

Is Ghostwriting (Collaborating) for You?

Publishing has a long tradition of using ghostwriters to write books (nonfiction and fiction), speeches, articles, and pamphlets for others.

A few terms

- **Writer** – In most contracts, those who do the work are referred to as **writers**.
- **Author** – In most contracts, those for whom the writers have written are **authors**.
- **Ghostwriter** – A true ghostwriter leaves no evidence in the book that anyone other than the author wrote it. They are invisible (think ghost), and they get no byline credit for writing it.

Example: Cecil (Cec) Murphey wrote Franklin Graham’s book *Rebel with a Cause* and many others for a variety of authors, but his name did not appear on the books. He was the ghostwriter.

- **Collaborator** – One who writes for an author and receives credit for the work. If you see the word “with” in a byline, it means that the name following “with” is the person who wrote the book.

Example: In 1990, *Gifted Hands*, a book Cec wrote for Dr. Ben Carson, was published. It was the first time Cec’s name appeared on the front cover of the book with the author’s name. The byline says, “Dr. Ben Carson **with** Cecil Murphey.” Cec was then called a collaborator. (These days we often see the terms “ghostwriter” and “collaborator” used interchangeably.)

- **Co-writer** – Example: Cec wrote *90 Minutes in Heaven* for Don Piper. The byline reads Don Piper **with** Cecil Murphey. Other Piper books Cec wrote carry the byline Don Piper **and** Cecil Murphey, because not only did Cec write the book, he provided some of the content as well. Don and Cec co-wrote the book. The word “and” signifies co-writing.
- **As told to** – This term is now mostly used in magazines.
- **Book doctor** – One who takes an already written manuscript and revises or rewrites portions of it. (They fix a poorly written—or sick—manuscript.)

Who uses ghostwriters/collaborators?

- People who have a story to tell and have talent, but they can’t write
- A person who lacks writing expertise, but needs a book to promote their brand
- Celebrities, business leaders, professionals, and so forth (Note: If a celebrity releases several new books in a year, chances are pretty good that they used ghostwriters.)

- Speakers (for publicity, getting more gigs, interviews, credibility, back-of-the-room sales, etc.)
- People who might have the skill but lack the time to invest
- People who can't spend the amount of time alone that writing demands (In other words, they don't do well with isolation.)
- People who are too close to their topic (They can't get out of their heads or have trouble speaking in normal-person language, or maybe they have a difficult time looking at the material from the reader's point of view.)
- Those who lack self-discipline to complete the project
- Those for whom English is not their first language
- Someone who wants to make a name for himself (the vanity angle)

What makes a good ghostwriter/collaborator?

Not everyone can write other people's stories successfully. Ghostwriting requires specific skills and certain personality traits to be good at the task.

Here are a few things to consider:

- You need to know the craft of writing. (That's obvious.) Industry experience and connections within the industry are also helpful.
- Are you good at interviewing?
- How observant are you? Noticing the author's movements, tone of voice, expressions, quirks, surroundings, and things like that helps you write a better story. (Tip: Interview the author in his/her own surroundings whenever possible. Record your interviews.)
- Are you a good listener? A good communicator? A good collaborator? Flexible?
- Are you able to write in the author's voice so that the final project sounds like him/her?
- How good are you about getting inside other people's minds?
- The gift of empathy is an asset. If you've experienced loss, grief, devastation, despair, or any kind of trauma, you can more easily sense the author's pain and feel compassion for them.

- Can you honor confidentiality?

Many people have amazing stories, but they can't open their hearts when they write about themselves or the topics they're passionate about. They tend to skip the painful memories. So, for them to get their stories written well, they need someone who can help them identify their deeper emotions, face their feelings, and convey their pain on the page. Often the authors don't even realize things about themselves until they try to tell their stories.

What are some of the advantages of ghostwriting/collaborating?

- It puts food on the table.
- Ghostwriting gives you a chance to earn a good living doing something you enjoy.
- It provides an important service and ministry.
- It offers you a chance to learn how to write professionally, work with editors, and learn a great deal about the publishing world.
- It gives you access to the lives and insights of others that you otherwise wouldn't have. You can meet fascinating people and have the opportunity to put their stories into words.
- It provides an amazing education through the lives of others.
- Most of the research and material is provided by the author (other than what you need to help clarify).
- Ghostwriting enables you to enter worlds into which you wouldn't otherwise be invited.
- Writing for others increases your opportunities to make a living because you have a faster turnaround of projects.
- It keeps you productive.
- It provides invaluable experience, and you learn more about writing with each book.
- It gets you known among people in the industry and increases your contacts.
- Ghostwriting helps establish your reputation as a writer.
- It increases your chance at getting better advances.

