

So you want to write a book?

Organize upfront – Decide on characters, timelines, when they intersect, the conflicts.

Take it a step at a time – Writing a book can be daunting. Take it in pieces. Set milestones for yourself, accomplishing something every day.

Keep a work diary – Jot down anything and everything that happens each day, including leads that you'll want to follow up and suggestions that sources made that were worth thinking about more. Keep it on your computer, by date, and it's easily searchable.

Casting is crucial – Make sure to find the right character for the story – don't be satisfied with the first person you meet.

Go. Rinse. Repeat. – Visit the place or person. Do your interviews. Write up the salient points and anecdotes. Then return and do it again. And again. And again.

Ask for help – Find more experienced writers who can read your work and be mentors.

Be free – Writing may come more freely once you've escaped column inches or word counts. And those bad habits picked up over the years, like tired language or formulaic writing. Go with your story, but also be aware that...

Editing will be 75 percent of the game – Allow time to edit; this is where your sections develop meat or lose fat. Keep all your versions, though, in case you're too ruthless and need to double back.

Can you publish a shorter version first? In newspapers? Magazines?

Create suspense – A short feature generally involves one crisis and one resolution, while a book weaves together many different types of crises and complications into an overall narrative arc. Keep the reader guessing.

Read often – Keep close a stack of books by writers you've always admired. You may find it will help you to borrow their tricks when you confront difficult sentences or sections.

And read your own work out loud – Always the best way to "hear" what's wrong.

Once you're done.... You'll have to be salesman. Sometimes you'll get help promoting your book, but you're the person who knows the story best and will need to do what you can to get people to read it.

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