

BECOMING A PUBLISHED THERAPIST

A Step-By-Step
Guide to
Writing
Your Book



BILL O'HANLON

Becoming a Published Therapist

A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing Your Book



W. W. Norton & Company
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To Helen, who has written something deep on my heart.

Introduction:

"Stop Me Before I Write Again!"



I GOT THE CALL TO WRITE A BOOK SOME YEARS AGO. I had been presenting workshops for the previous seven years, and participants in my workshops had regularly begun to ask, "Where is your book?"

I would tell them I wasn't a writer. I had never had ambitions to write, although I loved to read. I didn't have much patience for sitting down and writing; I would rather speak. Also, I had no clue how to write a book or how to get it published.

Fast-forward 24 years. I have now written and published more than 30 books, many of them by mainstream firms such as W. W. Norton, the publisher of this book. One of my books got me on *Oprah*. My books have sold hundreds of thousands of copies all over the world. They have been translated into 16 languages.

How did I get from clueless to clued-in? How do you go from "I don't know how to write" to "Stop me before I write again"?

That's where you come in. You are probably reading this book because you have some curiosity about book writing and publishing or you wish to write a book and get it published. And because I wasn't a "natural writer" and was clueless about the process of both writing and publishing, I think I may be the perfect guide for you in realizing your writing dreams and goals.

I went to a “brown-bag” lunchtime presentation at a large psychotherapy conference some years ago, and the well-known presenter was giving a session on how to get a book published. She began by saying that an agent had learned of her work, approached her, and suggested she write a book. The book quickly became a best-seller. She admitted she really didn’t know that much about getting an agent and getting published and that she had essentially fallen into best-sellerdom.

That certainly isn’t my story. I worked at it by struggling to learn how to write and complete a book and then get it published. I think my journey is typical for most authors; in many ways, it’s a hopeful message I have for you. Even if you are not a natural writer, even if you have no idea how to get a book published, it’s possible to do both. I’ll tell you exactly how to do so.

There are several components to the successful therapist/writer path:

1. Managing to find the time and discipline to write amid a busy life and practice;
2. Finding your writing style and voice;
3. Finding the intersection for your expertise, your passion, and the needs of the marketplace; and
4. Learning about and handling the business and marketing aspects of publishing in order to ensure that your book finds its intended readers.

If you are willing to engage in and accomplish each of these goals, the odds of getting your book written and published will increase.

I began to write in 1982. I was asked to be a guest editor for a journal issue, and, because I knew the editor wouldn’t turn me down, I decided to write two articles for that issue. I wrote them on an electric typewriter (that should carbon-date me). It was very hard to write those articles: I avoided sitting

at the typewriter; I was nervous and unconfident. When I finally began to write, I found my words to be flat and not at all reflective of what was in my mind or my heart.

I had to revise those first two articles again and again and still I didn't think they were well written. But they were good enough to publish in a clinical journal. (I actually met someone years later who told me they were his favorite articles in the issue, but they weren't my favorites, I can assure you.) That seemed to get me over the hump. I had become a published author!

This leads us to Lesson #1: Start writing and do what you can do to get anything published. This will help you think of yourself as a writer, thereby breaking that initial psychological barrier of not having been published. It will also help you begin to establish your writing "platform" (more on that later).

At a family therapy conference I attended, I met an acquiring editor, Susan Barrows, who ended up offering me a contract for my first book for W. W. Norton. In our initial discussion, I told her I was planning to write a book about Milton Erickson's work someday. She told me to keep her in mind when I did.

Lesson #2: Relationships, like in any endeavor, can help. People tend to think of the publishing industry in abstract terms, but for me it has mostly been about relationships with people. My current editor at W. W. Norton, Deborah Malmud, and I have an easy and good relationship that actually led to this book being written. Like with any relationship, if you are disagreeable, don't keep your word, or are demanding or entitled, don't expect to get far. Likewise, if an editor or agent in the publishing industry treats you badly or doesn't keep his or her word, ease out of that relationship as gracefully as you can.

I found the idea of writing a whole book quite daunting, so when a colleague in England (Jim Wilk) suggested we write a book together, I jumped at the chance, figuring that having a partner would be half the work. We got a contract offer from Guilford Press, a publisher that specialized in books for psychotherapists. I actually wrote many of my initial books with coauthors. Writing can be a lonely endeavor, and I find I keep my word to others better than if I make myself a promise to write or finish something by a certain time.

Lesson #3: Find a partner to write with if you find the task too daunting. Obviously, find someone who can pull his or her weight and who is able to work collaboratively.

It turned out that, due to Jim being in England (in the days before computers, email, and the Internet) and due to some personnel changes at Guilford, that first book, which was begun in 1983, didn't actually appear in print until 1987. By then, a book that I had done for W. W. Norton had been published.

Jim and I rewrote that book for Guilford 38 times! Because it was a first book for both of us, we wanted to get it right. Also, as I mentioned, I wasn't a very good writer and most of my final writing turned out to be rewriting. It took us the better part of three years to finish composing that book and then almost another year for it to be published.

Lesson #4: Traditional print publishing can take years. Be patient. Also, Lesson #5: Most good writing is the result of rewriting.

