

How to write a book

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Increasingly, people ask me, “How do you do what you do?” They want to know how to become a writer, speaker, or consultant. I wouldn’t be a speaker or a consultant if I didn’t write a book, so I’ll start with how to write a book.

I post this article pretty regularly, because when I wanted to be a writer, people acted as if it was some mysterious, unattainable goal. But it’s not. Writing is like most art forms. You might be naturally gifted, but more likely, you get up early in the morning (or stay up late at night) and you work. So here’s this year’s edition of “how I did it.”

Work. I know people who have fantastic ideas, great platforms, and even book deals in hand, but they don’t ever get the work done. I’ve heard of writers who go out in the woods and magically give birth to a tome after two weeks without human contact. I am not one of those writers.

I’m a mom who cooks food, does dishes, walks a dog, and cleans a house. I travel enough for speaking and teaching, so I’m not keen on leaving my family for any more than I have to. My daughter goes to school in the morning and my husband serves a ministry in the evenings, so I only have an hour or two of time alone. So I work in the morning or in the midst of chaos. I often have to stop mid-sentence to find my child a clean t-shirt, or to reply to our dog’s plaintive whine. But I work at least eight hours, six days a week. Before writing was my full-time job, I wrote from 4:30 to 7:30 am. Then I edited when I got the dishes done and the house clean. I usually got in five hours a day.

Learn. I try to learn everything I can from other authors. I read books on writing (LaMotte’s *Bird by Bird*, King’s *On Writing*, and Gilbert’s *Big Magic*, for starters). I get advice from everyone I can. I go to book signings. I make author friends. Most authors are extremely generous, when they know you’re serious and not just using them. I read as much as possible. I have an Audible account, so that I can listen to

books. I read fiction and nonfiction. I've never been able to go to Festival of Faith and Writing, or any other writing conference, but I would if I could. I used to be a part of a writing group. I moved and I miss them, but I ask friends to read my work. I'm committed to learning about this craft for the rest of my life

Propose. Write a proposal. Templates abound on the Internet. If you're looking toward a certain publisher, then they might have a standard on their website. Writing a proposal will give you an idea if you have the sort of stamina you'll need for book writing, because it's an action plan for what's ahead.

Inquire. When you have an idea, try to get it into a succinct form. In publishing, they say to have an "elevator pitch" or have a "hook." It sounds cheesy, but the main thing is that you want to say something interesting quickly. Believe me, when people ask you, "What's your book about?" you'll get tired of rambling on for forty minutes, while their eyes glaze over. You'll be doing yourself a favor to hone in on a quick answer to that one. When you have a pithy answer, then contact a publisher. If you're starting out in the religious writing field, then you probably don't need an agent. (Although it seems like a lot of evangelical mommy bloggers have gotten great deals, with big publishers, straight out of the gate. It didn't work that way for me.) Pitch to your denominational publishing house, or to the house where you do most of your reading. If you can connect in person first, that would be the best. (Hang out at the publisher's book table at a conference, etc.) If you know someone who knows someone, you might ask for an introduction. You can look at inquiry letters on line, if you want an example of how to pitch.

Build. In the proposal, you'll be asked about your platform, which is unnerving, because it's a chicken/egg thing. A book helps you build your platform, but you can't get a book deal without a platform. I built it through a blog, podcast, Twitter and writing anywhere and everywhere I could. Just get your name out there. Endless self-promotion is annoying, so try to be generous. Promote the work of authors you love, build relationships, and encourage colleagues. The time for promoting your work will come, but spend most of your efforts focusing on other people.

Contract. If you don't have an agent, get a lawyer friend and an author friend to look at it. They should be able to tell you what's standard or out of whack. Generally, if you're at a denominational publisher, most of what I see is pretty standard. Most books will sell a thousand to 10 thousand copies. Which might come as a shock if you imagined that you would be an overnight sensation, selling millions. Do the

math. Most people don't make a lot on royalties.

Writing. Nose to the grindstone. Savor the process. And get it done.

Marketing. You will need to do marketing, whether you're with a denominational publisher or on the big five (that's Hachette, Macmillan, Penguin, Simon & Schuster, and HarperCollins). It's embarrassing, it feels weird, but it's just part of the job.

If you have specific questions, please feel free to ask in the comments, and I'll address them.