

USING A GHOST-WRITER

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Writing is hard work. The American playwright, Tennessee Williams, is reported as saying it was the hardest thing he ever did and he ought to know for he had been, among other things, a lumberjack, a coal miner and a merchant seaman.

But the discovery that writing is hard is no deterrent to anyone motivated to write their life story or family history or that special book they know is inside them and just bursting to get out.

Of course some people start on their *magnum opus* only to give up when they find that writing really is a 'lonely and sullen art'. Yet for those who go the distance it's only *after* they finish their sixty or seventy thousand words – no mean feat in itself – that they discover how tough and uncompromising is the world of publishing: how difficult (some would say impossible) it is to get their manuscript (MS) read, never mind accepted, by a literary agent or editor at a reputable publishing house.

So, after a few rejections, many emerging writers opt to have their MS assessed by a published writer or assessment agency. Which is when they may find that their writing has serious flaws and that it's going to take a whole lot more work and rewriting to get the MS into a shape that might appeal to an agent or editor. It's a lesson professional writers learn early – that at the end of the first draft of a book the writer is still much closer to the beginning of the process than the end.

Manuscript assessment can bring many benefits (too numerous to list here) to a writer's work, not least that if the MS has been assessed by someone credible, it may sway an agent or editor to read it. Even so, the rewriting has to be undertaken by the author, and sometimes, though the author takes into account some elements of the

assessment, he or she misses out on others. It's not unheard of for a MS to be assessed two or three times before it is sufficiently good to be considered by an agent or editor. And the process isn't cheap. An assessment of an average length MS will cost between \$500-\$800. Perhaps it is possible to get it assessed cheaper – but in MS assessment you definitely get what you pay for.

But whatever happens in an assessment, the author is still responsible for writing the book and seeking to get it placed with an agent and editor.

There is one other (small) group of people who are sufficiently motivated to want their book to be published but who are realistic enough to know they have neither the time nor the skills to write it. These are the people who consider hiring a ghost-writer. The rest of this article is about what you need to think about if you are thinking of employing a ghost-writer.

Firstly, and to save you reading further if it's out of your range, the cost of a ghost-writer for an average size book – say fifty thousand words – could be anywhere between \$25,000 to \$50,000. Yes... that's right.

Of course it may be possible to reduce those costs somewhat, or contract with the writer to take a share of royalties, but the overall cost of having your book professionally written will still be considerable.

Why so high?

Because the majority of ghost-written books are commissioned by publishers or agents who can see a possible profit from a book ostensibly written by a famous person. Usually the famous person can't write and so a ghost-writer, whose name will never appear on the jacket cover and who may be legally bound not to reveal that they wrote the book (hence the name, ghost-writer), is hired

So when a (not-so-famous) individual decides to employ a ghost-writer he or she needs to remember that they'll be employing a professional writer who'll be

working on the book for a minimum of six months and maybe a year. Just as none of us would expect to employ someone to build you a house and not pay them, so realists understand they will be employing a specialist craftsman or woman who will require adequate remuneration to work on their book

Which brings us to the first consideration when employing a ghost-writer.

Never even think about using someone to ghost-write your book who is not a professional writer; who has not had at least three or four books published by a mainstream, commercial publisher. Better still if the writer has had a number of books published over range of genres and best of all if the writer and has already ghost-written a few books.

How do you check out a ghost-writer's credentials? You can go to the web but it may be difficult to check the bona fides of anyone claiming to be a ghost-writer. (The world of books and publishing has its fair share of crooks, conmen, fraudsters and sharks). A good alternative is to contact writers' organizations like WritingWA or the ASA and enquire about ghost-writers. These organizations usually have a few ghost-writing members whom they know to be reputable.

But what happens if you are in a different state or even country to the ghost-writer? How do you meet? Well, though it's helpful and preferable to meet, it isn't absolutely necessary. With the phone, fax, emails and Skype, it is possible to be in regular touch, to transfer documents and information and for you, the principal in the arrangement, to monitor and amend the progress of your book without actually meeting face-to-face.