Eventually, I began to be faster and better at the book-writing process. After those first titles, each book generally took a year to write and rewrite. Later still, after many more publications, I found my writing and rewriting time was reduced to about three months per book.

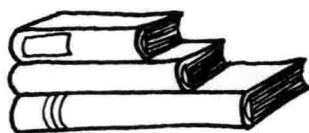
After more than 30 books now, I usually write a book in a matter of weeks rather than in months or years. So I went from being a tortured, slow, not natural, or “good” writer to being a fast and relatively good writer. (I can always improve, and I still work on my writing skill regularly.)

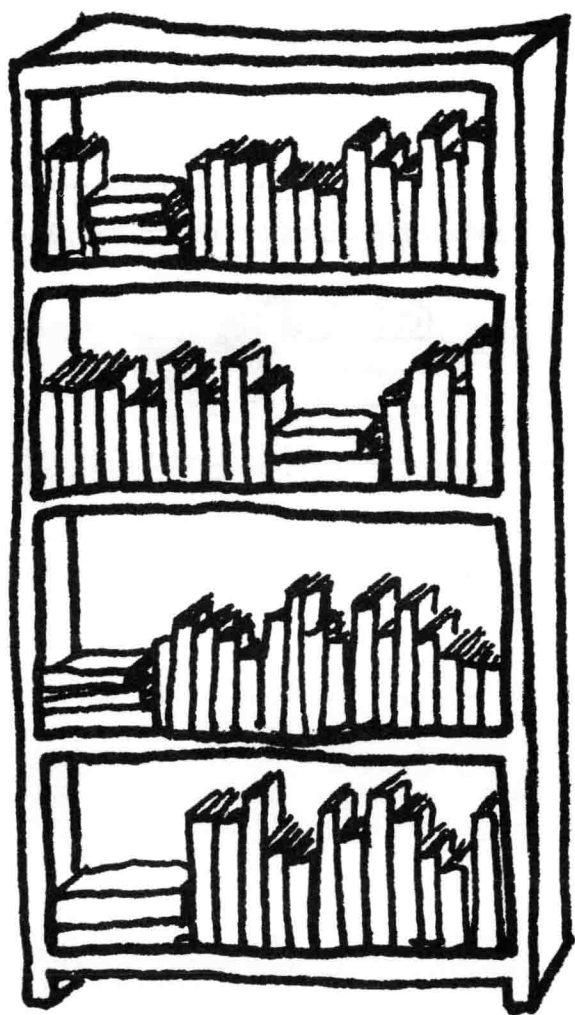
Lesson #6: You will get better with more experience and practice.

One more note: This book is mostly about writing and publishing nonfiction, because that’s what most therapists aim to do and that is also what I have experience and expertise in. Some of the material in the book also applies to writing and publishing fiction and will help in that endeavor, but fiction is a whole different kettle of fish and beyond the main scope of this book.

John Steinbeck wrote about avoiding the “hoptedoodle” some years ago. By that, he meant “fancy” writing that many readers glaze over or skip in a book. I have never been one for hoptedoodle, so enough of the preliminaries. Let’s dive right in to the meat of the matter.

Becoming a Published Therapist:
A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing Your Book





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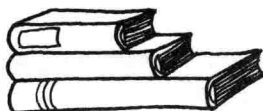
CHAPTER 1

Why Would a Therapist Want to Write a Book?

Passion and Purpose

I always wanted to be an author. I figured the way to do that was to write a book.

—Steve Martin



ONE CAN, I UNDERSTAND, HAVE A PERFECTLY FINE LIFE without writing or publishing a book. I had one for 25 years before my first book came out. Now, after more than 30 books, I can barely remember life before having been published. But I was not a natural writer. I struggled to write, and it felt like I spilled blood on the keyboards in order to get each line down. When I did write, I didn't like what I had written and had to rewrite again and again so the books would be readable.

I also never grew up, as some do, with the dream of being a writer. I liked to read, but it had never occurred to me to write a book until I was an adult and felt that I wanted to express something. Even then, I had no clue how to go about writing or getting a book published.

Why might a therapist, in the midst of a busy life and practice, want to take the time to write a book and get it published?

I wrote my first books because I *had* to. Something inside me insisted, and while I could have resisted the call, I knew

that I would be letting myself down as well as shirking an important contribution I could be making. So, I guess that is the first reason to write: because you feel you *have* to write.

Unlike me, some therapists are naturals and love the process of writing. Writing for publication, for those therapists, would be a way to get supported by doing something they enjoy or find satisfying.

After I began to get my books published, I had a colleague who also wrote who asserted that if one added up the time spent writing and revising, as well as dealing with publishers and getting the word out about the book, one ended up earning pennies per hour. I've never done the math, but either his books sell fewer copies than my titles or don't stay in print very long, because I still receive royalty payments from books I wrote in the 1980s, and I am sure it has worked out to be much more than pennies per hour for at least some of my published books.

