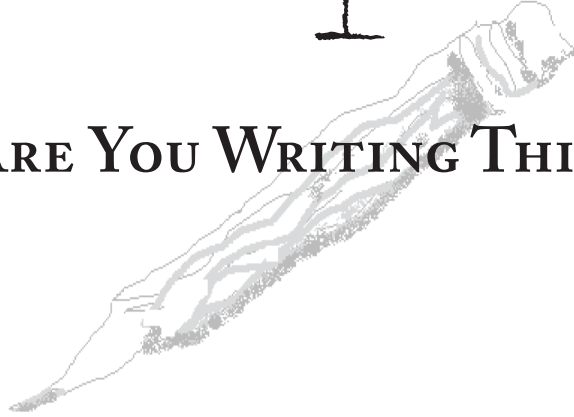


I

WHY ARE YOU WRITING THIS BOOK?



Books often start with a simple yearning to explore new territory: a fascinating topic, characters who won't leave you alone, a good story.

No surprise that writing a book can be one of the most far-reaching journeys a person can take.

If holding your finished book in your hands is your ultimate destination, you need to know that your book doesn't always provide road signs. It's easy to get lost along the way. Often you won't know if you are getting anywhere at all. You may have experienced the excitement of starting a book. You may have also experienced the frustration of stalling out midway through a manuscript because you didn't know where to go next.

A book is much more than just producing pages. A book demands your belief, your stamina, and a strong structure that your reader can follow. It's a lot easier if you have two things: a good guide and a good map.

The summer I turned nineteen, I was sleeping on the floor in a bookstore in Paris called Shakespeare & Company when I overheard some Australian students talking about a beautiful ruined temple overlooking the Aegean. Ancient and mystical, the Temple of Poseidon was perched on the edge of Cape Sounion, open to the sky. It sounded amazing. It was August, too hot in Paris, and my college semester didn't start for three weeks. I wanted to see this wonder.

I had just enough money to buy a ticket on an overnight train. In Athens, trying to figure out how to get to Cape Sounion, I was stuck with no place to stay. I didn't know the language or the country. And at the time, Greece was seething with intense anti-Americanism.

A book demands your belief, your stamina, and a strong structure that your reader can follow.

MARY CARROLL MOORE

But I had to see that temple.

I struck up a conversation with a young British couple. They wanted to hitchhike along the coast and visit some islands then end up at Cape Sounion. They let me tag along. We figured out the route as we traveled. We got rides in trucks, slept along roadsides, ate baklava for breakfast. My new friends paid our ferry trips to each island. We washed our clothes in the Aegean and dried them on the beach.

After asking directions and getting lost many times, we finally stood at sunset under the ancient white columns of the Temple of Poseidon. I sat on the crumbled steps at the edge of a cliff, staring at the impossibly blue sea, watching sea birds coast the wind currents, thrilled to be there.

Looking back, I realize how lucky I was to have made the trip unscathed. As much fun as it was to travel rough, Greece in the 1970s offered too many close calls for an American girl alone. Luckily I had help, because at nineteen, I didn't know better.

I began my first book without a map too, but as with my trip to Greece, unexpected help arrived to get me through the journey.

An expert in gourmet natural foods, I co-owned a cooking school that was reviewed in *USA Today*. One day, a publisher called: Would I write a book about my methods? Yes! It was a dream come true.

I soon learned that books are impossible to navigate blindly. Fortunately I was assigned an editor who worked closely with me every step of the way. During our collaboration, we created a plan for the book's flow, we researched other books to find the best possible structure, and during revision we took out what didn't serve the reader. He helped me learn to make the book's map.

Without that map, giving up would have been a given. I felt discouraged many times, but my editor called at just the right time, pointed to our mapped-out plan, and I carried on.

