

# How to Hire a Ghostwriter



**William  
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Disclaimer: The opinions expressed herein are based on extensive research and conversations with literary agents, editors, ghostwriters, clients, and publishing industry analysts. The sole purpose of this book is to help educate people about a little-understood area of the publishing industry and to enable people to intelligently select the right ghostwriters for their projects. No allegation of illegality is made or intended against any individual or corporation.

## Introduction

The most important thing to do when hiring a ghostwriter is get to know the ghost so that you can tell whether he or she is the right fit. So let me tell you a little about myself and share my background with you in Part 1 of this book. Part 2 is devoted to short, easy-to-read points on the process of hiring a ghostwriter when confronted with a dizzying array of websites promising you the sun and the moon when it comes to writing or publishing your book. The last time I checked, the sun and the moon weren't for sale.

You need to do your due diligence and educate yourself about publishing and the ghostwriting process. You wouldn't choose just any doctor to treat your illness, and you shouldn't select just anyone to write your book. The biggest impediment to selecting the right ghostwriter is that people have almost no understanding of ghostwriting, who the ghostwriters are, whether or not their websites are truthful, or the realities of the literary marketplace.

One of the cleverest memes to ever hit cyberspace is "Don't believe everything you read on the internet. ~Abraham Lincoln." When we go to a doctor, we presume that he or she has gone to medical school. But when looking for ghostwriters online, how do we know who they are or what their background is? The truth is that there is no regulatory agency screening people who claim to be ghostwriters. I hope this book, in conjunction with the information on my website, will help educate you and enable you to make the right decision when choosing a ghostwriter.

## Part 1

### Who Are the Ghostwriters?

The first thing one needs to know when selecting a ghostwriter is exactly who the ghostwriters are. Who are these individuals who write or edit books for other people, and where does one find them? For the purposes of this book, I will focus primarily on those ghostwriters who can be found through an online search since consulting the internet is how the vast majority of people look for a ghost.

But on any given day, one may be confronted by dozens of sites representing individuals and ghostwriting companies, and comparing and judging the different sites can be quite confusing. How can an individual know whether an independent ghostwriter or ghostwriting company is trustworthy? Who is qualified to write a book—who are the true professionals—and who should be avoided? Indeed, what is ghostwriting in the first place, how does the process work, and how does one go about hiring a ghostwriter? Is there a way to rank the websites, individuals, and companies?

Few people know what to look for when assessing the qualifications of a ghostwriter. Claims made on any site, independent or corporate, should be examined carefully, and your evaluation should be conducted with knowledge about the ghostwriting and publishing industries. This book will explain in detail what ghostwriting is all about and how you should evaluate any ghostwriter or ghostwriting website. Your search will be only as good as the knowledge you bring to the process.

For example, many people mistakenly believe that hiring a ghostwriting company means they are buying into the world of mainstream New York publishing. This is totally false and is a classic case in which image trumps reality. Despite a few “big name testimonials,” the overwhelming majority of clients using a company have their books self-published, although you wouldn’t know that by reading any of the company websites. And most of their books fail to sell in any significant numbers.

Some websites dedicated to writing (not ghostwriting per se) talk of the many qualified ghosts around the country, while others issue stern warnings to those contemplating hiring a ghost, noting that there is no regulatory agency to decide whether or not people are qualified to be ghostwriters and that the overwhelming majority of manuscripts produced by ghosts are poorly written. I favor the second opinion. After studying the work of thousands of ghosts over the years, I found that only 4% of their work was polished, organized, free of grammatical errors, and could hold the attention of a reader. This statistic is one that is embraced by many publishing executives and editors, who note that the internet has degraded the profession by allowing individuals to advertise their services as ghostwriters regardless of competence.

How do I know this? Read on. I’ll share with you two decades of experience and

show you the industry from the inside.

## 1. So Who Is William Hammett?

When I tell people I'm a ghostwriter, they look at me like I'm from Mars. They usually ask if I write about ghosts.

"No," I reply. "I write books for other people. They give me outlines, synopses, or rough drafts, and I turn them into complete and polished manuscripts."

"Oh. No ghosts?"

"Not unless it's a ghost story. I've written quite a few of those."

"How did you get into such an unusual profession?" they ask.

The answer to this question encompasses decades of my life.

The profession has been around for a long time, but I politely tell people that I taught writing and literature for twenty-two years at colleges and universities. During that time, I also held editorial positions, wrote newspaper articles, published fiction in literary journals, and published eBooks and novels under my own name.

I began writing books in my twenties and wrote literary fiction, horror, sci-fi, and other genres. Agents loved my work, but they never closed a deal because the market was awfully tight at the time, and before the digital age one had to wait for months or years to get a response from an agent or editor. I came close, though. The agent for bestselling novelist Walker Percy read my work and thought it had merit, but that particular manuscript didn't sell either.

I wrote a horror novel called *Street Magic*, and ten agents loved it. They said it was brilliant and lyrical . . . and too much like Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. Guilty as charged. I was purposely trying to imitate the book because I loved its soaring, lyrical, wide-open prose. I would later publish it with a small press since I think it's one of the best novels I ever wrote.

I talked to my original agent, crying in my beer about how hard it was to get a mainstream contract. He gave me some TLC and explained that a lot of really bad books get published every year, while many worthy titles get overlooked. He suggested that I try ghostwriting since I was like a literary chameleon—able to vary my style as well as write in a variety of genres. "You're a natural," he said.

Really? Hmmm. Maybe I would be Roy Hobbs from one of my favorite movies, *The Natural*. I would sit at my keyboard, write great books, and hit a few out of the park. I was either doing a good impression of Walter Mitty or on my way to making a living as a writer.

## 2. Ghostwriting

So I started ghostwriting since I'd been academically trained in writing, editing, textual criticism, publishing, and creative writing. The first manuscripts I produced were a couple of romance novels, and my clients really loved them. Then I wrote a few memoirs, a book on quantum physics (I really dig science), and a thriller in the vein of Dan Brown. When he published *The Da Vinci Code*, everyone wanted to write a book of the same ilk, and requests for similar novels poured into my inbox. My ghostwriting was paying the bills and keeping the lights on, and I was being paid to do what I loved most even though my teaching career had been very rewarding. My son thought I was crazy and told people that I wrote greeting cards. When I started depositing larger checks in the bank, he confessed that I was indeed a ghostwriter.

People still regarded me with suspicion, especially at parties.

"You're a *what?* A ghostwriter?"

"Yep."

"Interesting. Please pass me a cocktail weenie and a cheese ball."

Meanwhile, I continued to publish novels, short stories, children's books, and poetry under my own name. I wasn't famous and didn't make a gazillion dollars, but I got the work out there, and people seemed to enjoy it. I wrote *John Lennon and the Mercy Street Café*, a book which was even read by a couple of people who knew the surviving Beatles. Wow. Later, the novel was taught in a course on the genre of magical realism at the University of Illinois. Somebody even wrote me a letter and said that the book had changed her life. Wow *again*.

Soon after my fifteen minutes of fame, I was contacted by an Emmy-winning Hollywood TV director who had worked on some of the most famous sitcoms of all time. He, too, wanted a memoir. Next, an Oscar-nominated producer called and asked if I'd work on a book project he had going on the side—nonfiction about a reclusive, eccentric man in Tennessee who was thought to be the most intelligent man in the United States. It might, he thought, be turned into a movie. We became friends, and he asked me to do research and pitch him movie ideas, and I even wrote a few screen treatments. I was now building a reputation within the writing and entertainment communities.

