



[Buy book or audiobook](#)

How Words Get Good

The Story of Making a Book

Rebecca Lee • Profile Books © 2022 • 304 pages

Workplace Skills / Communication / Business Writing

Take-Aways

- Readers enjoy stories with predictable patterns and familiar structures.
- If you lack the time or talent to write your own story, consider employing a ghostwriter.
- An agent can be a writer's staunchest supporter. Find the agent who is the best fit for you.
- An editor helps your book to emerge and empowers you to give your desired meaning to your words.
- Footnotes and indexes can enhance the impact of your writing.
- Translating your text can help your words and ideas reach a broader audience. However, translation carries specific risks.
- Draw readers to your book instantly with a compelling cover.
- Artificial intelligence will never replace the power of human imagination.

Recommendation

Rebecca Lee, a veteran editorial manager at Penguin Random House, offers a witty insider perspective of the writing and publishing processes. Her charming book, replete with historical tidbits, quirky anecdotes, clever quotes and fascinating factoids, illuminates the roles of ghostwriters, agents and editors and reveals the factors that determine whether a book will be a bestseller. Lee's comprehensive account of the publishing industry aims to expand your understanding of publishing and provide you with a multifaceted appreciation of the steps involved in creating a book.

Summary

Readers enjoy stories with predictable patterns and familiar structures.

The most crucial problem that all people involved in the creation of a book – including editors, publishers and authors themselves – want to solve is how to entice readers to keep reading. This is publishing's "prime directive," because, when it boils down to it, books are about the reader. The brilliance of your work is meaningless if nobody reads what you've written.

Irrespective of your style or chosen genre, thoroughly study the specific plot conventions and rules before you begin writing. While fiction, by nature, fosters originality and stylistic experimentation, successful authors recognize that readers find certain story conventions comforting and familiar before choosing either to deviate from them or to embrace specific literary formulas and structures. Author Christopher Booker identified that **all stories follow one or more of seven basic plotlines: "overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, voyage and return, comedy, tragedy," and "rebirth."**

"Since the dawn of time, humans have enjoyed telling stories – and those stories have followed predictable patterns. In fact, the pattern of the story – its structure – was sometimes more important than the author."

Readers can feel lost if they can't detect a familiar story structure. Author Kurt Vonnegut says that stories boast simple shapes, which can be depicted on a graph, with the protagonist's fortune (in degrees of good and bad) represented on the y -axis and story progression on the x -axis. For example, Vonnegut describes a common plot structure as "man in a hole": When a character's fortune rapidly declines, with the character losing all that is of value at the climax of the book, and then reclaiming lost fortune at the story's conclusion, the story shape resembles a hole, as it descends rapidly before ascending. Vonnegut, an experimental writer, sometimes flipped or inverted story structures. For instance, part of *Slaughterhouse-Five* inverts the man-in-a-hole structure.

If you lack the time or talent to write your own story, consider employing a ghostwriter.

Authors must master a number of skills and habits to excel at their craft. They must know, for example, when to reveal information and when to keep it veiled, and to build intrigue and suspense while allowing readers to draw their own conclusions. Authors must also find a comfortable pace and method that works

for them as individuals. For example, Enid Blyton, author of approximately 760 children's books, used a stream-of-consciousness approach, and wrote between 6,000 and 10,000 words per day. By contrast, Ian Fleming, author of the James Bond series, wrote only 2,000 words per day but did so with a strict formula.

You don't necessarily need to write your own story if writing a book feels overwhelming: Some writers prefer the secrecy of ghostwriting or using an alias, which Virginia Woolf describes as "the delight of having no name...being like a wave which returns to the dark body of the sea."

"Like dating, there has to be a connection between ghost and author for the collaboration to work."

Ghostwriting is not a modern phenomenon. In fact, people wonder, for example, whether William Shakespeare ever existed and speculate about who his ghostwriters were. Authors often choose to work with ghostwriters when they have a compelling story to tell but lack the skills or time to do so proficiently. Good ghosts know when to turn down projects if the chemistry isn't right, because, ultimately, the ghost serves the reader and aims to create the best possible story. Ghostwriters can face challenges when working with public figures or celebrities who attempt to push their own biased (or even fabricated) version of events; they can benefit when working with clients who possess the self-awareness to tell their stories truthfully.

