

Handouts for

*Rolling through the
Writing Cycle*

Writing the Christian Non-Fiction Book

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*A Continuing Session for
Colorado Christian Writers Conference
May 13-16, 2015*



OUTLINE

Thursday 10:15 a.m.–11:30 a.m.

- 10:15 – 10:35 **Introduction:** An overview of the entire non-fiction book process in a nutshell. *Where are you in this process?*
- 10:35 – 11:00 **The Battleground of Ideas:** A discussion of what makes a good idea, how to evaluate ideas, how to expand ideas into a book-sized project.
- 11:00 – 11:15 **Questions, Discussion, Break**
- 11:15 – 11:30 **Researching (Part 1):** How to develop your idea and beef up the content of your manuscript through judicious research. Different techniques are presented, including Internet research. How to keep notes so that you can retrace your steps.

Thursday 4:45 p.m.–5:45 p.m.

- 4:45 – 5:00 **Quick Review and Researching (Part 2)**
- 5:00 – 5:30 **Outlining:** How to prepare an outline you can use, instead of the way you were taught in school. How outlining fits in with research, and how to avoid the “same old, same old” tendency in outlining.
- 5:30 – 5:45 **Questions and Discussion**

Friday 10:45 a.m.–11:45 a.m.

- 10:45 – 10:50 **Quick Review**
- 10:50 – 11:20 **Preparing the Proposal:** Your brainstorming, researching and outlining will help you prepare the seven parts of a complete book proposal. The “front-end” method of writing a proposal, and how it helps the book to move along smoother.

OUTLINE (cont.)

Friday 10:45 a.m.–11:45 a.m. (cont.)

11:20 – 11:30 **Questions, Discussion, Break**

11:30 – 11:45 **Completing the Rough Draft (Part 1):** How to keep yourself going to complete a first draft of the manuscript—and why you shouldn't show it to anyone! If you want to write in the worst way, here's your chance.

Friday 4:45 p.m. – 5:45 p.m.

4:45 – 5:00 **Quick Review and Completing the Rough Draft (Part 2)**

11:15-11:40 **Revising the Manuscript:** Techniques for editing your own writing, for expanding and beefing up the rough draft. Returning to brainstorming, researching and outlining to re-think the entire book.

10:45-10:55 **Questions and Discussion**

Saturday 2:15 p.m. – 3:45 p.m.

2:15 – 2:20 **Quick Review**

2:20 – 2:45 **Finalizing the Manuscript:** A checklist for adding the professional touch to your manuscript. Why this step alone may be the key to getting published.

2:45 – 3:00 **Questions, Discussion, Break**

3:00 – 3:30 **Marketing the Manuscript:** How to know what publisher(s) to send your proposal to. How to customize a proposal to different publishers.

3:30 – 3:45 **Questions, Discussion and Wrap-Up**

The Writing Cycle

“The only book that should ever be written is one that flows up from the heart, forced out by the inward pressure. When such a work has gestated within a man it is almost certain that it will be written.”

(A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of Man* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1950, 1978), page xii.)

1. BRAINSTORMING

2. RESEARCHING

3. OUTLINING

4. SELLING (BOOK PROPOSAL)

5. WRITING A ROUGH DRAFT

6. REVISING

7. FINALIZING THE MANUSCRIPT

8. MARKETING

The eight steps are roughly chronological, yet you will find that you may do them a bit out of order, or even do two or more of them simultaneously.

For more information on the writing cycle, check out my book:

