you no matter what phase you're in: pre-writing, editing, or publication.

## **2. Why should I write a book?**

Let me start by saying there are as many reasons to write a book as there are authors. Here are just a few:

With boomers retiring and feeling pretty smart, the obvious answer is to leave a legacy for the grandchildren. I agree. The world is changing so much that it's useful for new generations to understand the past and their heritage. But that's only one small reason to write about your life.

If you've lived decades, chances are you have forgotten more than you remember. Adrian McIntyre, a consultant I know, is fond of saying, "The reason we remember so few stories from our lives is because there's usually *one* story we can't forget." When I heard him say this, I was reminded of my dad. He was on the USS Cummings DDS 365 in Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Even though he was a sailor for four years, we don't know very much about most of his naval career because his attention was focused on that one day.

If you're an electrician who does good work, for example, you probably have lots of competition. But if you are the electrician who wrote a book, that makes you stand out in a good way. People take notice because it's unexpected, and can be used to get more business—especially if your book gives valuable information about your area of expertise. The book can be used as a business card, lead to public speaking, and give you an opportunity to share with others in your field.

During job interviews, we're often asked to "give an example when you\_\_\_\_\_". It's been my experience that all ages of individuals have an experience or two tucked away. It's easy to forget

the stories of our lives—both successes and lessons learned. The reflective nature of writing will bring emerge.

Writing involves reflection—it’s like counting the coins in your piggy bank of the experiences and lessons you’ve learned from the life you’ve lived. Many of my clients and workshop participants have said, “Gee, I didn’t know I had so many good things happen in my life.”

### **3. Who would be interested in reading my book?**

Many of us fall into the trap of comparing ourselves to famous people. Because they’re famous, they have huge fan bases interested in the smallest details of their lives. In order to be an author they need to make a big investment and pay a cadre of helpers—including, perhaps, a ghost writer. They live in another universe, so don’t worry about competing.

You may not have a star-studded platform, yet your book will likely be of interest to a smaller group. One author’s topic is how to be smart with money—written for her niece. When she completes the book, it will hold value for other young women and men new the world of financial decisions. My brother wrote a book to honor his late wife as a way of preserving her memory for the grandchildren. Consequently, he’s provided a story about the journey of a courageous women that many others will enjoy.

Because of print-on-demand and places like Amazon, books can be written on very narrow topics of interest for just a few people—and that’s okay. For example, you could write a book about what to feed Yorkshire terriers with stomach issues, and there would be readers who’d gladly buy your book. This topic would not attract great quantities of readers, but there would be others *chomping at the bit* to get the information you have to give.

This idea has a name, a book and a TED talk. It’s called **The Long Tail**. Chris Anderson describes this concept using many examples, but one of his best is from the publishing world. Let’s say a publisher wants to sell 10,000 books. They can do it by selling 100,000 copies of one title (1 x 10,000) or 100 copies of 100 different titles (100 x 100). The best part is, the “book shelves” on the internet are not limited as they would be in a brick and mortar bookstore. Isn’t it wonderful that authors no longer need to appeal to a general audience. Instead they can publish a book for an audience who has the same interests, needs and passions!

### **4. How do I get started writing my book?**

This is a big question, and there might be several answers, depending upon your situation. For now, I’ll answer in a general way.

The first step is to be motivated to write a book. Sometimes I think a “write a book” seed gets planted in the mind. The idea appears, and won’t go away. For some, it becomes so uncomfortable, writing a book seems inevitable. This does not describe all authors, yet many I’ve worked report this experience.

My favorite thing to say is, “Writing a book is like having a baby.” First there’s conception (lots of fun), then early development (still exciting and new), late term (this seems like work!), and finally delivery (the deadlines and details can be painful). In the end, there’s almost nothing as wonderful as holding your own book in your hand. That’s why sometimes I feel like a book midwife instead of a book shepherd. I take special pride in the books I’ve helped to deliver!

Another useful analogy: There are many **SEASONS** of the book creation process:

1. **WINTER**: the idea arrives
2. **SPRING**: you begin to play with what you’ll say
3. **SUMMER**: a time for the heavy-duty work of writing
4. **FALL**: steps are taken to publish.

Most people do best with an outline or a plan, which is helpful near the beginning of the process. Selecting the right chronology for laying out your content is foundational. Personally, I really don’t like the word outline, so I usually take out a blank sheet of paper, colored gel pens, and draw circles and lines of related topics. Once I get my ideas out in full color, I compose a list. I never call it an outline—but that’s just my way of working with myself.

Once you know the order, you are ready to plan the various sections or chapters of the book. You might have already written something that fits somewhere—which helps greatly! When you’re finished adding, then editing, you are ready to publish.

I would be remiss if I didn’t tell you that I offer a VIP day to help organize your content. Some clients who have benefited from this experience knew what they wanted to write—others didn’t have a clue. It’s an amazing day of discovery!

### **5. My life isn’t very interesting, how could I write a book?**

Everyone leads an interesting life. EVERYONE. We all have stories about our successes, failures and lessons. We’ve all been places and done things. And we know “stuff.” If you don’t believe this is true about yourself, you might consider reflecting on your life. Stories don’t have to be as grand as surviving the Titanic or climbing Mt. Everest. Some of your best stories are about common everyday events, like getting a good grade when the subject was hard, or how it felt to forgive a friend, or how you learned to milk a cow.