I nevertheless had to sort through a lot of queries every day from people who were odd, to say the least. One query read:

Dear Mr. Hammett:

I'm from the planet Mongo, and I need a biography to introduce me to the people of Planet Earth. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Garloo Manatee

I'm not making this up.

And then there were people who wanted me to write about their alien abductions, moonshine operations, and their ability to communicate telepathically with furry animals. I wasn't sure why people couldn't communicate with non-furry animals, but I didn't ask for an explanation. There was also a woman who claimed that, under deep hypnosis, she had learned that she was the reincarnation of King Tut. I naturally didn't take any of these jobs.

Some queries, however, were heartbreaking. Hundreds of women contacted me over the years, requesting that I write memoirs about their physical, verbal, mental, or sexual abuse. They had been advised by therapists that it would be cathartic to write about their experiences. My heart went out to them, but there was no niche in the literary marketplace for these stories. Traditional publishers don't touch such accounts unless they're part of celebrity biographies or academic books on psychology. I wish I could have helped these women, and their sadness was palpable when I told them that they would have to self-publish. (Many men and women do indeed self-publish their accounts of psychological hardship, and I think it's healthy to do so.)

### **3. Ghostwriting Companies**

When I started out, I had fifteen online competitors. Then thirty. As the Internet grew into its present iteration, ghostwriting companies appeared. They produced terrible books while promising to make everyone a bestselling author. They subcontracted their work to inexperienced writers around the country—unemployed English majors, housewives, and people whose teachers had told them they wrote good term papers. Many people brought me their work to “fix” because it was so poorly written. Their ghosts couldn't have penned a decent grocery list let alone a book, but the companies scooped up a lot of clients. Two went under pretty fast after being sued, and one reincorporated under another name.

A young woman sent me a manuscript produced by one of these outfits, and she was in tears when we spoke on the phone. Her ghostwriter had no sense of punctuation, dialogue, or grammar. The mess she received cost her \$22,000. Ever since, I have tried to educate people about publishing and online ghostwriting.

I called the company that had botched this woman's middle reader (a short novel for kids eight to twelve) and was connected to a sales rep. This is technically called “mystery shopping.” One calls or visits a company in order to see if goods and services live up to advertisements.

“I want to write a book about cats,” I told her. “My name is Garloo Manatee. I'm from Eastern Europe.”

“Cats? Excellent! Books on cats are bestsellers.”

“Well, it's about *my* cat.”

“Even better. It will personalize the subject.”

“How much will it cost?”

“Twenty-five thousand dollars,” she replied.

“Okay. By the way, who does the writing?”

“One of our writers.”

A sage answer, if ever there was one.

“Which writer?” I asked.

“We’ll select him. Don’t worry.”

“Can I talk to him *now*?”

“Not yet.”

“When?”

“After you sign our standard contract.”

“Well, alright, but this is going to be a long book. My cat is pretty interesting.”

“No, no, no!” she cried with urgency. “Publishers don’t put out books over two hundred pages anymore.”

That was utter nonsense, but I continued in character—Garloo Manatee.

“I see. When do I pay?”

“Half now, and half when the project is over.”

“You mean I don’t get to see the book until it’s finished? What if it stinks?”

“Not to worry. You’ll be rich and famous.”

Click. I’d heard enough to know why my client had been ripped off to the tune of \$22,000.

With so many ghostwriters calling out the companies for questionable behaviors, it’s not surprising that more than one company has advertised that people should not hire freelance or independent writers, opting instead for an experienced firm to get it right! Companies claim that freelancers have no experience and should not be trusted. That’s really rich considering that the companies subcontract work to freelancers every day regardless of the company label substituted for the word “subcontractor.” If you believe that a hundred writers are crammed into an office somewhere—or even a couple of dozen—you’re wrong. As I’ve stated elsewhere, I’ve talked to the company writers myself and I know where they are.

#### 4. They're Back!

Fast forward ten years. There are now more companies than ever as I write this in 2018. They offer to write, edit, publish, and promote a customer's book. From reading some of the company sites, I surmise that they'll even take out your trash and check your mailbox while you're out of town. The package deals they offer are nothing new—promotion and advertising have been around almost from the beginning—but adding print-on-demand is a new feature.

I've spoken to a few people who confessed that they hired these companies because they "want to be part of mainstream publishing." Let's set the record straight right now. These companies are *not* part of the mainstream New York City publishing industry. They talk a good game and have slick websites that make it sound like anyone who contracts their services is on the way to a bright future in publishing, but this just isn't the case. I've discussed this misconception in considerable detail on my website, but a recap is in order here.

Many of these companies require prospective clients to fill out questionnaires, speak with project consultants, and interview ghostwriters (although some companies select the ghostwriters for clients based on the questionnaire responses). During the composition of the book, clients must again speak with managers, consultants, editors, and quality assurance personnel. Whew! And I thought for all these years that writing a book was a creative act performed by a very talented individual as opposed to an assembly line process, with half a dozen people putting "the product" together. It's almost as if the client is walking through a cafeteria line, choosing salads, entrees, sides, desserts, and drinks. It's a business model, in my opinion, and not related to the craft of writing.

I looked more closely at the websites and started to do some research. A few of the company owners were named, whereas the owners of the "old" companies were never listed. There was originally no transparency at all, and the entire ghostwriting process was shrouded in secrecy. Had things changed? Had these new incarnations of ghostwriting companies cracked the code?

Testimonials on a couple of these sites revealed that at least a few clients had been mainstream published, and one or two had become bestselling authors. I verified this on Amazon. Some companies also listed the names of numerous writers and said that most were on-staff and worked in-house. (Over the years, many independent ghostwriters correctly pointed out that companies use subcontractors.) I looked up the writers one-by-one. I even knew a few of the names because I regularly network with other ghosts. It was time to pick up the telephone again.

I called a company and asked to speak to some of their staff writers. A receptionist told me these individuals weren't allowed to speak to potential clients. So I called or emailed some of the writers listed on the sites. What I learned from thirty-nine writers was that they'd been asked to join the company but had never been given a writing assignment—had never been asked to write a single book. The rest of the writers I called never got back to me.

“Are you an employee of the company?” I asked.

“Well, kinda. More like a subcontractor. I’m technically on their staff, but I’m still waiting for a gig.”

“Have you ever been to the corporate office?”

“They have an office?”

“That’s what the website says.”

“Son of a gun. Didn’t know that.”

I returned to the website and read the disclaimer that not all writers were located at corporate headquarters. Obviously not, I thought to myself. The ones I spoke to lived all over the country. It’s a long commute from Idaho to New York City.

Next, I looked closely at the fee schedule. Ah, there was the answer to the riddle! If someone had \$100,000 to \$200,000, one got access to a top ghostwriter with an impressive track record. This is why companies can list a few well-known celebrities as former clients. The lower the fee one paid, the less qualified the writer was. The big guns—the writers with street cred—were for the rich and famous. A mid-range fee got you an author who had publishing credits of some kind, while low fees obtained a writer who had never published before. It was a form of bait and switch. Writers with prominent names within the ghostwriting industry were displayed, but they were apparently on these sites for window dressing. Not many people can afford to pay a hundred grand for a writer, so the entire business model was skewed toward low-paying clients who would more than likely need to use the POD arm of a company. In fact, some industry analysts believe that ghostwriting is a way to wrangle POD customers and represents a conflict of interest.