Writing the Christian Nonfiction Book: Concept to Contract

published by Sonfire Media

Methods for Brainstorming an Idea

1. **“Bubble” Charting.** In the center of a blank sheet of paper, write your basic idea in as few words as possible. Draw a circle around it (a “bubble”). Think of a related idea, write it down and put it in its own “bubble.” Draw a line from the first “bubble” to the second. As you continue to brainstorm ideas, create more “bubbles” and draw lines between them and other related ideas. Don’t be afraid to draw multiple lines to express more complex relationships between ideas. You may end up seeing how, for example, your fifth idea, though related to your fourth idea, also has a direct connection to your second idea; draw another line to represent that relationship. You may need to label the lines to remind yourself what the relationship is; for example, “love” is related to “fear” through First John 4:18 (“perfect love casts out fear”). Work on the chart until you have created a complex web of connections. Also check out the free “mind map” software at <http://freemind.sourceforge.net>.
2. **Index Cards.** Many people like to write out their ideas in more detail, and index cards work very well. This is *NOT* the use of index cards that you may have been taught in school, where you carefully write out the full text and citation of a quote for use in a research paper. It doesn’t have to be neat and tidy; it doesn’t even have to make sense to anyone but you! After writing out several ideas, label each card with its own letter, number or symbol. (Some people like to use symbols [@\$%] because letters or numbers may subconsciously influence them to put the cards in a certain order, so that they tend to ignore interrelationships.) Spread out the cards and review your ideas. Write the letter, number or symbol from one card onto another to identify a relationship. You may need to write notes on the cards (maybe on the back) to help you remember the relationships.
3. **“Sticky” Notes.** I once met a technical writer by the name of Dave Young who shared this method with me — a variation on the index card technique. He put his ideas on “sticky” notes (also called Post-it® Notes), and slapped them on the nearest wall. Then he rearranged them to find the interrelationships. He called this his “off-the-wall” approach to brainstorming!
4. **“Stream of Consciousness” Writing.** This is my favorite. I just grab a legal pad and start writing my ideas down, “talking it out” on paper. When I come to a new idea, I separate it with a couple blank lines. My notes may consist of single words, sentences, or paragraphs of varying lengths. Sometimes I will write two or three pages on a single idea. It’s not great writing, nor is it always grammatically correct, but it gets the ideas down in concrete form. When review my notes, I simply write down interrelationships in the left margin of the page.
5. **Audio Tape.** More verbal people find it helpful to start a tape recorder and talk their ideas out. Then they review their ideas as they transcribe the tape. Other people are more social, more interactive, and they know someone who is a good listener, who knows how to ask the right questions. They sit down over a cup of coffee and discuss their ideas with their friend — as they record the conversation.

Rules for Internet Research

The Internet is a wealth of information — but also a haven for lies, distortions and plagiarism! So what does this mean for writers? Simply that you must be careful about the information you use from the Internet. Here's some rules of thumb for judging the quality of the material you receive on the web:

1. **Check the web site for authorship.** Is it affiliated with a known organization? Does it include a legitimate address, phone number, etc.? Does it include links to other legitimate web sites? Does the authorship imply a definite bias? (Obviously, a Serbian web site will have a different viewpoint than a Bosnian or Croatian site!)
2. **What's it look like?** Are the graphics sophisticated? Is the text well-written, or are there multiple typographical errors and grammatical mistakes? One can assume that when time and money are invested in a site, care will also be taken to get the facts straight.
3. **Look for the date of the material.** Most legitimate web sites identify when the material was last updated. Without that information, you could be depending on material that is five or more years old—and with many subjects, a lot can change in five years!
4. **Is it obviously slanted?** Are multiple viewpoints presented, or is all the information one-sided? To give one example, I learned from a web site about Macedonia that Greece has accused the Macedonians of “falsifying history” and “stealing” the name “Macedonian.” This is a complex issue, involving historical and cultural questions that date back to before the time of Christ. The web site appears to present both sides of the argument, so I am more likely to trust it.
5. **Don't use a single web site as your only source of information.** Check multiple web sites and/or other sources. If your sources contradict each other, look for a majority consensus, or use the rules I've already mentioned to decide which sources are most trustworthy.

These suggestions are not meant to discount the Internet as a source of information; when used carefully, it can be a rich resource. As with everything in this world, however, we need to be “as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). A little sanctified skepticism never hurts!

Thesis and Outlining

The first step in creating an outline is to write a thesis. This is simply putting your book idea in a nutshell. This process goes all the way back to the ancient Latin writers. They had a three-part formula for creating a thesis: *an sit*, *quid sit* and *quale sit*. For those who don't speak Latin (including myself), the translation is: **whether it is**, **what it is** and **what kind it is**.