That brings me to my next point. You might not be a good judge of your own stories. One of my clients told me her dad raised llamas and started a zoo. To her, it was just another of his kookie ideas. I don’t know anyone who has such a story (except maybe the *Tiger King* crew), and I immediately had a lot of questions for her. In other words, those stories make interesting reading. So, the next time you’re telling your friends a story, pay attention to how they respond. If it peaks someone’s curiosity, it might be good to include in your book. (If your friends are never interested in your stories, get new friends.)

Threads of our experience are likely to resonate with others. Recently, I listened to a panel of Irish born women speak about their lives in the U.S. and in Ireland. I have little in common with

them, yet as they told their stories, I found myself thinking about my own move from Iowa to Arizona. It's true that "we are all one" when your stories are also my stories.

Don't compare your life experiences to others. This applies to you, *especially* if you have someone famous in your family, or you've read about someone famous. Some families assign skills to family members: Tom is the writer, and Julie is the photographer, and Carol is the chef. Chances are Tom, Julie and Carol has talent in all three areas—so ditch those labels and do what feels right for you. All stories have value because they represent moments of your life.

If you feel the need to spice up your life story, you can select a theme and take it through your life. Songs you've loved (and why), shoes you wore throughout time, or maybe the names you were given. To use myself as an example, I could divide my life into chapters based solely on the names I've been called: Janiwhich, Janice, Jan, Mrs. Roelofs, Mom, Ma, Jan Marie, JanR, Grandjamama—you get the point. When you make it fun for yourself, you'll make it fun for your intended audience.

## **6. Can I turn my blogs or my journal into a book?**

Yes, that's a very real possibility. There are companies that will do this for you, (just Google it) but before you publish, make sure you are selective in the blog posts you include. Make sure they are unified around a central theme so that your book makes sense to the reader. The theme could be related to your hobby, career, or perhaps a quality such as kindness, honesty or integrity.

Organize blogs so that the subtopics flow into each other. Recently, I worked with a client who wanted to convert his journal into a published book. As you might have guessed, some of what he wrote was too personal to share with the world. However, there were nuggets of gold within the pages of his 90 day journal, and once we organized the general topics, his book came to life.

Be sure to edit your work. If you're like me, you publish your blog without the help of a professional editor—they are real-time message to your audience. In my case, when I placed my blogs into a book format for *Well Seasoned: The Beauty of Age*, I found better ways to say the same thing, and some of my blogs were better split into two sections. Each time we read through our writing, we'll find ways to improve it. As they say, "God is in the details."

If your favorite blogs cover a wide variety of topics, find a central theme, and as you edit, subtly weave that theme into the body of the individual blogs—sometimes just adding a word or a sentence is enough. As you read each one, ask yourself this question: What does this particular blog have to do with my topic? When I selected blogs for the book *Well Seasoned: The Beauty of Age*, not all my most popular blogs were about the topic of age. However, since age brings knowledge (and hopefully wisdom) these topics fit. I incorporated phrases like: "Over the years I have found," and "I used to think, but now I know," which hint at age, thus blending them into a harmonious unit.

Titles and subtitles are a great way to tie it all together, to let the reader know the topic, and to make it easier to read. One author I've worked with has funny titles for each of her chapters, binding each topic into a cohesive unit.

### **7. Should I write a book even if I don't feel old enough or wise enough?**

Wisdom is dynamic. Remember that. If the seed of writing a book has been planted in your head, you are most likely ready to share what you know. Carl Koch, professor in our Servant Leadership Master's classes, gave us this formula: Experience + Reflection = Wisdom. So it's entirely possible to be a very young reflective person and have something profound to share. Young people see the world with the freshest perspective. Regardless of age, the key is to make an effort to understand your life.

All people have experiences, and we can learn from each other. Keep in mind that the dynamic aspect of wisdom says, "No matter what you know today, you'll know more tomorrow." That's a fascinating concept!

Writing a book is the best way to grow in that particular topic. When I wrote *Rock Solid Confidence: Presenting Yourself with Assurance, Poise and Power*, I knew many aspects of confidence. Through audience interaction and researching their questions, I grew in my understanding. I discovered that the book was only the beginning of my confidence journey.

At the same time, it's best to stay in your lane. Write a book about what you know, what you've lived and what you've studied. You don't need to be the best or the leader in your field, but don't discount your point of view.

### **8. Should I search for a publisher or self-publish my book?**

Many aspects of publishing have changed over the years. A few authors I know started out by having their books published by traditional publishers, but because of these changes, have joined the ranks of the independent publishers. There are a few advantages to being an independent publisher—or, as I generally refer to as self-publishing.

If you are a first time author who is not famous (nationally known athlete, coach, movie star or someone with a mega-platform) many publishers will most likely not be interested in publishing your book—even if you have a fascinating story.

