

The Ghostwriting / Co- Authoring Process

By Stephen R. Clark

There’s nothing spooky about it

“Writing is easy; all you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead.” – Gene Fowler

For many, the idea of ghostwriting is a mysterious endeavor, but it needn’t be. Writing is writing, and *all* writing involves *plain hard work*.

Usually, one person (the author/writer) comes up with an idea and then puts that idea or story into words and creates their book.

With ghostwriting/co-authoring, the work is shared between the “author” and the “writer”: You, the author/client generate the idea and general content, and I, the ghostwriter (or co-author), craft your message into the final product.

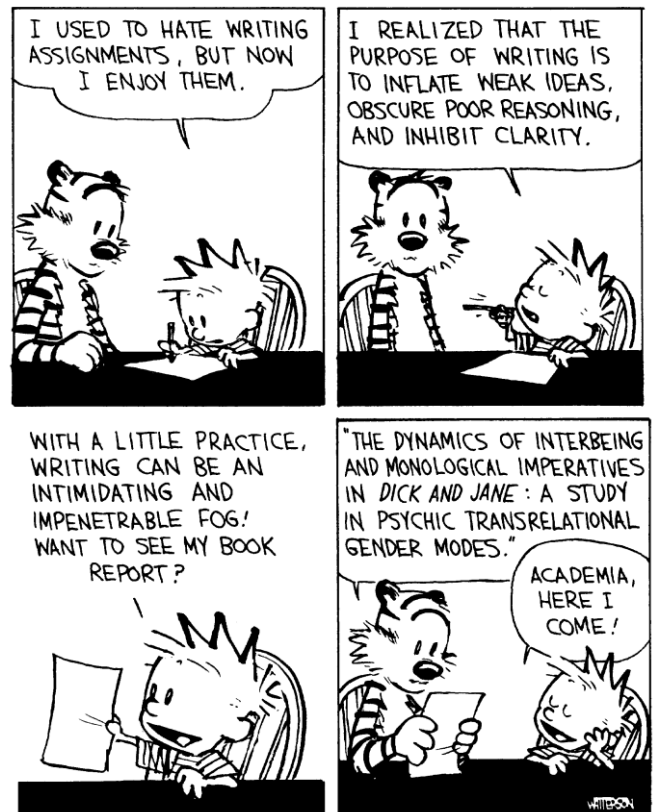
You, the author, are the subject matter expert (SME). You know your subject inside and out and can probably talk at great length about your core ideas. And that’s exactly the crux of the process; *you talking!* More about that later.

Reasons for using a ghostwriter / co-author

“The most difficult thing in the world is to make things simple enough, and enticing enough, to cause readers to turn the page.” – Helen Gurley Brown

Usually a ghostwriter/co-author is needed because, while you know your subject well and most likely can give an effective presentation or short speech on your topic, you may feel you are not as skilled when it comes to writing for print. Or, the idea of building an entire book seems intimidating. Not to worry! That’s why I’m here. There are many “authors” who are not “writers.”

However, there are also many authors who are good writers, yet who still turn to ghostwriters/co-authors for help. Why? Because they’re busy with speaking engagements and other efforts, and may even be facing multiple deadlines.



At any rate, they need an extra hand and mind to help them stay ahead of their commitments and workloads. The writer helps the author produce books, articles, speeches, radio scripts, and more.

The bottom line is that there is no shame in using the services of a ghostwriter/co-author. And for all authors who do, the process is pretty much the same. The primary goal is to somehow get all the information on the topic from the *author's* head into the *writer's* head. This is where some of the harder work comes in for both of us.

This means that we will need to spend some time together (in person, on the phone, via email, etc.) so you can explain your idea and what you want to accomplish. While it may feel slow and frustrating, taking the time to do good, up-front work will ultimately help the overall process move more smoothly and quickly. Just jumping into “getting the book done” is not time-efficient or cost-effective, and will most likely result in an inferior product.

Before we begin, following are some questions you need to consider:

Why do you want to write a book?