1. **Whether It Is.** Does “it” (your idea) exist? How do we know it does? How can we identify it? In other words, a good way start boiling down your idea is to seemingly shoot yourself in the foot — question whether it's true at all! (Do you remember how I introduced this class?) Then decide that if it is true, there has to be reasons why. The *an sit* step has the potential to bring the element of *controversy* into your thesis — and in this case, that's a good thing.
2. **What It Is.** How is it defined? How is it different? How is it the same? By defining what your topic is, you get at the *essence* of the thing. Be clear and concrete; this is no place to get metaphoric! Avoid using a form of the same term to define a term (“a poet writes poetry”). And avoid using a negative statement in defining (“a poet is not a prose writer”).
3. **What Kind It Is.** What categories does it fit in? What are its qualities? This is the step at which you *should* use the negative, and you *should* use metaphors and similes.

This exercise may lead you to wonder if you really know *anything* about the topic of your book. Don't let that discourage you; let it drive you back to further brainstorming and researching.

Different Books, Different Structures

No book outline is entirely unique — and you wouldn't want it to be. The chapters and sections should follow a familiar, logical progression, or the reader is apt to get lost and stop reading. This logical progression will vary, however, according to the type of book:

Biography: chronological and/or topical

Devotional: daily or weekly sections with standard format, such as a passage of Scripture followed by commentary and concluding with a prayer

Christian Living: definition, distinctions, application, conclusion

How-to: identification, materials needed, step-by-step instructions, evaluation/recap

Exposé: revelation, specifying errors, show results of errors, present alternative

Book Proposals

Most book proposals are incomplete, if the ones that cross my desk are at all typical. They lack much of the information that an editor needs to recognize the book's potential and, in turn, sell it to an editorial committee. Let me outline the six crucial items that are needed in a proposal:

1. **Cover Letter.** This is usually an abbreviated version of the entire proposal, stating (or at least hinting at) its strongest points and most telling arguments *in two or three paragraphs*. This is the toughest piece of writing you may ever do, because it is the editor's first impression of you and your manuscript. **DO THIS LAST.**
2. **Premise Statement.** This should say *very* briefly *what* the book is about, and *why* the book should be published, or what need it meets. Your plan here is to get the editor on your wavelength. Where are you coming from? Why are you so excited about this great project? This should be short—about a half page.
3. **Audience/Market.** Who are you aiming at? Who would want to read this book and why? Do not needlessly limit your audience to only one gender or age group, but don't say that the book is for "all people, everywhere." This usually takes up about a quarter page.
4. **Comparative Titles.** What other books are in print on this subject? How is yours different? In half a page, explain how this book is distinctive from others on the bookstore shelf.
5. **Author Information.** Who are you and what qualifies you to write about this subject? Do you have any previous publishing credits? With what organizations are you affiliated? How can you help promote your book? Answer these questions in one or two paragraphs.
6. **Chapter-by-Chapter Synopsis.** Summarize each chapter in two or three sentences. A well-written synopsis sparks curiosity as much as it brings clarity. Describe each chapter in a way that leaves the reader wanting to know more. Each chapter description should also show a clear connection to the main theme of the book. The synopsis should be no more than two or three pages long.

One more item may be included with the proposal if you can get it ready:

7. ***One or Two Sample Chapters.*** Here is your opportunity to show the editor that you can write, so the sample chapter(s) you send must be well-polished—don't send a first draft! Ideally, you should include the introduction and/or the first chapter; a chapter from the middle of the book can be confusing and give a bad impression. If you prepare a proposal early in the process, it is possible to have the previous six items done before you have even written a word of your book. If so, don't be shy about sending a proposal without any chapters to an editor; the feedback you receive can be invaluable in preparation of your manuscript. Besides, if the editor sends you a contract on the strength of the proposal, you'll be all the more motivated to finish the book!

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Mistakes to Avoid in Preparing a Proposal

For the general outline of this handout, I am indebted to Ken Peterson of Random House Publishers. If you see him, say thanks.