The independent publisher has complete control of things like the manuscript (MS), cover and publication date. This freedom is great, yet the downside is that *you* get to pay the bills for the whole thing, and the quality might suffer. For example, some authors decide they don't want to pay for professional proofreading—which means there are more books of lower quality flooding the market. However, with trusted professionals assisting you, you can create a high quality book.

Keep in mind that about 2.2 million new books are published each year. About 130 million books are available online and many people are not reading books anymore. However, my advice is, if you have a message you know is important, publish anyway. You will need to do the marketing of your book either way, and there is a possibility that a publisher will pick up your book if it's sellable—which is the name of the game for publishers.

So in short, what I'm saying is that it's a matter of money and freedom. If you are able to start small and pull together a team to make your book a reality, you will be able to accomplish your

publishing goals. Speakers and other professionals use their books as a key to their credibility. If you are a lawyer who specializes in copyrights, the fact that “She wrote the book on it” gives you an advantage over others in your field.

Perhaps one of the biggest changes in publishing is the marketing aspect. Years ago, one author I know was sent to New York for a book tour. She stayed in a nice hotel and the publisher picked up the tab for all of it. More recently, another author friend was courted by a publisher, but she was told that she’d need to provide her own transportation and pay her own expenses for the book signings they’d set up for her. Big different. This second author chose to self-publish and set up her own events. More than ever before, marketing is the responsibility of the individual author—or someone you pay to market for you.

### **9. I hated English class and don’t write very well. How could I write a book?**

If you have a passion for your topic and want to write a book—do it. This desire to share what you have learned will carry you a long way. At the same time, a poorly written book distracts from the message. So if you have never liked to write, there are a few ways around that.

I’m working with a client who sits down with me and in a conversational way, we record her stories. Later, I transcribe the recording. It’s a little more complicated than capturing the words, because spoken language and the written language are different beasts. Yet for her, this is the best (least painful) way to share her life experiences.

And that’s the point. Expertise doesn’t always happen to those who are considered good writers. Yet it would be a pity to lose the benefits of those life experiences because of poor spelling and grammar.

A word of warning about those you let edit your writing. Make sure the editor wants to help you tell your story in your words—not their words. Sometimes editors are frustrated writers. They sanitize and clean up the language so much, the author is stripped of his or her unique voice. Only allow them to edit for understanding. An example I’m thinking of is of the late theologian and interpreter of Celtic philosophy, John O’Donohue. His books are completely correct in their grammar, yet the editors have taken out all of his quaint Irish vocal mannerisms. Yes, it’s perfect English, yet when you’ve listened to the way he puts sentence together at a workshop, or heard his voice on tape recordings, the books fall short of the man.

It’s also my opinion is that a great salesperson with a good book creation team will outsell the book of a great writer who sits around waiting to be noticed among the other 2.2 million books published each year. The author is the best promoter of his/her book.

### **10. I am very busy. How could I possibly write a book. Should I wait until I retire?**

That question reminds me of a classmate who said, “We will work hard, and then before our health fails, we will travel the world.” He currently has dementia, so I hope he got to travel. If the idea of writing a book has been placed in your head—begin now. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Take small bites out of this huge undertaking. No need to do it all at once. Begin by organizing. If you're like me and don't like to "outline" (I'm a graphic organizer person myself), begin with a big white sheet of paper. Place a circle in the middle and write the name of a possible topic inside the circle. Ask yourself, "What do I have to say about that topic?" Then begin to draw lines and circles from the center to answer your question. If you have nothing to say, then you've selected the wrong topic. Try again.

NOTE: This is one of the services we provide. We help you choose the best topic for your first book.

Work in small units. Make your writing goals small enough so that you are able to enjoy progress. One of my favorite ways to move forward in writing is to make a promise to write one sentence each day. On a truly busy day, you'll keep it to that one sentence, yet most days, one sentence leads to another and before you know it—you've written a paragraph or a page or two. And the feeling of keeping your promise to yourself is priceless!

Another successful method I teach is to begin with a few (maybe 3-5) titles/topics. If you have 60 minutes to write, set your timer for 10-15 minutes. Titles should be on separate pieces of paper whether you are writing by hand or on your computer. Start the timer and begin writing about the first topic. Write until the timer goes off. When it does, finish your sentence and then move on to the second topic. Continue this way until your allotted writing time the time you've set aside is gone.

When you finish, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that you've begun to write several of your stories. Another interesting thing begins to happen. After you write about two or three of the topics, your writing begins to speed up. You realize you don't have time to ponder, to edit, or to fuss about what you want to write—you simply write. And isn't that the point? You'll eventually want to go back to each of those stories to finish them. But when you do, you'll be better able to get your first draft on paper.

If you're a practical person, you may say to yourself, *If it do this correctly the first time, I won't have to keep rewriting and editing.* That attitude is not realistic. Even the best writers edit their work several times. Harry Heckel once said, "The hardest part of writing for me is filling a blank page with words." So do the hardest part and write the complete piece—then edit later.

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If you want to write a book, but don't know where to begin, call me. Over coffee, we can talk about how Whalen Voices will assist to make the dream of holding your own book in your hand a reality. [jan@whalenvoices.com](mailto:jan@whalenvoices.com) or call Jan 623.466.5067