I have ghost-written a number of books for people I have never met. In one case, for a principal in Canada, we didn't meet until a couple of years after the book I'd ghost-written for her had been published.

The best way to overcome any problems of distance and lack of personal contact in a ghost-writing relationship is through a contract. The ASA has a draft contract that covers the basics of a ghost-writing agreement which anyone can buy for a few dollars by visiting the ASA website (www.asauthors.org).

A contract will focus on a number of essential elements.

Such as...

- Research. You need to agree with the ghost-writer who is responsible for any research or interviewing (if any), as extended time and/or travel to research material and interview people may add substantially to the cost of the project.
- Time-line of the project. How long do you expect the writing to take? This of course depends upon the length of the book but you and the ghost-writer should establish a timeframe for completion.
- Making it *your* book. As the principal in the arrangement you will expect the book to reflect you and your personality. In other words, it will be 'yours' which means a professional ghost-writer should always write a book in the principal's 'voice'. Thus, if you are telling the story of your triumph over adversity, having left school at fifteen, your book must not appear to have been written by a university professor. A good ghost-writer will quickly pick up a principal's voice from telephone conversations and personal documents and will reflect that voice back in the writing.
- Re-writes. The principal has full control over the material and so can ask for re-writes within reason. Ten percent is about the norm. Often re-writes occur because the ghost-writer has used an expression in dialogue that either the principal or someone else would never use. If

the principal demands excessive re-writes, either the ghost-writer isn't doing his or her job or the principal has delusions of being a writer.

Either one will kill the relationship stone dead.

- Supply of the MS. It is not unreasonable for the principal to request to see chapters as they are written. This can keep the 'voice' and writing on track.
- Payment The cost of the writing may be calculated at an hourly rate or by the page, but most professional writers will calculate the cost of the job at a rate somewhere between 50 cents and a dollar a word. So, at the outset, the principal and ghost-writer will need to estimate how long (in word-count) the book is likely to be. The ghost-writer will expect fifty percent of the fee up-front, another quarter approximately halfway through the MS and the final quarter of the money (adjusted for the final word-count of the MS) on completion.
- Attribution There are three levels of attribution...
 - Full Attribution – when the ghost-writer's name appears on the book's jacket cover along with the principal's - as in, 'My Secret Life' by Maybelle Boozowski 'as told to' (or 'with') Arthur Author.
 - Partial Attribution – when the ghost-writer's name is given a credit on the acknowledgments page, though usually not as the writer of the book.
 - No Attribution – when the ghost-writer is not mentioned and is often contracted not to reveal that he or she actually wrote Maybelle's runaway best-seller. Non-attribution is the most common agreement.

- Getting published You need to make it clear at the outset if you want the ghost-writer to help you with a book proposal or to help you sell your book to an agent or publisher. It's not usually a ghost-writer's job. The ghost-writer's job is to produce a MS sufficiently well written that it will be read by an agent or editor. A ghost -writer can normally guarantee that. What he or she cannot guarantee is that the book will be published. The book will be certainly be well written, but it may be on a subject that doesn't interest the agent or editor or they may have too many of that kind of book already in their list. Ghost-writing is not a guarantee of being published.
- Royalty Sharing Sometimes a principal may try to mitigate the cost of the ghost-writing by offering to share future book royalties with the writer. Do not be offended if the ghost-writer turns down the offer. Ghost-writers rarely go for this deal. Most of us have our own projects or are writing our next novel and are only prepared to consider royalties in relation to our own work.

So, if you carried on reading as this far, you'll have discovered that retaining a ghost-writer to author your book is not an arrangement to be entered into lightly. It will be a long and involved process involving a considerable expenditure of time and money. However, on the plus side, the relationship you form with the writer is unique: many principals have told me that it's almost like therapy and that working with a professional writer to find the best way to express their lives, passions and innermost thoughts develops a very close bond with the writer.

And there's no doubt some ghost-written books have done spectacularly well, though in most cases you'd never know that they had been ghost-written.

Which, I guess, is the whole point.