A few years ago, Ken pointed out several mistakes that editors make when they present proposals to other departments in their publishing houses. These possible mistakes certainly apply to us as authors in preparing a proposal. Without further ado, here they are:

1. **Ambiguity:** We need to be clear when it comes to selling an idea. Ask others to look at your proposal with a ruthless eye. When they identify something that is unclear, thank them profusely!
2. **The Forest for the Trees:** We can get so excited about one section or aspect of the proposal that we can let all other parts of it slide. Be thorough with every element of your presentation.
3. **Overselling:** We need to be passionate about our book idea, but we also need to be realistic. Don't make extravagant claims, such as, "There's no other book like it!" Or "This book will revolutionize the church of the 21st century!" Try for a more qualified claim, applied to an individual: "I believe there is new hope for any discouraged Christian who faithfully applies the principles of this book."
4. **Underselling:** On the other hand, you've got to blow your own horn. You've got to get people enthused. What got you so enthused about this topic that you decided to write a book?

5. **Selling Editorial Policy, Not a Manuscript:** Find out who publishes books like yours, and send you proposal to them. Don't send it to a publisher who never publishes your kind of book.
6. **Lack of Preparation:** Don't slap together a proposal. It needs to be a reasoned, carefully executed presentation.
7. **Premature Presentation:** Make sure your idea is fully developed before you try to get someone else to invest in it!
8. **Not Oriented to the Reader:** We don't understand what the readers want — their “felt needs,” for lack of a better term. Authors frequently say, Christians *need* to read this book,” but the book won't sell unless buyers *know* they need to read it.
9. **Focusing on Features, Not Benefits:** Proposals often emphasize things like a study guide in the back or discussion questions at the end of each chapter. All these are fine to mention, but remember that the concept for the book has to carry the day. How does this book *benefit* the reader?

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Divide and Conquer

Cutting Your First Draft Down to Size

Writing the first draft of a book may seem daunting — and it is! But the best way to attack a big job is to break it down into smaller steps. So with a good, flexible outline and notes from your research at your elbow, start cutting this scary giant into smaller, not-so-scary pieces.

Start by working on one chapter at a time. That may sound ridiculously obvious, but many writers get stalled by unconsciously trying to write about every aspect of a topic — all at once! If you have a good outline, however, it should help you focus on a single main idea in each chapter. As you concentrate on presenting one idea at a time, your job becomes a lot easier — and your writing should be a lot more readable.

Even then, the job may seem too big, but thankfully, a book chapter can be cut down into still smaller elements. I write the individual elements one at a time, and then merge them together. A typical book chapter consists of the following pieces:

1. The Lead Paragraph. An effective lead draws readers in and keeps them reading. Try to introduce the topic in a way that connects with readers, sparks their curiosity, and promises them something. Just make sure you don't promise them something you can't deliver later in the chapter!

2. Main Points. This is straight expository writing — just tell it like it is. Much of this content can be pulled directly off your outline. If necessary, also include sub-points. If you get stuck as to what to say, fall back on that exercise from ancient Greek rhetoric: *whether it is, what it is, what kind it is*. “Whether it is” means I ask myself if “it” (my main point) exists, how do I know it does and how I can identify it. “What it is” means I try to define my main point — I try to nail down what it is I am really talking about. And “what kind it is” means I try to identify the distinguishing qualities of my main point. This exercise almost always gets the juices flowing and helps you say what you want to say.

3. “Helper” Material. Each main point needs something to help the reader understand it and remember it. Whether it is a phrase, a sentence, or several paragraphs, whether it is a simile, metaphor, analogy or anecdote, it carries the reader from what they know to what they do not know. This is a tried-and-true principle of teaching. The “whether it is, what it is, what kind it is” exercise can often spark ideas for “helper” material as well.

4. Transitions. Between each main point, there should be transitional statements that introduce the next main point and show its relationship to the previous one. I find it is critical to put time into this, because a lack of transitions is one of the most common errors in writing, and one of the main reasons that editors reject a submission.

5. Conclusion. Finally, wrap up what you have to say, leaving the reader with something to think about, or with a memorable word picture that anchors the main point of the chapter in their brain. This is what editors often refer to as the “take-away” factor. The conclusion can also be used to give a hint of what is to come in the next chapter, sparking the readers' curiosity and hooking them into reading further.