Is it your idea that’s important or your bank account? Sure, a qualified writer commands a higher fee, but some websites make it look like all clients will become literary rock stars. You walk into the car showroom hoping for the luxury sedan, but drive away in a compact.

I picked one company at random, called its “headquarters,” and was connected to a sales rep and then a “manuscript guide.”

“I want the works,” I said. “Writing, editing, printing, and promotion. Money is no object. My novel is about a shape-shifting detective, a combination of science fiction and mystery. How much will this cost so I can transfer money into the right account?”

A professional voice, a sultry and deep-throated woman, replied. “One hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars for our premium ghostwriting service. Another ten thousand for editing. Then there’s fifteen thousand for print-on-demand, and an additional ten thousand dollars for promotional activities.”

“So that’s one hundred and sixty thousand dollars, correct?”

“Yes, Mr. Manatee.”

“When do we get started?” I talked like I was from Texas, with a lot of bluster and bravado, an impatience that indicated I was a high roller and was in a hurry to get my bestseller into the hands of the reading public.

“You have to fill out our questionnaire first. I’m emailing it to you now. Just open the attachment.”

Which I did. I felt as if I were looking at the MMPI, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, a complex set of questions used by therapists and designed to spot personality disorders, neuroses, and the like. Well, it wasn’t quite that bad, but it was intense.

“This is to help us pair you with the five best writers in your price category,” she said.

“I feel like I’m on a dating service. You know, like that match harmony thing.”

“No, but it’s very scientific.”

Good writing, I thought to myself, wasn’t scientific. It was a highly personal creative act that could not really be defined by anyone short of God himself. Great books are not born from answering questionnaires.

“Okay, so if I answer these questions, then what happens?” I asked.

“You’ll talk with Shane, our chief sales executive.”

The car salesman had just referred me to the sales manager to help close the deal so that I would pay the sticker price.

“And then?” I asked.

“We’ll all teleconference—you, me, Shane, the potential writers, our chief editor, and our resident book guru.”

Book guru?

“Can’t we just cut to the chase, ma’am? Can’t I just talk to a writer?”

“We find it more productive if you follow our organizational flow chart.”

Good Lord! I was now following a flow chart that included a book guru. Surely Dickens just sat at his writing desk each morning, dipped his pen in the inkwell, and started to write.

“Where are the writers? Are they there at your office?”

“Some of them are. A few are traveling to meet clients.”

“And the rest?”

“We’re not allowed to discuss company personnel.”

“But you’re a ghostwriting company, and I want to speak to a writer.”

“I’m sorry, but we have a proprietary business model.”

I chose another company and had a friend of mine call it for the next week, asking each and every time to speak to one of the in-house writers. They were always on coffee break. Always. I figured that the company either had no writers at the office or else they were really juiced on caffeine. Big time. Shaky, like Don Knotts. Who could drink that many lattes without going insane?

And was it asking too much to speak with a writer?

I’m not saying that ghostwriting companies are crooked or never produce good work. I do question their business ethics, however. I don’t like their business models and lack of transparency. I don’t like ads or websites that cause people unfamiliar with publishing to fork over mounds of cash because they think they’re going to be the next John Grisham, Dan Brown, or Stephen King, and I don’t like assembly lines. I was raised with a respect for the written word, and when words confuse rather than enlighten, I have to wonder who’s in charge of a process where words are literally bought and sold. I think writing is a sacred calling, and I don’t for a second believe that great books come from mating with a corporation. It’s the literary version of artificial insemination.

I believe writing is a craft that is a bit mystical and can never be put into a mold much less a flow chart or questionnaire. Our children study classic literature in high school and college, and I guarantee that not a single book they read was ever written by a team. The books we revere come from blood, sweat, tears, talent, experience, and inspiration.

I have only one business model, and it isn’t proprietary: Do good work. Write well.

## **5. Book Packagers and Their Locations**

Ghostwriting companies are book packagers, and a packager is a large business that offers several services, many of which are outsourced to third parties. If you’re searching online for a ghostwriter and stumble across a “ghostwriting company,” you’re not going to be aware that the company’s main focus isn’t necessarily ghostwriting at all. It’s part of a much larger corporate picture. The company’s business model is usually “one-stop shopping,” offering you ghostwriting plus editing, marketing, and self-publishing. While this may seem attractive, you should remember that you were originally looking for a

ghostwriter. The reality is that ghostwriting is not a specialty of these book packagers. It's one of many services they offer, and if you believe that they have the most talented ghosts in the country, then I have some swampland that I'd like to sell you.

I've been to New York City many times and have looked up the addresses of some of these companies that call themselves industry giants. At one rather small office, I saw a receptionist and someone in the background standing next to a copy machine. There was no bustling staff of managers or writers. I saw several business cards for the executives and project managers and noted that their phone numbers all represented different area codes around the country.

I recently called a company that claimed to be a leader in ghostwriting and print-on-demand for thirty-five years. (Online ghostwriting and print-on-demand didn't exist thirty-five years ago.) I was connected to a project manager who I'll call Jane Doe.

"Hi, this is Jane. How may I help you?"

I could barely hear Jane and asked if I'd indeed reached Company X.

"Yeah, hon," she replied. "I'm doing laundry here in the basement, and the machines are kind of noisy."

"Where are you located?" I asked.

"Talladega, Alabama."

In reality, Jane was the wife of the owner of Company X. She didn't live in the Big Apple, and she was busy with laundry, not making sure that bestselling books were being written and printed.

## **6. Ghostwriting Marketplaces**

Ghostwriting companies lie on a very wide spectrum, at the other end of which are individuals who post resumes on sites that claim to have thousands of the best ghostwriters in the country. Since there are several major ghostwriting marketplaces (sometimes referred to as ghostwriting clearinghouses), each claiming to have thousands of expert writers, one might infer that there are tens of thousands of ghostwriters in the country, all of them consummate professionals.

Wrong. Remember that there is no regulatory agency that oversees someone's right to call himself a writing professional or ghostwriter (although there are associations and various credentials that can go a long way in indicating that a person is a legitimate ghost, and I'll discuss those later). There are not a hundred thousand professional ghostwriters in the country, and after almost twenty years of studying the profession and being a ghostwriter myself, I'd say that less than five percent of those who call themselves ghostwriters are qualified to write a book.

I believe that ghostwriters and editors listed on marketplaces represent the worst writers in the country, and they charge rock-bottom fees, ranging from a few hundred dollars for a book to five thousand dollars. And this is where the old adage applies: You get what you pay for.

One has only to look at the resumes posted on these sites to know that their writers and editors have no facility with language. Well, perhaps that is overstating the matter, for people looking for a ghost may not recognize poor phrasing and grammatical errors, but I think most people with a discriminating eye can pick out the really egregious mistakes in these resumes. In all the years I have popped in to take a gander at these ads, I have never seen a single one that was error-free. Here is an example, although I have imitated several that I've seen so as not to use any copyrighted material.