This first book, *The New Gourmet*, introduced the home cook to everyday fresh foods prepared elegantly. Because my lack of book-writing skills was balanced by a good editor and good recipes, *The New Gourmet* became a bestseller and won an International Association of Cooking Professionals (IACP) award. Winning that award was just as thrilling as seeing the Temple of Poseidon for the first time.

As I published more books, I learned the value of creating a new map for each book project and, too, securing a helpful guide. Book writing became much more enjoyable. I now knew where to turn when the road disappeared, when my enthusiasm flagged, or when my manuscript overwhelmed me.

Start with a Good Map

How do you get a map for your book? It is something you create as you go. It starts easily enough with a written conversation between you and your book project. Get yourself a new notebook. In it, you will begin “talking” with your book on paper, and from the answers that come, you will create your book’s map.

During the book-writing journey, your writer’s notebook will become a valuable aide. In it, you can collect ideas for scenes, character sketches, research notes—whatever might deliver both inspiration and signposts when you get lost. But first you’ll use it to answer three important map-making questions.

With my first published books, I learned that a good manuscript needs to satisfy in three basic ways:

1. the writer’s need to write it
2. the reader’s reason to read it
3. how it contributes to the world of literature

So making your map starts with asking yourself the right questions that help you explore these three needs. Your answers will tell you where you are already on solid ground, and also where you need a guide to help you develop certain book-writing skills.

Get yourself a new notebook. In it, you will begin “talking” with your book on paper, and from the answers that come, you will create your book’s map.

THREE QUESTIONS

1. Why am I writing this book?
2. Why do I feel a reader will want to read this book?
3. What do I think about this book's purpose in the world or the greater mission it could fulfill?

At first glance, these questions seem fairly simple. I thought so too. But most of us never think about all three in depth, and it's a great place to begin your book-writing journey. Because the answers to each question will help you create your book's map.

Question #1: Why Am I Writing This Book?

Quite a few writers know the answer to this question, if they have a book percolating inside. As author Brenda Ueland says, "Everybody is talented, original, and has something important to say." Having something to say is why many of us want to write a book in the first place.

Over the ten years I've taught writers of all skill levels how to plan, write, and develop their books, I've gathered the top reasons—practical, professional, and personal—why we write our books. Is your reason on this list?

TOP REASONS WE WRITE BOOKS

- ✓ To document a life-changing event
- ✓ To help others improve their lives
- ✓ Characters won't leave me alone
- ✓ My friends tell me I have a great story to tell
- ✓ To leave my family a written legacy
- ✓ To make some money, retire rich

- ✓ It's publish or perish at my job
- ✓ I need a book to sell at my workshops
- ✓ To promote my expertise to business clients
- ✓ My crazy family story would make a great novel
- ✓ I'm published, but I want to try a new genre
- ✓ To share what I've learned
- ✓ I need a creative outlet
- ✓ To compile my published pieces into a book
- ✓ To publish my dissertation
- ✓ I have a story I must tell

Take some time to think about your reason for writing your particular book. Why is it so important to you? Ask yourself what is driving you to take this journey.

Question #2: Why Do I Feel a Reader Will Want to Read This Book?

For many writers, the second question, *Why do I feel a reader will want to read this book?* is harder to answer. This question requires you to look up from your book, face your reader, and consider seriously:

- What you imagine your reader experiencing as he or she reads your book
- How this reader is reacting to your ideas
- What benefit the reader is getting from your story

A publishing industry friend once told me that people read books for a certain pay off. They read to be informed, entertained, or inspired. Ideally, they get all three. Writers who only write for their own reasons produce books that sound as if they're talking only to themselves, and there's little benefit to the reader.

Take some time to think about your reason for writing your particular book. Why is it so important to you?

So how do you answer question #2? Your first step is to get familiar with your book's genre and find out what readers most love about it.