Sure-Fire Methods for Unplugging Writer's Block

Tired of staring at a blank screen? Get ready to jump-start your creative engines with these exercises. Unconditional money-back guarantee! (If they don't work, I owe you a nickle.)

Write It Wrong

You want your manuscript to be absolutely perfect — the very first time. No wonder you're stuck! (What is it about a *first draft* that you don't understand?) You can't make it perfect, so do the very opposite. What is the biggest thing you are afraid of doing wrong? Then do it, and you won't be afraid of it anymore. Are you afraid of writing a cheesy anecdote? Then write one that way — and as long as you're doing it, make it *really* cheesy! Are you afraid of being too wordy? Then try writing something that is as wordy as possible. Get the bad stuff out of your system. (You say you want to write in the worst way? Well, here's your chance!) You will be surprised to discover that deliberately making the mistakes you want to avoid actually teaches you to avoid them in the future.

Five Ways

I am indebted to Sherwood Wirt, editor emeritus of Decision Magazine, for this one. Write a short essay or descriptive piece of about 800–1,200 words. (Whoops, I forgot — you've got writer's block, don't you? OK, then take something of that length that you've written in the past, back before the creative juices dried up.) Find the portion that is the logical *beginning* of the piece — usually the first few paragraphs. Rewrite it *five* different ways. It's crazy, I know, but humor me. Wow, you thought you had writer's block before! At about the third rewrite, you're going to think it's impossible. But keep going. Once you've done that, and you feel like your head is about to burst into flames, find the portion that is the logical *conclusion* — usually the last few paragraphs. You know what's next, don't you? That's right — rewrite the ending five different ways, as well. When you are all done, compare your new beginnings and endings. You might like some of them better than the original! But the real reason to do this is to get it through your thick skull that there is more than one way to write something.

“Throwaway” Writing

Write something you never expect to publish. Why? Because sometimes you need to release yourself from the tyranny of “publish or perish.” Maybe

you could create a quirky illustration or anecdote about the topic you are writing — the kookier the better. (For instance, if the love of God was a piece of candy, what kind would it be?) Or, you might write a section or even an entire chapter that goes off on a tangent from the main theme. Go into great depth about that rabbit trail of an idea. Why do “throwaway” writing? Because you’ll learn something from it, and you’ll also break up the writing dam. Take this Scripture as a promise that you are not just wasting your time: “In all labor there is profit” (Proverbs 14:23).

Pray

How often we forget to do this! But it’s essential to the writing process — and so simple, a child can do it. Ask God to show you what to write, how to write, when to write. Most importantly, ask God to remind you *why* you should write.

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CHECKLIST FOR DENOMINATIONAL PUBLISHERS

- ___ Have I read, and do I understand, their statement of faith?

- ___ Have I visited the denomination’s web site?

- ___ Does the denomination hold to a theological distinctive that I would disagree with? Can I write for them without this being a problem?

- ___ Is the topic I have chosen within this denomination’s circle of attention?

- ___ Does my book fit with the particular publisher’s style (formal, casual, folksy, business-like)?

- ___ If this publisher rejects my submission, can I adapt the book to a different denominational publisher?

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(SAMPLE PERMISSION REQUEST LETTER)

[DATE]

[NAME, TITLE]

[COMPANY]

[ADDRESS]

[CITY, STATE, ZIP]

Dear [NAME]:

I am writing to request permission to quote a passage from one of your publications:

[*TITLE*], by [AUTHOR], [COPYRIGHT DATE], [PAGE NUMBER(S) BEING QUOTED]

A photocopy of the page(s) on which your material will appear is attached for your review. This material is being quoted in the following work being published by [PUBLISHER'S NAME, PUBLISHER'S CITY]:

[*TITLE*] by [AUTHOR]

Proposed date of publication: [MONTH, YEAR]

Format: [TRADE PAPER, MASS MARKET, HARDCOVER]

Price: \$ _____ (tentative)

Initial press run: _____ (tentative)

I request nonexclusive world rights, as part of this volume only, in all languages and for all editions for the life of the product. If you are not the copyright holder of this material, or additional permission is needed from another source, please so advise. Unless you request otherwise, we will include the standard bibliographic credit line, including publisher, author, title, etc.