- You don't have the constant pressure of building a platform and the need to do all the promotional work. (This is a biggie.)
- You get paid even if the book bombs.
- It gives you some great stories to tell.
- It challenges you.

What are some of the disadvantages of ghostwriting?

- You have to work with people. 😊
- You don't receive credit for your work.
- Often, your name isn't known, even if it's on the front cover of the book.

Tip: You need to have a heart-to-heart chat with yourself. Are you writing for recognition or to support yourself at what you love doing—writing? If you insist your name has to appear in big, bold letters the size of the author's on the front of the book, then collaborating probably isn't for you. Check your ego.

- You don't receive publicity, interviews, or talk show invites like the author does.
- Authors can be demanding and often don't realize it.
- Authors might insist on endless rewrites.
- You have to earn the author's trust, which isn't always easy.
- You might not have editorial rights.
- Your temperaments might not work well together.
- The author might be getting old and their recollection of the story has changed over time.

How do you break in?

- Industry connections (Connections are extremely important, so be nice to people.)
- The God factor (He's amazing in the way He works.)
- Word of mouth

- Networking
- Making it known that you're available for ghostwriting projects
 - Business cards - Always have them with you.
 - Website – Represent yourself well.
 - Online venues
 - Email tagline
 - Bio
 - Promotional materials/brochures
 - Social media, blog, etc.
 - Writers conferences – Talk with agents and publishing house editors and let them know you're available for ghostwriting, collaborating, or book doctoring projects.
 - Organizations – Get involved with an organization like The Christian PEN (Christian Proofreaders and Editors Network) or others.
 - Writing forums
 - Testimonials

Tips:

Consider writing family histories. Help the elderly leave a written legacy.

Sometimes you need to start small—ghostwriting someone's blog post or op-ed or an article. Prove your value. (If you have trouble writing an article, how could you write a whole book?)

Maybe you know a pastor who wants to create a book out of sermons. Offer your services.

Write profiles of interesting people. That could lead to a book project.

Help others. It often leads to others helping you.

A few more things to consider:

Let's say you're discussing the possibility of taking on a ghostwriting project. Here are a few things for you to think about.

- What type of publishing will you pursue? The route you take will determine your initial process. Do you think you can sell it to a publisher, or does the author want to go the indie route? (If going the traditional route, you'll need to create a proposal first.)
- Is it a project you'd like to write and can see yourself writing? Do you have a strong, positive response to the person and the project? If the concept doesn't grab your interest, decline.

- Is it a good fit for you?
- Are you open to any type of topic? Fiction? Nonfiction? Erotica? Business?
- What is the author's motivation behind the book?
- Is it a topic that would interest readers?
- Is it a topic you're passionate about or would like to learn about?
- Is it worthy of a whole book, or would the material be better suited for a magazine article?
- Can you get into the person's head?
- Does the author have the money to pay for it?
- How much work and time will you need to invest? Would it be a rewarding project—one that you believe in, even if it may require more work than expected?
- Does the author communicate clearly? Clear communication is extremely important.
- Is it a good match theologically?
- How involved in the process will you be? Your job is to deliver a manuscript. Maybe you'll agree to help with the publishing process and guide the author on his next steps. Perhaps you know people who might be willing to endorse the book.
- Is a proposal needed? How long will it take to create one? What will you charge for that part of the process?
- How much will you charge? Your experience and sales figures play into this. Never agree to write a book on speculation. Beware of those who offer to split the profits but don't want to pay you to write.
- Will you charge by the hour, a flat fee, royalty payments, or a combination?
- What will you include in your contract/covenant agreement? (You must have a contract or a written agreement, without exception.)

Random tips about the process

- As you're in the discussion phase, and before you move forward, do some background research about the author. Become familiar with him and his ministry.
- Meet in person in his environment/surroundings, if possible.
- Record your interviews and have a backup recording. (Maybe two digital recorders or a digital recorder and your phone.)
- Transcribe your interviews.
- Let the author know your expectations, the documents you'll need, and the expected turnaround time.
- Organize your material. Come up with an outline.
- Communicate how you operate so he'll know what to expect. Will you send every chapter as it's written, or will you send several at a time? How often will you send him something to review? How do you want him to mark changes? How does your process work?
- Have the author review the material for phrases and words that don't sound like him.
- If you plan to go the traditional route with publication, clearly communicate to the author that there are no guarantees his book will be picked up by a publisher.
- Strongly discourage the author from showing the drafts and unfinished manuscript to a third party without your agreement and written permission. That'll only cause problems.
- If the book is without a title, one will probably emerge as you're writing the manuscript.

Recommended resource: *Ghostwriting: The Murphey Method* (Cecil Murphey)