“A first-rate soup is more creative than a second-rate painting.” – Abraham Maslow

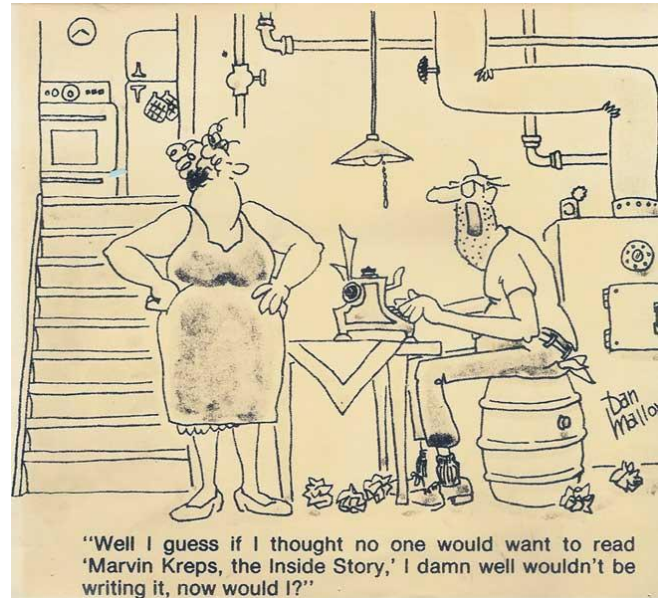
You need to clearly decide (a) what your book is going to be about and (b) why anyone would want to read it.

What do you want to say? Why do you feel a need to share this message? Who is the message for? What do you want people to do after they read your book? What are your motives and purposes for writing this book?

EXERCISE: Write out a page or two answering these questions in detail; write it like a very personal letter to your target reader. This may become the introduction to your book.

Here are a couple of wrong reasons for writing a book!

- If you're looking to write a smash bestseller that will earn you a ton of money fast, then most likely you're off track right from the start. It's not a good reason! Every year hundreds of thousands of books are published and only a small percentage become bestsellers. And of those, only a handful yield large pay-offs for the authors. Your book may have the potential to become one of those lucky few, but that's not the most effective motivation for writing. If your passion for money or notoriety is greater than your passion for your message, odds are your book will not succeed.
- If you come to me and say, “God told me to write this book,” I'll be honest and say I'm skeptical. Especially if you've done no research, don't have a clear idea



what the outline of the book will be, have no expertise on the topic, and expect me to help you without getting paid. If God truly told you to write a book, He also will give you the content (at least a clear, detailed outline), it will most likely have some relevance to your experience or expertise, and He also will provide the funds for hiring me to help you. I do not work for free for anyone.

What are some better reasons for writing a book?

- If you are an SME on a topic and you are giving speeches or presentations, or conducting seminars on that topic, then a book that you can sell to your audience is probably a good idea. This is especially true if people are already asking you if you have a book available. Your appearances create a ready-made captive market for your book, and a book enhances your credibility as a SME.
- If you are a minister, pastor, or evangelist, and you have done a series of sermons around a specific topic, then putting those sermons into a book could be a great idea. Again, you have an existing channel for selling your book (or books).

CAUTION: Merely taking transcripts of speeches or sermons, doing minor editing, and publishing them as books is a *bad* idea. There is an art to taking a spoken presentation and crafting it for the printed page.

- If you have had a very unique, challenging, or inspirational experience that others have asked you more than once to put into a book, then you may have a good reason to write a book (or an article).
- If you are involved in a ministry or not-for-profit organization that provides a special or unique community service, then a book about what you do and the people you serve could be an effective fund-raising tool.

These are only four good reasons, but you get the idea. So, be brutally honest as you answer the question: *Why do I want to write a book?*

If you don't have a good, strong reason for writing the book, and no real passion for your topic, then a book is not the thing to do. Maybe, instead, we could work on an article or small pamphlet. Also, if you're *not* a SME on your topic (for example, a business person writing about theology), you will need to work very hard to establish why anyone should pay attention to what you have to say. Credentials are critical to credibility.

How much effort are you willing to put into your book?

*"I love being a writer. What I can't stand is the paperwork."
– Peter De Vries*

Just because you hire me doesn't mean there's no work for you to do!