An agent can be a writer's staunchest supporter. Find the agent who is the best fit for you.

Authors are creative types, and many lack the necessary business acumen to sell their work to a publishing house. This is where agents come in, as they possess the sales experience to sell an author's book. Contrary to popular opinion, agents don't act as gatekeepers to prevent authors from publishing; agents work to protect authors, and they want them to succeed. Karolina Sutton, an agent for the literary and talent agency Curtis Brown, explains, "Agents are the first filters – they keep a lot of secrets, and some of those secrets are bad words. Our job is to keep those words away from editors, and only let them see the good ones."

"If agents are sometimes disparaged among aspiring authors for being overly picky or difficult to impress, there's a simple reason for this: They are, and they have to be."

Don't expect your agent to rewrite your proposal; an agent's job is to reflect your style honestly, and it would be unethical for your agent to pitch a book that you can't deliver. Consider checking the trending Twitter hashtag #MSWL ("manuscript wish list") to determine agents' current marketing focus and to find an agent who fits your style and genre.

To understand which books tend to appear on bestseller lists, peruse *The Bestseller Code* by Jodie Archer and Matthew L. Jockers. The authors used an algorithm designed to predict a book's commercial success and applied it to the books on the *New York Times* bestseller lists. The only input the algorithm receives is the words within the book, so a book's success lies largely in "having the right words in just the right order." The algorithm scored Dan Brown's work with a 95.7% likelihood of becoming a bestseller.

However, an algorithm isn't infallible. You still need human agents to dissect the nuanced and subtle details that contribute to a book's merit.

An editor helps your book to emerge and empowers you to give your desired meaning to your words.

Don't think of an editor as a co-author; an editor is what Maxwell Perkins, a veteran editor at Scribner, referred to as a "handmaiden to an author," whose job is to help you better present your work.

"Good words are clear words: They express an idea thought up by one person in a way that another person can then understand – with a copy editor there to check the scaffolding of the sentence that holds the entire thing up."

A commissioning editor who acquires promising proposals, typically from an agent, is your first point of contact. A structural editor helps you ensure that your story is structurally sound and that readers can follow the plot. A copy editor scans your manuscript for mistakes that commissioning and structural editors may have missed, which could include grammatical errors and chronological inconsistencies. Copy editors use the four C's of copy editing as their foundation when considering how to improve a text's wording:

1. **Correctness** – They fact-check manuscripts to ensure the accuracy of basic facts.
2. **Clarity** – They point out awkward, unclear or repetitive phrasing and fine-tune your wording.
3. **Coherency** – They ensure that readers can understand how one sentence or word leads to the next, focusing on any logical but potentially confusing gaps in your text.
4. **Consistency** – They draw from publishers' house styles to ensure consistency of such essentials as spelling, style decisions and punctuation.

Finally, a proofreader hunts for typos and marks final corrections before your work is published. Even if you feel tempted to focus only on big-picture issues such as the structural integrity of your words, do your copy editors and proofreaders a favor by addressing small details such as punctuation and grammar. Ensuring the accuracy of these minutiae helps you better create meaning, communicate emotion and share your desired message.

Footnotes and indexes can enhance the impact of your writing.

You may think of footnotes – author comments that appear at the foot of a page – as afterthoughts or distractions from the text itself, but footnotes give you an opportunity to include enlightening diversions and amusing anecdotes and to engage readers. Footnotes can be playful, poignant or insightful. They give you an opportunity to break barriers and acknowledge yourself and your readers as existing outside the world you've created. For example, writers Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett wrote the novel *Good Omens* together and used footnotes to break the fourth wall, create a dialogue and comment on each other's sections.

"Footnotes add much to our understanding of what a writer is trying to do. They require tact, skill and timing, but when it pays off, it really pays off."

By contrast, reserve endnotes – notes that appear at the end of a book or a chapter – for functional matters related to citation and providing evidence that your readers can trust your information. While many authors who publish online use hyperlinks, be aware that hyperlinks can distract readers from your text and may already be broken by the time your book gets published, generating error messages for your readers.