So, another reason for therapists to write and publish books is to develop sources of passive income, that is, income that doesn't involve trading hours for money like most clinical work does. If my books continue on in print and continue to sell, I will have some supplemental income in retirement. You could too. As I write this, the financial system is still recovering from a severe downturn and many therapists who thought they would be able to retire from active practice have had to rethink their plans. Having supplemental income from book sales might be enough to free those therapists from their current location-based income and enable them to cut back or stop their practices a bit earlier. If not, it might help them pay a few bills or buy a few extras.

A book can also establish a therapist as a recognized expert in some area and can lead to other indirect increases of income. Since my first books came out, I have regularly received invitations to give paid speeches and workshops all around the world. In many years, I have made more money from public speaking than from my book royalties. That applies to coaching and consulting work as well. When your

colleagues or readers start perceiving you as an expert, they will often want to hear more from you and may be willing to pay for you to share your knowledge.

Of course, just being recognized as an expert can be satisfying in its own right. I remember occasionally before I had any published books, I would have what I thought was an original idea, only to see it in someone else's book later or to hear some speaker saying something similar. I would kick myself for not having acted quickly enough to be recognized for that idea. Or I would read or hear something from one of the recognized experts in an area in which I had some knowledge and would think I had a better way of doing things or explaining things, but I would be frustrated because no one knew (or wanted to know) about my better way because I had no publications in that area.

That leads to one last reason why therapists might want to write and publish books: to have a positive impact on their field or on the world. The late Steve Jobs once exhorted his Apple cohorts to go out and "make a dent in the universe." Writing a book can be a way of leaving your mark.

I wrote this book to help therapists discover how to overcome their blocks to writing and publishing. I will discuss the inner and outer work of writing and publishing: overcoming procrastination and distraction, dealing with fears and writing blocks, and learning what works for you as a writer.

And I'll discuss how to get published. The publishing world, like any new territory, can be confusing and intimidating if you haven't lived in it or spent time learning about it. But like clients arriving confused and frightened for their first therapy session, once you engage in the process and learn a bit about the territory, it can become not only less frightening but also actually enjoyable.

I scrupulously avoided reading any books about the writing process when I began to write, because I knew I had the kind of personality that could forever be "fixin' to get ready," as they say down South. I worried that I would keep reading

books about writing and not ever actually start writing.

But after my first five books were published, I allowed myself to read a few of them. None of them were exactly right for me, perhaps because I was mainly writing for a specialized audience of therapists, and perhaps because I had worked out my own way of writing and getting published. Still, I picked up a few helpful writing tips and learned more about the publishing industry, and so I am glad I read those books. Many years later, I began to teach and coach others to get their books written and published (I have helped authors to write and publish more than 100 books so far, which is pretty cool, I think). Because I was now teaching it, I began to read all the writing and publishing books I could. I have read most of them by now and have grabbed the best ideas from them to put into this book for you, combining them with my hard-won knowledge from 25-plus years of writing and publishing experience and what I have learned from coaching others.

I tried to make this book fun and chock-full of practical knowledge and guidance. My goal is to help you get your book (or books) written and published or at the very least to help you figure out that writing and publishing are not for you so you don't torture yourself about not having written a book.

I'll cover self-publishing, e-publishing, and getting published by traditional publishers (I've done them all), so you can decide which direction is right for you.

PASSION: FINDING THE ENERGY TO WRITE YOUR BOOK AND GET IT PUBLISHED

Passion for a book is like an electrical impulse traveling down a wire, and that electrical impulse has to be strong enough to affect a lot of people, from the writer to the agent to the editor. Then from the editor to the publicist who needs to get the book reviewed, the art director who is responsible for coming up with the right cover, the sales reps who sell the book to the store

buyers. Then from the store's main buyer to the individual book-sellers and, eventually, to the customer.

—Lee Boudreaux, Senior Editor, Random House
(quoted in *The Making of a Bestseller*, by
Brian Hill and Dee Power [Chicago: Dearborn
Trade Publishing, 2005])

It takes a good amount of effort to write a book and get it published (and then to get the word out to readers after publication). So I would suggest not starting on your writing project unless you have enough energy to pull you through the rough bits, the dips, the discouraging moments, and just the sheer amount of time it takes to see your book through to publication and get it successfully out into the world.

I always start my books when an idea moves me. I get energized about a topic. I have many ideas for books; I actually have outlines for about 10 or so books sitting on my computer hard drive as I write this. But I don't expand every idea into a book. But ideas aren't enough in my experience: The book must have some driving force that turns it from idea into action.

The essayist Annie Dillard writes this about the act of writing a book: "Writing a book is like rearing children—willpower has very little to do with it. If you have a little baby crying in the middle of the night, and if you depend only on willpower to get you out of bed to feed the baby, that baby will starve. You do it out of love. Willpower is a weak idea; love is strong. You don't have to scourge yourself with a cat-o'-nine-tails to go to the baby. That's the same way you go to your desk. There's nothing freakish about it. Caring passionately about something isn't against nature, and it isn't against human nature. It's what we're here to do" (from her essay "To Fashion a Text").

On the other hand, the best-selling business author Tom Peters was asked whether his book, *In Search of Excellence*, which caused a shift in business practices all over the world, was written for that express purpose. His response: "When I