Margo, a published nonfiction author in one of my classes, was writing her first mystery novel. When she couldn't answer question #2, I suggested she skim five of her favorite mysteries and write down what she loved about them, what drew her as a reader. She discovered she loved the entertainment, all that tension and excitement in a highly plotted mystery. We worked together on a brainstorming list in her writer's notebook, exploring how Margo might bring more entertainment—tension and excitement—to her manuscript. Because she asked this important question #2, Margo accumulated twelve plot ideas that fired her enthusiasm after one month. She now knew where her book was going, why it would be read by others. Her new plot ideas created a page-turner.

Sometimes, asking this question about your reader can bring up fears. David, another beginning author, was writing his memoir. But he started getting scared thinking about how his relatives might read it someday. So he began to omit key elements that make books sing, such as the more human side of people he loved.

Readers can spot a writer's hesitation a mile away—they suspect there's a better story hidden somewhere, and if it isn't revealed, they get impatient and stop reading. Seeing David's stall out, I suggested an experiment. He would write everything that came to him for one week, without censoring, just to see what emerged on the page. As David began allowing the richness of his full story to come through, he found the stories much less risky than imagined. The fuller writing made the story more universal, less personal. His reader became his ally, rather than his enemy.

The process of discovering your real reader is a fascinating journey. As you ask yourself, *Who is my reader? Why would this reader want to read my book?* you'll look at your

material in a new way. You'll begin to ask what serves the story best, rather than what just serves you.

Question #3: What's the Book's Larger Purpose?

Our final map-making question asks about the book's uniqueness, its larger purpose in the world. This question most interests publishers. Understandably, publishers and agents want to be sure the manuscript will make its mark, before they invest their time and money.

Linda, a respected clinical psychiatrist, was writing a book about couples in transition, her first attempt at writing more than papers and articles. But her book struggled with its larger purpose. No surprise she was having trouble finding an agent.

We went over questions #1 and #2—these seemed easy answers. Linda knew why she was writing the book—she had a passion for her work and wanted to share the insights she discovered. Her readers were obviously fellow academics. Or so she thought.

When I asked about question #3, Linda felt silent. She knew the book's larger purpose only in theory. Her mission was to help couples communicate from the heart. So why was there no heart in her writing? The chapters felt dry and academic, as if she were lecturing from a distant room. Frustrating to a woman who knew she had more to say than what she was writing.

Heart comes via voice. I knew what was wrong with Linda's book. Her own experiences were largely absent. So I gently asked about this, why her own journey had been omitted. She said because her colleagues would think less of her if they heard about her personal learning curve in relationships, or in sessions with clients. It was a dilemma because these very experiences had led to her most valuable insights about couples communication.

"Let's go back to question #2," I said. "Who are your real readers?"

Linda visited several bookstores, researching other volumes in the body/mind/spirit genre, looking at how similar

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topics were presented. “My reader is primarily the layperson, not the clinician,” she discovered, to her surprise. “And almost all the books for those readers are full of the author’s personal experiences! Even those written by very respected clinicians.” So Linda began to include her own struggles with relationships.

As she revealed her personal vulnerability as a therapist on the page, it brought authenticity to her theories. Readers could now trust this writer’s words.

Paul, a business educator, had a similar experience with this important question of his book’s purpose—and a similar reason for not yet achieving it in his manuscript.

A skilled speaker with great material, Paul was approached to write a book by his boss who admired Paul’s seminars on team-building. To the boss, the book’s goal was clear—for use in training seminars. But feedback from the boss on Paul’s first draft was discouraging. The manuscript felt slick, as if it were blatantly selling an idea, promoting a prescribed agenda. Paul’s boss wanted a book that would inspire, not sound like propaganda.

Paul began to realize that even a business book needs a strong personal voice to convey meaning and purpose to a reader. If his voice was completely missing from the manuscript, he could remedy this by adding a bit of his own story, sharing the steps he’d personally been through with this team-building method. Adding real-life examples from his clients, too.

Although Paul at first couldn’t see what good it would do “to make the book all about me,” his boss encouraged him to include a few stories about his own process. Each new anecdote made the material much more readable—and ultimately more useful to his company.