Remember, you're the SME and your job is to help *me* know and understand what *you* already know and understand about your topic. Since I can't read minds and neither of us knows how to do the Vulcan mind-meld, then this is going to take some effort on your



part. The good news is that I've rarely met a topic I couldn't grasp quickly. Here are a few things you'll need to do (**yes, this is work you need to do before you contact me!**):

- **Develop a detailed outline for your book.** Think of this as an expanded table of contents. List the “chapters” in the order you think best makes sense, and write a few sentences or lists of bullets about what will be in each chapter. The more detailed you are, the better. Together, we will reorganize the outline and add much more detail before diving into your project.
- **Pull your research together.** Gather together all the magazine articles, newspaper clippings, books, tapes, transcripts, hand outs, newsletters, brochures, flyers, news releases, notes, PowerPoint presentations, videos, rough drafts, and anything else you've accumulated on your topic that can be used to develop your book. Be sure you have all you will need to properly cite your sources. **If you have none of this material then we have a very serious problem!**
- **Get organized.** Once you have your outline, then organize the material as best you can by chapters. Make a file folder for each chapter and put all of the relevant supporting material in that chapter's folder. If you're going to quote extensively from any source or use song lyrics, you may need to get permission and pay a fee to do so – *this is your responsibility*. Speeches, presentations, and any other audio or video will need to be transcribed. You can get this done on your own or I can get it done for you at additional cost. Once I've read and absorbed all the material you provide we'll need to get together and talk some more. We'll need to discuss a final fee and a production schedule, plus I'll want to talk to you about each chapter. Essentially, I'll want to listen as you talk through the book so I can clearly grasp your idea and hear your “voice.” Together, we will develop a plan and timeline for completing your project.

Note: You will be charged a \$250 fee in advance to review your materials. If we move forward with an agreement, this fee will be deducted from the final project fee.

- **Look at your calendar.** How much time can you commit to being interviewed and for reviewing material as it's developed? Most book projects take a minimum of three months (which is very, very aggressive) to six months or more. This includes interviewing, transcribing, writing, reviewing, and rewriting time. How quickly we are able to move through the project will often depend on your availability. Just because you're eager to get the book completed doesn't mean that it's going to be possible to meet your expectations. Be realistic and patient. You want to produce a quality product and quality takes time. **If you are unable or unwilling to make yourself available as needed then, again, we have a very serious problem.**

Do you have the financial resources for such a major project?

“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?” – Luke 14:28 (NIV)

Every project is unique and every book is a substantial undertaking. Writing a book, and writing it well, is hard, time-consuming work. While it may not be as physically demanding, it is not unlike designing and building a house you are going to live in. It takes time, money, planning, and care to get it just right. Once it’s done, you’ll want your book to be able to stand on its own for years to come and be something you are proud to have authored. You need to consider the cost in time and money before beginning.

I don’t work cheap or for free (1 Timothy 5:18). My pricing is based on a variety of factors. A final estimate cannot be given until we’ve had a chance to talk and I’m able to clearly ascertain the scope of your project. Once I’ve gotten a handle on what needs to be done, a contract will be developed outlining all of the steps, deadlines, payment terms, authorship credits, royalty/profit sharing, and responsibilities of all parties involved.

Typically, I generally will not set the base price of a book-length project lower than \$10,000 to \$25,000, and it can be higher and include royalty/profit-sharing arrangements.

Why is there variance? If you’re a well known “celebrity” who is able to pull a six or seven figure advance from a publisher for your book, then I’m going to get a reasonable share of that, which will be substantially higher than \$10,000 - \$25,000, just as your agent will get 10% to 20%. The same is true for a well-known evangelist with a multi-million dollar ministry, or a successful business person with a multi-million dollar business. Or, if you have done little to no preparation and there is the need for extensive research, then my fee will be higher since more of my time will be required.

In rare, special circumstances, I may charge less.

If you’re an SME who has some regional or national exposure within a narrow or wide target audience, or if you have a good sized donor base, or if you know you have any kind of ready-made channel for selling your book, then \$10,000 to \$25,000 is definitely affordable and reasonable.

Think of it like this: If you pay me \$10,000 to help write your book and you decide to self-publish it, let’s say it costs \$4 each for you to print 1,000 copies of your book*. You sell them at your speaking engagements and from your website for \$14.95 each. That yields an income of \$14,950. You have recovered the \$10,000 writing fee and the \$4,000 printing cost, and have a profit of \$950 – just from selling your first 1,000 copies on your own. Your profits increase substantially from that point on.