"Hi, I'm Chloe. I love to write! I majored in Fine Arts in college and then worked in an Antique shop for a while. I got great grades on my term papers in schol and have always enjoyed writing, that's why I became a ghostwriter. I specialize in Business writing but can do other things as well. If you're looking for a Great ghostwriter, please Contact me and then I'll contact you. Just click the Contact button at the top of my Resume in order to contact me. I to be hearing from you real soon."

Oh, Chloe, Chole, Chloe. Where do I even begin?

Why are there random capital letters sprinkled throughout the resume? Why is the word "contact" repeated so frequently? She says she can write on business (highly doubtful) and "do other things." What "other things"? Does she mean that she can write about other topics or that she can cook, rollerblade, knit, and tear phone books in half with her brute strength when she gets toasted at parties? She has a comma splice (a major grammatical error) since "That's why I became . . ." begins a new sentence. She omitted the word "hope" from the last sentence, and she misspelled "school." The wording is juvenile, not professional, and yet she wants to charge money to write your book. Granted, people like this usually charge \$500 to \$5,000 for a book, which isn't a professional or living wage, but the websites that host these resumes claim that they have the best writers in the world. They don't come close to living up to this boast.

Not all resumes are this bad (some are even worse), but all the ones I've reviewed have had errors in grammar or phrasing. It should be noted that the websites on which such resumes are posted can also help you find accountants, plumbers, web designers, and dog groomers. I guess a clearinghouse site is like Walmart, where ghostwriters are stacked high on aisle 15.

Every month, however, I receive emails from people who tell me that they're looking for the best work possible at the cheapest price. Ay, there's the rub, as Hamlet said. Cheap prices are never going to get you good work. The "best work possible" is going to be a Chloe crap-fest, pardon my French. You indeed get what you pay for, and if you want a great book, you're probably not going to get one from a clearinghouse. Let me repeat this since I'm writing on the subject of how one should choose a ghostwriter: **You can't get a good book written for a cheap price.** The sad reality is that many people get a finished product and never notice all of the errors in the manuscript. It happens every day.

I was talking on the phone one night to a potential client who said he could beat my fee by going to a marketplace. "I've done my homework, and I know all about the publishing industry," he declared in the rudest possible voice. "Books are full of errors, like that porn book that became a big seller and then a movie. The editing smoothes out all the errors."

"And you think your memoir is going to be acquired by a major publishing house?" I asked.

"Of course. If somebody writes a book, it gets published and lands in bookstores in a matter of weeks."

The conversation was a brief one. No major publishing company will read manuscripts unless submitted by an agent, and agents are not going to read junk created by a bad writer. The book to which the man referred was a salacious novel that was panned for its awful plot and prose. For the record, it never received any editing by the publisher, which acquired the book (which was originally self-published) because it was about sex.

I would much rather have talked to Garloo Manatee than the brash man who didn't know squat about publishing.

## **7. Independent Ghostwriters**

I think independent ghostwriters are the way to go, although they can be just as bad as other writers if they simply decided to hang out a shingle by creating a website and calling themselves ghostwriters. Some of their writing is awful, and I see a lot of grammatical mistakes on their sites as well. But if I were looking to have a book written, I would search for someone with no corporate ties, a great deal of experience, publishing credits, and samples that showed me that he or she could competently use the English language. There will be more on the selection process in Part 2, but I'll touch on independent ghostwriters here in order to round out the major three categories of ghostwriters.

If you find a talented ghostwriter who is also knowledgeable about the publishing industry, you've struck gold. When dealing with a qualified independent, a client doesn't have to cope with middlemen, project consultants, editors, questionnaires, or an assembly line process. You talk directly with the writer who will author and edit your book. He or she can also tell you how to submit your work to literary agents or to small or independent presses. This is a service I provide for free for those people who have entrusted me with the dream they've had, usually for many years, of finally publishing a book. That's right. I don't charge for giving simple advice that people can then take and execute themselves without any help from an office staff.

But what about POD and promotion, you ask.

Here's the plain, unvarnished truth. If you want to self-publish, I can point you to several POD companies that do great work for a fraction of the cost charged by a ghostwriting company. The POD firms I recommend are affordable, do excellent work, have great production values, and turn out first-rate books.

You should therefore focus on a simple two-step process: 1) getting your manuscript written by a qualified writer; and 2) discussing your publishing options, which will entail either submitting your work to an agent or indie editor, or else finding a reputable and affordable POD firm that is ranked highly by *The Fine Print of Self-Publishing* by Mark Levine. (This gem of a book is considered to be the gold standard for POD in the publishing industry.) You'll save an enormous amount of money over what you would pay a ghostwriting company.

The choice is yours. You can pay next to nothing for poor work or have your book written by a team that's going to drain your retirement fund. Or you can search for a qualified independent writer and make sure that your book is written in a professional manner without people upselling you on services that most assuredly won't get you a seat at the table with Stephen King.

That doesn't mean that a great ghostwriter comes cheap, but the average qualified independent isn't going to charge you a hundred grand and waste your time with sales pitches. I'll talk more about fees in Part 2, but suffice to say that there is a middle ground on which you pay a professional fee for a professional product without all of the headaches mentioned above.

I have listened to countless people recount their nightmarish experiences with bad writers or ghostwriting companies. When something happens once or twice, it might be a coincidence. When something recurs year after year, like complaints about bad writing or companies that give customers little satisfaction or success, I take it seriously.

## **8. Academic Writing Services**

Unfortunately, academic ghostwriting is quite popular. Numerous companies employ ghostwriters to write, edit, and research term papers, theses, and doctoral dissertations for students. This is a multimillion dollar business and, in my opinion, totally dishonest. Students should do their own work. Learning how to write is integral to the educational process. I do not respond to requests from college students asking me to write their papers.

The executive personnel of two ghostwriting companies, however, are (or were) affiliated with multiple academic writing services (incorporated under different names) that will edit, revise, research, and rewrite student essays, theses, and dissertations. While the ad copy focuses on the editing of student papers of one sort or another, a reader who looks closely will see the word "ghostwrite" in several places on the site. Also, the claim is made on several of these academic writing sites (some now unavailable but captured by screen shots for posterity by unhappy clients) that they provide comprehensive *original* content, bragging that they do far more than just edit or clean up grammatical mistakes.

Writing or rewriting papers for students is cheating and violates student codes of conduct at colleges and universities. It is grounds for expulsion. **If this is how ghostwriting executives treat our youth—if they want to play fast and loose with ethics—what will they do with your book?**

This information is readily available online. All you have to do is type in the correct search terms and names. You can draw your own conclusions about the integrity of these operations.

## **9. And All the Others**

There are other ghostwriters, of course, such as medical ghostwriters employed by pharmaceutical companies, writers who author complex research articles on drugs and then have doctors put their names on the documents before they are submitted to the FDA. That's an entirely difficult ballgame and should be outlawed, but pardon me; I digress.

There are million-dollar ghostwriters who write biographies for the wealthiest people in our society, and they fly low under the radar, networking at New York and Hollywood parties to find their clients. That's not my cup of tea. I've worked for clients in tinsel town, but I don't mix socially with the beautiful people, although I've made certain celebrity clients promise to take me to the Oscars if a project we worked on is ever nominated. It's an item on my bucket list.

Some high-end ghostwriters who are consummate professionals have agents. They are difficult to find, and I personally don't have an agent because agents like to take a hefty cut of the profits, but I have to admit that agented ghosts usually do outstanding work. They're pricey but talented.