Julie, a beginning novelist, easily answered the first question. Pages in her writer’s notebook showed why she was driven to write a novel based on her crazy family—the chaos of growing up with a psychotic mother and disappearing brother was such a compelling story, she had to tell it.

Researching questions #2 and #3, Julie looked over recently published books with similar voice, language, and tone. She realized her ideal reader was actually a girl in her late teens, the same age as Julie herself had been when the family craziness accelerated. Her book's purpose? To give young adults inspiration and strength.

This wonderful discovery changed the map for her entire book. A synergy occurred and Julie began to dream about her book, a common occurrence when writers open up the dialogue between themselves and their creative work. The book itself begins to give the writer new directions. Maybe you've overheard writers say, "Those characters are talking to me." Maybe you thought they were crazy. But this ongoing dialogue is magical; it's one reason writers love to write.

During sleep, Julie came up with unexpected ideas: a memory she'd forgotten, a detail about the setting, a plot twist. It was as if the book was talking to her, and in her dreams she could hear what it was trying to say. When Julie only put attention on her own reasons for writing her book, she was unable to see the path ahead. Her book is now moving forward beautifully; the sequence of the three questions created a functional map and her book's inner dialogue became her guide.

Each Author's Voice Is Valuable

Your unique voice as a writer comes through as you contemplate these three questions, answering them as best you can with what you know now about your book. Each author has an authentic way of telling her story. We're sometimes hampered by our preconceptions about the book-writing process, what it takes to get published, or what others feel we should write. These three simple questions help you discover what you alone can offer the world of readers, through your book.

I'm a great believer in short writing exercises to deepen this discovery process. Even twenty minutes of exploring on paper can reveal new directions. As author Adriana Diaz says, "The creative act is a courageous, ancient gesture, a dynamic

The book itself begins to give the writer new directions.

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Writing is a great way to find out what you believe and who you are, to listen to yourself on paper and make sense of what you hear.

exploration of the . . . mystery that is human existence.” I couldn’t agree more. Writing is a great way to find out what you believe and who you are, to listen to yourself on paper and make sense of what you hear.

Writing exercises help you hear what your creative self is trying to say, get in touch with that mystery. They are also one of the quickest ways to access both the linear (planning) and the nonlinear (random), or outer and inner story. We’ll talk more in the next chapter about how these two aspects of your book open doors to new ideas, explore places you haven’t yet traveled, and let you adjust course when needed. This last benefit is huge.

As you try the writing exercises in this book, be careful to avoid producing “good” writing. The goal of the exercises is to simply take you outside what you know now, away from your cherished notions about your book, and allow you to explore.



Exercise: Why Am I Writing This Book?

TIME NEEDED: 20–30 MINUTES

1. Close your eyes and imagine your book—its topic, its design, its plot and characters. What does it look like? What is it about? Open to an imaginary page. What is going on? Are characters talking? Is there an exciting moment in the plot? Note anything you feel or sense about your book now.
2. Open your eyes and write for ten minutes. Write whatever comes, let it flow, no editing. Read over what you wrote. Is there anything that surprises you?
3. Now ask yourself, *Why do I want to write this book? What is driving me?* Write whatever comes, for a few minutes.
4. Next, ask yourself, *Why would a reader want to read this book?* Is it fun? Fascinating? Moving?

Even life changing? Write whatever comes.

5. Think of a reviewer commenting on your book. What would this reviewer say? What is the larger purpose of your book, its impact on the world? Write for a few minutes about this.
6. Look over your responses. Circle or underline the question that was hardest to answer or had less truth for you. (That tells you something about where you are right now in your book journey.)
7. Jot down a few action steps to explore this question. Maybe “visit a bookstore,” “do some journaling,” “read books in my genre to see what’s published recently.”
8. Brainstorm ideas with fellow writers for any area you haven’t yet explored or don’t understand.