*(*Note: This is just an estimate. Printing costs vary widely from vendor to vendor. If you choose to self-publish, it is your responsibility to locate a printer for your book.)*

If you have a good connection with an organization or trade association whose members would have a strong interest in your book, you may be able to approach that organization for funding by developing a co-publishing arrangement, allowing them to sell your book to their membership.

The more effort you put into marketing and selling your book, the more copies you will sell, and the more quickly you will easily recover anything you pay me for helping with the writing.

Setting right expectations

“It makes all the difference in the world whether we put truth in the first place or the second place.” – John Morley

I am a writer. I will help you write your book and provide you with an accurate and strong manuscript according to your specifications and based on the material you provide as well as your expertise as you communicate it to me.

However...

- *I am not an agent.* While I can provide some guidance on submitting your manuscript to a traditional publisher, I generally do not help in this endeavor. I may be able to point you in the direction of an agent or two and give you some counsel.
- *I am not a printer.* Again, I can provide some guidance in this area, but if you wish to self-publish, you will need to find your own printer. Start by talking to local printers in your area by looking in your Yellow Pages. You may also want to do an Internet search looking for “book printers.” You may also want to consider the services of companies such as www.CafePress.com, www.Lulu.com, www.XulonPress.com, www.iUniverse.com, and other similar self-publishing companies and services.
- *I am not a publicist or marketer.* Again, I can provide some guidance in these areas and even help you develop some marketing materials, but any support I provide will be limited and specific (such as copy writing, developing a media kit, or helping develop a simple web site).
- *I cannot guarantee the success of your book.* While I will deliver a quality manuscript, I cannot guarantee that there is an audience for your book. I cannot guarantee that you will sell enough copies to recoup your costs. I cannot guarantee that a traditional publisher will be interested in your manuscript. A lot of your success will depend on your own efforts to market your book. Even if you are fortunate to have a traditional publisher pick up your manuscript, they will expect a lot of effort from you and they won’t guarantee the success of your book either.

A good resource for locating agents and publishers, and for marketing tips, is the *Writer’s Market* published annually by Writer’s Digest Books or *Christian Writer’s Market Guide* (Sally Stuart) published annually by Tyndale House Publishers; both are available in most bookstores.

A few frequently asked questions

“There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don’t know we don’t know.” – Donald Rumsfeld

Q. *How long is a typical manuscript?*

A. How long your book needs to be depends upon what needs to be covered on your topic. Generally, book length manuscripts run 25,000 – 75,000 words, depending on the topic, audience, etc.. A typical double-spaced manuscript page runs about 250 words. Aim for around 10 chapters, more or less. Usually, the topic and materials dictate length, but a publisher may require cutting to a specific formula-based page count.

Q. *What are some typical acknowledgements for ghostwriters/co-authors to receive?*

A. It has become far more common for ghostwriters/co-authors to have their names on the covers along with the author, and this is more ethical. This could be “By John Smith with S. Writer,” or “By John Smith as told to S. Writer,” or even “By John Smith and S. Writer.” Other mentions of the ghostwriter/co-author can be made in the book, including on the copyright page with contact information, or on an acknowledgements page thanking the writer for their help.

Q. *What are typical royalty/profit-sharing arrangements?*

A. Anything is possible. It is entirely reasonable that we share in any earnings your book and spin-off products achieve. This could be a percentage of royalty earnings from a traditional publishing deal or a percentage of self-publishing sales, or even a percentage of earnings from other income such as audio, foreign editions, movies, software, etc. My total earnings from your book can be capped at a mutually agreed amount.

Q. *What types of books do you ghostwrite/co-author?*

A. Only non-fiction. I do not ghostwrite or co-author fiction, drama, or poetry. There are also certain topics I will not be involved with even in a non-fiction work. I am happy to ghostwrite on theology, business, true experience, inspirational, Christian living, and many other types of books. If your topic is too far outside my areas of expertise or interests, I’ll tell you.

Q. *What kind of payment arrangements can be made?*

A. For the base-fee, payment can be broken down as needed, as long as the final payment is received by the end of the project. For example, if the total fee is only \$10,000 and the project takes six months, here are some *examples* of possible payment options:

- \$5000 at the start of the project; \$2500 at the midpoint; \$2500 at the end.
- \$5000 at the start of the project; \$5000 at the end.

