

How to write a book

For a writer, announcing that you've scored a book deal is the professional equivalent of the engagement or baby announcement on Facebook: it's life-defining, it's exciting, it gets you hundreds of likes and comments from people you haven't spoken to in years.

I just announced my book news on social media the other day, and felt the temporary glow of achievement. But then I swiftly returned to the rather gnarly reality: that writing a book is a lonely, doubtful, at times excruciating experience that causes you to question your abilities, your life choices and yourself. There's a reason people always say it's like giving birth to a literary baby: it's an enormous undertaking and you're literally creating something out of nothing.

And yet... Writing a book is one of the most popular life ambitions in the world. There are millions of half-finished debut novels, just-started memoirs and nearly-there works of non-fiction tucked away in desk drawers, and millions more ideas for books on secret bucket lists. Everyone thinks they could maybe whip up a bestseller, and there's always been something glamorous about the perception of a writer's life. Like tapping on a typewriter or a laptop is the most romantic thing a creative person can do with their brain. Writers in movies and books are always depicted as brilliant and a little bit tortured, because writing, *really* writing, is like extracting a piece of your soul every time you open a Word document. Or so legend would have us believe.

Given how many people desperately or casually wish to write a book, I thought I'd give you a few brutal hints about what it's really like to actually sit down and do it. Because that's the real difference between the

people who do write a book and those who don't: the actual physical act of forcing words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, paragraphs into chapters and chapters into a book.

The first thing you should know about book-writing is that when you strip away the loveliness of getting a book deal and the thrill of having an idea worth chasing, it really is just you and a word processor in a room. There are few things on this planet more solitary than writing a book. It can get pretty lonely. As a freelance journalist, I'm used to the solitude of the thinking-writing cycle, but if you're unaccustomed to it, it could be a shock. Sure, you've got editors and friends and loved people who can offer an opinion – and they're all fantastic – but ultimately, your book doesn't exist until you make it exist through sheer force of will and hard work.

And it is hard work. It's not all stringing together beautiful sentences, moving plots and writing characters into life. It's dogged, diligent research, planning, scheming, thinking and then bashing out words at the rate of your imagination until you have the right amount. It's an arduous, baffling, exhausting task that could bring you to the precipice of your sanity again and again. Somehow, every time you feel like you've run out of inspiration, you've got to find the courage and the stamina to keep moving words onto pages in time for your deadline. That's what I'm trying to do right now – I've been stuck on 35,000 words (out of my required 80,000) for three weeks. The inspiration has just stalled and quite frankly, all I can do is blindly trust that it will return because it has to. That's what a deadline and a cheque will do: it'll make the act of writing urgent, inevitable and terrifying.

Through all this external pressure, you've got yourself to contend with, too. Maybe you're the kind of writer who lays down a sentence and whispers aloud, "Oh, well

done! What a sentence!" Maybe you're the kind of writer who sees the beauty in their own writing immediately, and often. And that's terrific for you.

If you're anything like me, though, or indeed any other writer I've ever spoken to, you will more likely hate every word you've written as soon as you've written it. I'm at the stage now where I just focus on churning out words and hope that the noise of my fingers on the keyboard will drown out the sound of my self-doubt. My confidence in my own work comes and goes like a pernicious cat: it visits me for reassurance only on its time and its terms.

Some days, I like my idea for a [book](#). I can imagine people reading it, even liking it. Most days, I berate myself for ever having the audacity to think I could be a published writer. It's exhausting. And I'm not a timid, self-loathing sort of writer typically – apart from a brief time where I thought I might follow my mother and grandparents into acting, this is all I've ever wanted to do. Writing is what I've chosen to do with my life, and I wouldn't have it any other way. To do it, you have to push through layers and layers of fear, doubt and guilt. You have to have the sort of ambition that carries you through all that and the tenacity to get the job done, no matter what. It's intense and difficult – but that's just what it's like to write a book.