Many literary agents and editors at major publishing houses have a stable of ghostwriters who are called upon to heavily revise or even rewrite a manuscript that has merit but isn't deemed commercially viable yet because of the author's presentation, organization, content, or style. These individuals are often called book doctors or rewrite specialists within the publishing industry. They are not accessible unless you've already gotten past the gatekeepers: literary agents and editors at the top publishing imprints in the world.

## **10. Great Work, Great Clients**

I continue to ghostwrite for some of the best clients in the world, people who I sometimes end up calling friends long after a book has been completed. I'm currently waiting for the release of a true crime book about a young woman who was cyber-stalked and threatened with torture for over a year until the FBI finally stepped in and nabbed the perpetrator. I'm also looking forward to the release of a political thriller commissioned by a well-known politician, as well as a memoir by a prominent CEO in America, someone who I think is a rock star because he champions transparency in the business world.

Other recent projects have included a memoir by a physician who travels to third world countries to provide medical aid needed by the poorest of the poor. I have also worked on a series of crime novels that is popular in both Europe and America. And there have been books on school shootings, crimes committed by corporate America, infertility, psychology—the list is long. I regularly get queries for horror, science fiction, mystery, fantasy, and romance, as well as literary fiction. My work blends my writing talent, creativity, and imagination in ways I could never have predicted.

One client recently sold fifty thousand copies of his self-published book, which is not an easy thing to do. Others have obtained the highest level of literary representation. Still others have successfully published with small or indie presses.

I can't promise any given client that he or she will break out, to use a phrase from the publishing world, because publishing is a tough business. Any individual or company that tells you that you're going to get a bestseller and a movie deal is a snake oil salesman. No one, not even literary agents on Madison Avenue, can guarantee that anyone's book will be a blockbuster, let alone get published. Many A-list agents love certain books but are unable to sell them, and that's one reason why I distrust ghostwriting companies so much. They would have people believe that they're movers and shakers who will catapult clients to success.

The average book that is traditionally published by a New York City imprint will sell only 14,500 copies nationwide. Books often fall to what publishing houses call their midlist, meaning that the book made little money or broke even. Major publishers make money on what they call their top "leads," meaning the authors who write mass market or trade paperbacks that are sold in bookstores, drug stores, and airports. They also make money on breakout nonfiction on motivational topics, how-to books, pop-psychology, contemporary culture, and inspirational themes.

If average sales equal only 14,500 copies for a given title, what's the use in publishing? First, remember that the above number is an average. A book may sell fifty to a hundred thousand copies—or more. There's just no way of knowing how many copies will sell, although marketing departments of mainstream publishers can usually forecast with some degree of accuracy whether or not a book has legs to take it to the *New York Times* bestseller list.

## **11. Defining Success**

Success is writing a book because someone feels passionate about a topic or will never rest until a story is told. Success is putting the work out there—the best work possible—and then stepping back and letting forces greater than ourselves decide what happens to a title. When people contact me, I give them an honest assessment of their ideas, but I don't own a crystal ball. Nobody does, and that includes ghostwriting companies and people at the highest levels of legitimate publishing—agents and editors who work tirelessly to publish good books that entertain and teach. Maybe Oprah is the only person with the Midas touch, someone who can make a book into an overnight sensation by giving it her thumbs-up, and I'm not convinced that this is a good thing. I think

a lot of books that she has backed are pretty bad, both in prose style and subject matter. In fact, she seems to have fallen down the metaphysical rabbit hole and will endorse just about any New Age spiritual belief that drifts her way. No one should have that much power in the publishing industry.

I promise people great writing, and I deliver it. I help them with their publishing goals. I tell them the truth. That's the only business model I use, and for many years it has produced success for a lot of clients. Like the saying goes (despite its lack of grammatical correctness), "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

## Part 2

### How to Hire a Ghostwriter: The Basics

In Part 1, I told you who the ghostwriters are, at least the ones you're likely to come across in your online searches. It's now time to give you practical nuts-and-bolts advice on how to conduct your search properly, solid advice on all aspects of finding, querying, and hiring a topnotch ghostwriter. While many of the following points may seem obvious to some, I've found that most people don't really have the necessary information to prevent them from paying too much or getting ripped off.

So let's begin, starting with a fundamental point that has a place in any discussion about ghostwriting.

#### 1. What Is Ghostwriting?

Ghostwriting has been around as long as mankind has been making symbols on stone, paper, and computer screens. Who knows? Maybe the Paleolithic cave paintings in Lescaux, France, were painted by some caveman who snuck into the dark chamber in the dead of night and did the real artwork for his friend, who couldn't get the hang of smearing paint on stone. I'm being intentionally silly here, but you get the picture, pun intended. Throughout recorded history, people have asked for assistance in trying to communicate their words, images, stories, and even music to others. Mozart ghostwrote music for famous patrons because he was in demand and often needed money.

A few of literature's more well-known authors who have done ghostwriting on the side are Mark Twain, Sinclair Lewis, HP Lovecraft, Kingsley Amis, and Katherine Anne Porter. More recently, famous authors who have enlisted ghostwriters or have engaged in collaborations with other writers (some openly) are Tom Clancy, Arthur C. Clarke, and James Patterson, to name just a few. Many authors of genre fiction seek ghostwriters and collaborators in order to increase their output and build their franchises.

If you read series such The Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew, then you were reading the work of ghostwriters. The Hardy Boys, for example, used nine ghostwriters, all writing under the name of Franklin W. Dixon. Nancy Drew used at least two ghostwriters for the first fifty-six books in the series, which were written under the name of Carolyn Keene.

And then there are politicians and celebrities who regularly use ghostwriters to pen their autobiographies. Sometimes acknowledgments are made to these ghosts, sometimes not. One of the earliest examples of a politician seeking a ghostwriter was President Ulysses S. Grant, who enlisted the help of several writers to produce his memoir. This was the beginning of modern political autobiography, although the "auto" part was a bit of a misnomer since Grant didn't write the book himself. Other notable politicians to employ

ghostwriters are Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Hillary Clinton.

CEOs use ghostwriters extensively to chronicle their careers, their rise from rags to riches. Lee Iacocca, Stephen Covey, Richard Branson, Jack Welch, and Sam Walton are just a few of the several hundred entrepreneurs and businessmen and women who have collaborated with experienced writers to tell their personal stories to the world. The same is true for many athletes, Hollywood celebrities, explorers, scientists—the list goes on and on.

It is estimated that in the world of mainstream publishing in New York, London, Sydney, Toronto, and other publishing centers, 30% to 40% of all titles have been ghostwritten or have received significant help from developmental editors in order to reach the literary marketplace. That amounts to thousands of titles every year, representing the sale of tens of millions of books.

Ghostwriters are some of the most talented authors you'll never hear about. But why would someone who is a gifted writer sell his or her services to someone else? Why not just write a killer book and rake in the royalties. The answer lies in the realities of the publishing industry. It is generally assumed that all books that are written will be published, and nothing could be further from the truth. Assuming a book has merit, though, it may take a great deal of time to secure literary representation since rejection rates by literary agents run at about 98%. If an agent agrees to represent a book, then he or she must sell it to a publisher, and a sale is never a given. Add to this that not all published books are successful or make very much money, and you'll see that being a writer is not necessarily the royal road to riches, although it is assumed to be by the general public.