- \$2500 at the start of the project; \$1500 each month for five months thereafter.

Payments for royalty/profit-sharing arrangements would continue as specified in our written agreement and will vary with each project.

Q. *Why does it cost so much?*

A. 1 Timothy 5:18 (NIV) states, “The worker deserves his wages.” My pricing is in line with those offering similar services. In 1983, one vendor was offering to write and produce 100 copies of a 120 page bound book for \$63,000. In 1986, William Novak, who was the ghostwriter for *Iaccoca*, received a fee of \$45,000. Consider what these fees would be today with cost-of-living adjustments and inflation!

Today, fees as high as \$250,000 and significantly more, along with substantial royalty/profit-sharing agreements are not unusual for authors who have only limited exposure within a specific market or industry. Some ghostwriters/co-authors charge \$125 or more an hour plus royalty/profit-sharing. When you consider that the total project (interviewing, discussions, writing, reviewing, revising, travel, etc.) can take as many as 500+ hours or more to complete, a base fee of \$10,000 to \$25,000 is not unreasonable. This is how I make my living and pay my bills.

Q. *Can you accept payments via credit cards?*

A. Yes, using PayPal. However, you may need to add an additional 2.5% fee when making payments via PayPal.

Q. *Who owns the rights to my book?*

A. You do. Unless we negotiate some other specific arrangement, all rights to your book are exclusively yours.

Q. *Will you sign a non-disclosure agreement?*

A. Certainly, if you feel this is necessary. However, our discussions and your material are confidential, especially if you indicate that. Anything you share with me will not be shared with others except as it is written into your manuscript. As a general rule, I do not even share with friends specific details about projects I’m working on. In some cases, I’ve been asked not to talk about any aspect of a project until the book was released, and I’ve honored those requests.

Q. *How essential is email to the project?*

A. Vital. If you do not have access to email or don’t want to use email, completing the project is going to be almost impossible.

Some next steps

“We can be knowledgeable with other men’s knowledge, but we cannot be wise with other men’s wisdom.” – Michel de Montaigne

Okay, you’ve got a really good reason for writing a book, you’re passionate about your topic, you have time on your calendar for us to work together, and you have the resources to cover expenses. What’s next?

Here’s a simple checklist:

- You develop an initial detailed outline/table of contents.
- You gather together all of your research and supporting materials.
- You make contact with me and tell me about your project.
- You send me all of your materials and I bill you for \$250 as mentioned previously.
- We meet or talk on the phone to work out payment and a production schedule. (Note: You will be responsible for expenses such as phone calls, transcription, postage, research materials, travel, lodging, meals, etc. related to the project and as mutually agreed.)
- We meet (in person, on the phone, or via Skype) to brainstorm and flesh out your outline.
- We meet to discuss each chapter (one meeting/interview session per chapter). These meetings can be in-person or over the phone. There are other options as well.
- You or I get the interviews transcribed.
- I will write each chapter and send them to you via e-mail for review.
- You review each chapter and help me fill in gaps, clarify weak spots, correct errors, etc., and return your corrected chapter to me to polish into a first draft of the book.
- We go over the entire first draft of the manuscript to determine any needed fixes. This can be a face-to-face meeting or via e-mail.
- I will finalize the manuscript based on your input and send it to you via e-mail for one final review.
- You will return the manuscript to me via e-mail with your corrections and changes (we can also meet face-to-face or talk through these changes over the phone).
- I will deliver the final manuscript to you as a Word document on CD (or thumb drive) and via e-mail, as well as one printed copy. I will also return all of your materials to you that we used to develop the book.

The more prepared you are and the more effort you put into your project, the lower your costs may be. Plus, your project will be stronger.

A good resource for helping you do the upfront work is Michael Hyatt's ebook on *Writing a Winning Non-Fiction Book Proposal*. You can find it at <http://michaelhyatt.com/products/ebook-writing-a-winning-book-proposal>. This will give you a good idea of what a publisher will want to see.

To get started, email or call me and we'll go from there:

NOTE: When you contact me, please provide complete details about you and your project. Include a synopsis and an outline. Tell me why you want to pursue this project. If you have a resume or bio, please send it. **Do not** have a second party contact me; I will only work directly with authors.

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