Think of an index as a road map to your book. An index is more than merely a list of contents; it also provides a “series of magical shortcuts,” according to Sam Leith, the honorary president of the Society of Indexers. Indexes exist to enhance the relevance of text for readers. The word “index” derives from Latin and translates into “one who points out.” People may assume that readers can simply rely on the search functions of online text, but indexes require the intelligence of human indexers to sensibly guide them through the text.

Translating your text can help your words and ideas reach a broader audience. However, translation carries specific risks.

Once you’ve completed your book, you may want to let your words and ideas travel. Perhaps you’ll opt to have your work translated, to ensure it reaches as broad an audience as possible. However, translation brings several risks. Translators must be skilled enough to ensure they can communicate the nuance and layers of an author’s words, as translating word-for-word can be a disservice to an author. Translators must be comfortable working with the received meanings and different cultural references that give context to the languages being translated.

“Humans have been discussing how to translate since antiquity, which perhaps indicates the value writers place on freeing their words to travel.”

French-to-English translator David Watson categorizes translators into two groups: “Roundheads,” he explains, translate a text as literally as possible. They believe that a translator risks losing the unique essence and subtlety of a source text if he or she clumsily attempts to translate it as though it had been written in the target language. By contrast, “cavaliers” feel that readers shouldn’t have to navigate stilted text. They believe that translators should take liberties with respect to expression, rather than merely translating words directly, to ensure that readers experience a compelling voice and style. The art of translation has no single correct style. Base your choice on your personal preference.

Draw readers to your book instantly with a compelling cover.

The cover helps you to connect with your readers. Put careful consideration into its features:

- **“Blaps, blovers and blurbs”** – The words that adorn the book’s back cover and Amazon page can help you persuade readers to purchase or pick up your book. The blurb, which appears on the back of your book jacket, is an adjective-laden recommendation for your book. The blap is “a glossy page covered in blurbs that immediately follows the front cover,” while the blover is a recommendation-filled cover printed on the same cardstock as your first book cover.
- **Jackets and covers** – Your choice of book jacket and book cover is not without consequence, as you have mere moments to grab a reader’s attention. Carefully consider your color choices, which could

associate you with a specific genre or trend. Your cover should draw attention to your book, so use typeface and imagery that convey your desired message.

- **Text design** – The typeface you choose should create a seamless physical experience for your readers. Make sure it is readable in all fonts – that is, italics, bold, and so on which you may need to use on occasion – as well as in both large and small print. Don't choose any flourish, no matter how artistic or well-intentioned, that could distract your reader from the text.

Artificial intelligence will never replace the power of human imagination.

AI is emerging as an increasingly popular writing tool. Innovators are refining technology such as OpenAI, the Silicon Valley not-for-profit company into which Microsoft invested \$1 billion in 2019. OpenAI currently uses a GPT-3 generator, which relies on more than 175 billion parameters to generate text across various genres, including songs, code, technical manuals and stories.

“Truly great authors are not mere stylists. They have the ineffable ability to imagine how their words will affect their readers; to inhabit the emotional sensorium of someone they have never met. Great editors have that ability to an even greater degree. They are, after all, the voice of the reader throughout the process of making a book.”

GPT-3 is certainly impressive. Nevertheless, AI technology has not yet replaced human beings, and it still makes some serious errors. For example, GPT-3 doesn't create new content; rather, it “remixes” what it finds on the internet. Thus, it often plagiarizes existing content by regurgitating another author's words. Also, GPT-3 is unable to filter out human biases, so it will generate racist and sexist language.

Even if the current limitations of AI are eventually vanquished, it's unlikely that computers will write better than human beings any time soon: Great writing demands more than adhering to certain stylistic frameworks and rules that a machine can mimic; it requires the author to possess the imagination and empathy to inhabit another person's world.

About the Author

Rebecca Lee is a veteran editorial manager at Penguin Random House. She has spent more than two decades managing hundreds of books from delivery of manuscript to printing of finished copies.



Did you like this summary?
[Buy book or audiobook](http://getab.li/43851)
<http://getab.li/43851>