Ghostwriters avoid running this gauntlet by charging a fee at the time they write the book, and then their work is done. Whether their clients are famous or John Q. Public, they don't have to worry about what a book's earnings will be, although there are some ghostwriting contracts that cut the ghostwriter in for a share of the royalties.

In other words, in a world in which less than 5% of writers are able to earn their living by practicing their craft, ghostwriters get to use their skill to keep food on the table.

## **2. Who Are the Ghostwriters?**

This has been covered extensively in Part 1, and if you skipped it, you need to go back and read it. Knowing who the ghostwriters are and at what level of professionalism they operate is crucial in finding the right ghost for your book. If you have already read Part 1, then you know that not all ghostwriters are created equal and that a majority do not produce quality work. That having been said, the following points will include more information on the profession and those who practice it, but in a slightly different context.

Be aware that professional ghostwriters earn their living by writing. They do so according to a set schedule that gives them a cash flow like any other worker. It's amazing how many people think that ghostwriters write for a hobby and don't charge money for their services. For a pro, time is money.

### **3. Know What You Want to Accomplish**

Many people email me and write words to the effect that “I’m thinking of writing a book—maybe two or three—and the first one will probably be about myself and my life, but I haven’t decided yet. Some might be novels. Can you tell me more about the process? I’m not sure when I want to begin. I’m really just starting out.”

Before you begin searching for a ghostwriter, make a list covering the following points so that you know exactly what you want. If you can't articulate what you expect from a ghostwriter, then the ghostwriter isn't going to be able to give you much information about his or her services upon initial contact.

- 1) What do you wish to have written?
- 2) Is it fiction or nonfiction?
- 3) What is the proposed length of the book?
- 4) Do you have source materials available for nonfiction?
- 5) For nonfiction, are you available for telephone interviews?
- 6) For fiction, what genre is your book?
- 7) For fiction, do you have a partial or complete manuscript, or just an idea? Do you need developmental editing rather than ghostwriting?
- 8) For fiction, do you have a synopsis or outline that you can share with the ghostwriter?
- 9) When do you wish to begin the project?

By having the above information at your fingertips, you'll be able to target your search for a ghostwriter more effectively. Not every ghostwriter handles all types of books. Some write only fiction; some only handle nonfiction or memoirs. Knowing what you want to accomplish will help you receive better responses from ghostwriters once you query them.

### **4. Look for a Ghostwriter Who Is the Right Fit**

Your goal should be to find the ghostwriter who is the best fit for your project, someone who understands the subject of your book and with whom you can work comfortably. This is best achieved by reading ghostwriting websites carefully and researching ghostwriters who look promising based on their qualifications. It's not a question of one size fits all. Truly professional ghostwriters maintain an online presence in the form of blogs, articles, listings with professional associations, or sites that critique or sponsor books they have written under their own bylines (such as Goodreads or Amazon).

While many ghostwriters will wait indefinitely for you to make a decision, these freelancers are the ones who juggle multiple projects and can therefore afford to wait weeks or months for you to make a decision. Professional ghosts look for the perfect client whose idea resonates with their interests and abilities. They are selective in whom they choose to work for, and they don't write several books at once.

You can cast your net wide, but if you do, you'll get a lot of different replies that are apt to be confusing. And you'll also get more than a few sales pitches. Just as when buying a car, you don't have to settle on the first vehicle you see, but you usually start with an idea of what kind of automobile you want. In the same way, do your due diligence and search for a ghostwriter who has the right qualifications. You can conduct a better, more productive search by following the guidelines in this book and on my website.

To be honest, I believe it's best to contact one ghostwriter at a time, and that initial contact should be with someone you feel strongly about after your online search. Many of my clients have told me that they immediately knew I was the right person for the job after reading my website. A CEO of a tech company that specialized in web advertising told me last year that he knew he'd found the right writer after reading just a few paragraphs of my Home page. "I knew that you got it!" he said. "You were transparent and cut to the chase. Your writing was crisp and you provided information on ghostwriting in general, not just about yourself."

So much for patting myself on the back, but when I choose a doctor, I don't do so after interviewing five. I may indeed ask around for recommendations, but when I finally make an appointment, it's based on a doctor's reputation, which isn't very hard to ascertain. This goes back to my first point. Know what you want from the get-go.

## **5. Choose Ghostwriters Who Are Members of Professional Associations**

Professionals, from doctors to plumbers, are expected to be accredited or certified. Why should we expect less from freelance writers? The vast majority of ghostwriters have no licensing or accreditation.

A ghostwriter should belong to one or more associations which vet the writer before extending membership privileges. The Association of Ghostwriters is a respected organization that admits only highly-qualified members to its ranks—and its membership is quite small. Another organization is The National Association of Independent Writers and Editors, or NAIWE. In the case of both organizations, a potential member has to prove that he or she has credentials, competence, and experience in the fields of writing and editing.

The most professional ghostwriters will also be found on LinkedIn and Publishers Marketplace, which are searchable via Google. Publishers Marketplace is a website where the nation's most prominent agents, editors, and authors network and share information and trends about the literary marketplace. If your ghostwriter isn't a member of any of these organizations and doesn't network on Publishers Marketplace, you should seriously question his or her professionalism and knowledge of the publishing industry. Ninety-six percent of all ghostwriters in the United States have no accreditation with any organization and do not network on Publishers Marketplace.

## **6. Send a Prospective Ghostwriter an Intelligent, Thoughtful Query**

Ghostwriters receive hundreds, even thousands, of queries each year. Approach a

ghostwriter just as you would a literary agent or editor. Describe your project, even if only in one or two paragraphs. If you've already begun the project yourself, consider attaching a sample of your work to the email even though this isn't mandatory. No one can steal your ideas. (More on this later.)

Ghostwriters don't handle every type of book in the literary marketplace. Before you initiate long telephone conversations or protracted negotiations, give the ghostwriter an idea of what you want written. This is the protocol throughout the publishing industry and can potentially save both you and the ghostwriter a lot of time. I have engaged in many telephone conversations with potential clients, only to learn after forty-five minutes that the client wanted me to write on a topic that I didn't handle.

By describing your project, you can hook the ghostwriter's attention and make your query stand out against the others. If the topic is one that the ghostwriter is especially interested in, you increase your chances of becoming a client.

Don't just send an email that says "Call me at 555-5555" or "I want a ghostwriter. Call me." These queries are usually ignored. Be courteous and professional and follow established protocols to ensure getting the best ghostwriter possible. If you wanted to get a literary agent, you'd never receive an answer if you wrote "I have a book and want you to represent me. Give me a call."

## **7. A Ghostwriter Cannot Steal Your Work**

Many people each year are afraid to send me a description of their proposed books because they think their ideas might be stolen. Without formal registration, your work is copyright-protected according to U.S. copyright law from the moment you set an idea onto paper or any electronic medium. A short description (even a sentence) committed to paper or any kind of electronic device that can retrieve text is sufficient to protect your idea. This may be verified at the U.S. Copyright Office website by clicking on the link "When Is My Work Protected?"

Literary agents and editors at publishing houses, who collectively receive millions of queries a year, will not respond to any email or snail mail query if you request that they sign non-disclosure agreements or ask them if it is safe to describe your idea. People who ask such questions are insulting the agent and impugning his or her integrity. Such queries get deleted from the inbox or thrown in the trash. Otherwise, agents, editors, and ghostwriters would live at the post office, mailing out NDAs all day long. It's just not how the publishing industry works.