Your earliest attention to this matter would be greatly appreciated, since my deadline for permissions is imminent. Please sign one copy of this letter and return it to me in the enclosed preaddressed, stamped envelope. In signing, you grant the permission requested above and warrant that you are the sole owner (or the owner's representative) of the rights granted herein, and that the material indicated does not infringe upon the copyright or other rights of any third party.

____ Permission granted to use the material described above with a standard credit line.

____ Permission granted to use the material described above with the following credit line: _____

Name: _____ Title: _____

(Signed) _____ Date: _____

Thank you for your consideration.

_____, author

encl: photocopied text, second copy of this letter, SASE

“Parts and Pieces” of a Book

Front Matter

Dedication (place *before* the table of contents): A brief statement to say that the book was written *in honor of* someone.

Foreword: This is a statement by someone *other than* the author, recommending the book.

Preface: This is the author’s own statement about the book — usually, the reasons he or she wrote it.

Acknowledgments: This is a place to recognize those who helped the author in some way with the book. The acknowledgments may also include a list of permissions granted for reprinted material. Sometimes the acknowledgments can be included in the preface, or even *instead of* the preface.

Introduction: This is the point at which you begin to *introduce* the subject of the book, setting the scene, identifying the problem, challenging the reader, etc. This is the real beginning of the text of the book. **NOTE: This section is optional, and many publishers discourage the use of an introduction.**

Back Matter

Appendix: This is where you include information that can be useful to your reader, but which would be awkward to include in the main text.

Endnotes: If you have a fairly large number of quotes in your book—more than a half-dozen—it probably is best to prepare a list of endnotes. *Don’t* use your word processor’s “endnote” function; it usually does not convert to the publisher’s typesetting system.

Glossary: Occasionally, you might be discussing such a specialized topic that it has its own vocabulary. Then a glossary of terms may be useful.

Bibliography: If you made extensive use of several other books to prepare your manuscript, put them in a bibliography.

Index: It is doubtful that you would need an index in your book unless it is a textbook or a reference work. Some books of theology, however, may include a Scripture index. If you do think you need an index, simply inform the publisher.

Query Letters

For a good query letter, all you need are three or four paragraphs:

Paragraph 1: Hook them with a problem, a story, a question. Make sure it's a good one. If it's a problem, it needs to be important, with universal appeal. If it's a story, it has to be a grabber. If it's a question, it has to be compelling. *Don't* use a question that begins with, "Did you know that . . . ?" The editor is likely to respond, "No, I didn't know that, and I don't care." And into the wastebasket it goes! Some authors use the lead paragraph of their first chapter (or an abbreviated version of it) for this kind of opening hook. That can work very well sometimes — and if it doesn't work, you should ask yourself why. If it doesn't grab the editor in a query letter, maybe it's not the best way to begin a chapter, either!

Paragraph 2: Present an abbreviated version of your *premise* (the main point the book makes — the opening salvo of the proposal), and two or three of your most telling sub-points from the proposal. Don't, however, give away the whole gist of the book — not only do you not have space to do this (keep it *short*), but you want to spark their curiosity. In other words, you might say that you have stories that illustrate how to keep your faith fresh, but don't tell the stories. Numbers are always good; for example, you may say you have five simple steps to improving one's prayer life, but don't say what the steps are. The editor should be curious enough to ask for the manuscript to find out what they are.

Paragraph 3 (optional): You might tell the editor — briefly — a little about yourself. Don't give your entire history from kindergarten to the present. Just explain what makes you qualified to write this book.

Last paragraph: Give details about length, approach (first-person vs. third-person, casual vs. formal style, etc.), and say that you are willing to make changes as required. Then either say the manuscript is complete or say how soon you can have it ready. End with, "I look forward to hearing from you."

Finally, remember the three most important rules for query letters:

1) BE BRIEF! 2) BE BRIEF! 3) BE BRIEF!