If someone would be so foolish as to publish your idea under a different name, he would be sued in a New York minute. But it just isn't going to happen. Suppose you want a ghostwriter to write a book on a high-profile criminal case or are requesting that a ghost pen a book on some unusual or dramatic event, like a trek through the Amazon jungle or starting a major company that turned the business world upside down. How could someone other than yourself possibly take credit for doing these things? The idea is ludicrous. I understand that in a limited number of cases, the topic of a book might be so

volatile or legally sensitive that a person wants the added insurance of an NDA, but it isn't necessary.

No one can steal your idea if you write it on a piece of paper. It's the law. More to the point, no professional in the publishing industry is even remotely interested in stealing your idea.

## **8. Carefully Examine a Ghostwriter's Credentials**

Too many people become ghostwriters because they did well in English when in school and they now need some additional income. Getting good grades doesn't necessarily mean that people have any competence whatsoever when it comes to writing a full-length book—or anything at all. Many people who ghostwrite got the idea to do so because they saw an internet ad that said, "Make large sums of money by becoming a ghostwriter! It's as easy as creating a website and deciding what you want to write about and how much to charge." That's a real ad I saw many years ago, and I can assure you that being a ghostwriter does not produce a bank vault filled with cash, nor is it easy.

Here are a few credentials that any ghostwriter should have:

- 1) A ghostwriter should have a college degree in some area related to the liberal arts, preferably a degree that requires competence in both writing and research. A degree in the sciences, of course, is perfectly acceptable when a ghost is writing on a scientific, technical, or business topic.
- 2) A ghostwriter should have a strong editorial background, or at least formal training in editing and proofreading.
- 3) A ghostwriter should have strong research skills since many nonfiction books require writers to do extensive research on a given topic.
- 4) A ghostwriter should have a thorough knowledge of the publishing industry and the literary marketplace. This kind of knowledge isn't easy to come by, and people who answer internet ads like the one above don't have the slightest inkling as to what the industry is about.
- 5) A ghostwriter should have writing credentials under his or her own name. These can be books, articles, short stories, technical writing credits, or other pieces for which the ghostwriter received a byline.
- 6) A ghostwriter should have superior interviewing skills.
- 7) A ghostwriter should have a resume that is able to demonstrate, at least in part, past work that he or she has done for clients. Granted, the very nature of ghostwriting gives clients confidentiality—it's the "ghost" in ghostwriting—but many clients will offer a ghostwriter at least some credit, even if it's only an editing credit (and most ghostwriters are editors as well). Also, most reputable ghostwriters have

at least one or two past clients that he or she can use as references.

Not everyone has the skill to be a ghostwriter, and the above checklist is a good place to begin when evaluating the person you wish to write your book.

## **9. Carefully Proofread a Ghostwriter's Website**

When a ghostwriter offers to write your "fiction novel," beware. *All* novels are fiction. This phrase is one of the most common redundancies made by amateurs. I also saw a website the other day on which the ghostwriter said he would "write your novel, fiction or non-fiction, with great care." (Nonfiction is not hyphenated, by the way.) More to the point, a nonfiction book is not a novel.

A majority of ghostwriters use the phrases "book length manuscript" and "full length book" when advertising on their websites. These phrases should be hyphenated: full-length and book-length, at least when they're adjectives modifying a noun (which they are in this instance).

One of the ghostwriters mentioned above wrote a sentence that said, "Choose your ghost writer carefully. "Ghostwriter" is one word. Shouldn't a professional know how to spell or type his own occupation?"

These blunders occur on the corporate ghostwriting sites as well. But can you spot them? Will you notice the missing hyphen or the grammatical error or the misspelling? If you're looking for a ghost, maybe not.

When ghostwriters can't even write grammatically correct ad copy on their own sites, do you want them to write your book?

## **10. Hire a Ghostwriter Who Is Familiar with the Publishing Industry**

A client who wishes to hire a ghostwriter should have some idea of what his or her publishing goals are. Does the client wish to receive a traditional contract from a large mainstream publisher? Does the client want to seek a small or independent press? Finally, does the client want or need to self-publish?

Unless a ghostwriter is extremely familiar with the literary marketplace, he or she can't help you assess the odds that you will attain your goal. A top-tier ghostwriter should be thoroughly knowledgeable about the submission process, literary agents, large and small publishing houses, royalties, the editorial process, and all pre-flight measures (the steps that it takes to edit, print, promote, distribute, and launch a book).

The average ghostwriter is not familiar with the following terms that are commonly used in the publishing industry: right of first refusal, earn out, midlist, front matter and back matter, colophon, remainders, blue lines, PP&B, spoilage, trim size, galley, under-run, backlist, dummy, hi-lo, co-op money, mass market and trade paperbacks, remainders, and

many more terms. Most ghosts also do not know how to successfully pitch an agent, are unaware of copyright law, can't name the five major publishers in the world, believe page count is more important than word count, and are ignorant of the steps involved in a book's acquisition process. It's virtually impossible for a ghost to guide a client through the steps that lie beyond the composition of a manuscript unless he is familiar with industry terminology and practices.

When it comes to self-publication, a ghostwriter worth his salt can help steer you through the confusing steps of the POD process. Gone are the days when iUniverse would publish a book for \$99.

There's simply no substitute for experience and a working knowledge of the literary marketplace. You can have the best book in the world, but if you don't have a strategic plan for getting it into print, it will eventually die a quiet death. But you don't need a large ghostwriting company to help you navigate the turbulent waters of deciding which publishing option is for you—or *pay* for this service. A reputable, honest ghostwriter will advise you at no cost. More and more independent writers (even though I believe independents represent the best category of ghosts) are beginning to charge high fees to show you how and where to publish. It's shameful.

## **11. Don't Ask a Ghostwriter to Work for Royalties**

It's true that some ghostwriters accept royalties (future profits) in addition to payments while actually writing a book. If a publisher strongly suspects that a book, such as a celebrity memoir, will sell millions of copies, then a ghostwriter may accept a royalty deal.

But not all books are going to sell in the millions, and this sometimes applies to politicians and celebrities as well. Indeed, not all books are published, regardless of their merits. Publishing is a tough business, and there's no guarantee that a book will receive agent representation, be acquired by a publishing house, or make money. Finding an agent and then getting the book acquired by a major publisher can take one to three years. Assuming a book does "earn out" (meaning that it makes back the printing and promotional costs) and goes on to make money, advances are usually small in today's publishing climate, and royalties do not accrue for one to two years after a book is published.

A ghostwriter can't afford to wait three to five years to get paid for months of hard work on a book. A professional ghostwriter earns his or her daily bread by writing books. If you don't have the money to pay for such a service, you're not going to find anyone to pen your book.

## **12. Don't Hire a Ghostwriter or Company That Tries to Limit the Length of Your Book**

Many ghostwriters and ghostwriting companies are now trying a new business model by offering shorter books to clients. This has become a popular selling point used by

ghostwriters trying to bring in clients who (they fear) might not want to pay a reasonable price for a longer book. Many ghostwriting websites advertise that a ghost will write “a 200 page book for \$30,000.” How can such an offer be made without speaking to the client and finding out more about the book’s content? The truth is that a book is as long as it needs to be. The above ad and fee structure are ridiculous and reveal a lack of knowledge and professionalism. It’s marketing language, nothing more.

I’ve heard many ghostwriters tell clients that “I can’t write your book for the fee you’re able to pay, but if you’re willing to settle for a shorter book, I can help you.” The arbitrary length suggested by many ghosts is 200 pages, which is an extremely short book and usually refers (in the ghostwriter’s mind) to 200 double-spaced manuscript pages. A double-spaced manuscript will be condensed to fewer pages when it is actually printed. Two hundred double-spaced pages usually equal 150-175 printed pages. For a nonfiction book, this may or may not be sufficient to cover a topic. It’s word count that matters to a publisher, not page count. The minimum word count for a novel, for example, is generally accepted as 65,000 words, which translates to 225 pages and above.

Some books do indeed lend themselves to a shorter length. Novellas are naturally shorter than full-length novels, and nonfiction categories such as how-to, self-help, and motivational may well call for briefer treatments. Sometimes business professionals simply want a platform book to help in their branding and franchise building, and length is not an issue.

Anyone searching for a publisher and ghostwriter should beware of low price points based on a book limited from its inception to 200 pages. Scaling back on subject matter may compromise the content and integrity of the book. Make sure that your subject receives the full treatment it deserves. Trying to get you to contract for a shorter book is like a car salesman attempting to have you drive off the lot with a smaller model car, one that you really don't want and that won't meet your needs.

It bears repeating: a book is as long as it needs to be. A writer who tries to force your content into his or her fee structure should be avoided. If you’re willing to remove important material from your book to meet someone’s fee, then your book has already been compromised.

### **13. Don’t Hire a Writer Who Handles Multiple Projects Simultaneously**

The last thing you want is a ghostwriter who juggles projects and multitasks. Did any great author, classic or contemporary, write several books at once? Did Hemingway write *Old Man and the Sea* and *The Sun Also Rises* at the same time? Did Charles Dickens sit at his desk every morning and write part of *Oliver Twist*, part of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and part of *Great Expectations*? It’s absurd to think that a ghostwriter can give you a great manuscript while working on another book at the same time. Writing a book calls for concentration, not multitasking.

A professional ghost is able to concentrate on a book with laser-like focus. He or she should give your book all the attention it deserves. Writing a book is a challenging

enterprise, and a competent ghostwriter will make your manuscript his or her priority. But I'll let you in on a secret. Almost all nonprofessional ghostwriters work on two (and sometimes more) books at once. I've known some ghostwriters who write as many as six books at the same time. This practice never produces good writing. Writing several books at once is antithetical to the way a professional, published author approaches his or her work. It's slapping words on a piece of paper in order to collect more paychecks. If you're going to hire a writer and pay him hard-earned money, hire one who knows how to practice the craft of writing.

Do you want to hire someone who is trying to please two or three other clients while penning the book you've dreamt of publishing for so long?

#### **14. Don't Fall for the Bait and Switch**

The process used by many ghostwriting firms is to have you talk with three or more of their subcontractors (i.e., writers from around the country) and then decide which one you want. But after you choose, don't be surprised if you are suddenly assigned a different writer because the preferred writer is suddenly unavailable. It's the old bait and switch again.

If you show any hesitation whatsoever during the negotiation process, the company might well bring in "the closer" to help seal the deal. (At a car dealership, if the salesman on the lot can't close the deal, you are invariably brought to the sales manager.) The closer is often a writer, someone with decent publishing credentials, who is allegedly going to sort out the process, and the unspoken promise is that this writer will be assigned to ghostwrite your book. In many cases, however, you don't get the closer. As indicated above, the writer assigned to your project may be someone you haven't spoken with—and someone who is not qualified to write your book.

Does this happen in every instance when you're dealing with a company? No, but I've known it to happen frequently over the course of many years and with many companies. There are several online watchdog groups, such as Absolute Write and Absolute Water Cooler, where people share their experiences with agents, editors, publishers, and ghostwriting companies, and this practice has been verified on these sites and others. Trust me. It happens.

#### **15. Don't Hire the Cheapest Writer You Can Find**

For some people, the hiring process all comes down to money, and this may be the biggest impediment to securing a quality writer for your project. If you need bypass surgery, do you hire the cheapest cardiac surgeon you can find or do you go with the best?

Many people hire the cheapest ghostwriter they can find. As I stated previously, their motto is "Get the best work for the cheapest price." In the long run, the word "cheap" means exactly what it says. What good is a book if it isn't readable? Most books written by bad ghostwriters sell less than a hundred copies, most of which are purchased by friends

and family—and then used to prop up uneven tables.

Some potential clients believe that good writing doesn't matter and that editors "somewhere down the line" will clear up grammatical errors and poor phrasing. This betrays a fundamental ignorance about the publishing industry and is related to my earlier anecdote about the man who thought he could pay a couple of thousand bucks and then get the manuscript polished by a mainstream publisher. It simply doesn't happen that way. Ever.

According to Writers Digest and Writers Market, which publishes dozens of books yearly on writing and the literary marketplace, \$15,000 is a rock-bottom price when it comes to paying a professional fee to a ghost for a full-length manuscript. Most ghostwriters will charge between \$15,000 to \$50,000 for a book depending on its complexity and length. It's not uncommon for a book to cost \$75,000 or more, although this is the exception. If a book has been commissioned by a celebrity, for example, and her agent is waiting for the book, which will most likely become a bestseller, the ghostwriter will charge a much higher fee because he or she is signing away royalties and passing up a great deal of money down the line. Charging a high fee is a fair practice if the publisher believes that the book in question will make over a million dollars. It is, after all, the ghostwriter's expertise that makes the sale possible.

If you want a professional product, you pay a professional fee.

## **16. Avoid One-Stop Shopping**

People searching for a ghostwriter are usually unfamiliar with the publishing industry. Finding a company that offers to publish your manuscript may seem attractive because you think you'll save time and receive a book that will immediately be thrust into the literary marketplace. But that's not how publishing works. Indeed, as cited elsewhere in this book and on my website, people mistakenly believe that signing with a company somehow legitimizes their books and enables them to be part of the established culture of traditional New York City publishing. This is totally false.

Ghostwriting companies, regardless of where they are located, are book packagers and offer print-on-demand services, or self-publishing. They're not affiliated with mainstream publishers, and they can't provide you with any better advice, publishing options, or promotional opportunities than an independent ghostwriter in conjunction with a reputable and affordable POD firm or literary agent. In most cases, using a topnotch independent ghostwriter and a highly rated POD company will save you thousands of dollars and result in a superior product. I have the experience to know which POD firms are the jewels and which should be avoided. I also know which literary agents would be interested in your kind of book if traditional publishing is your goal.

If you think you're eliminating headaches or buying into traditional mainstream publishing by choosing a company, then you're allowing your lack of knowledge about the publishing industry to cloud your judgment. Companies usually charge higher fees than the average POD firm and they upsell customers on unnecessary services with their infamous

package deals. But once you're on the phone with a sales rep, I guarantee that you'll be charmed. You'll hear a lot of publishing terms used solely to impress you. It's a hard sales pitch to resist, and along the way you'll hear how you want a company and not a freelancer to handle your work. As I've pointed out time and again over the years, companies use subcontractors to write their books. Their offices are not filled with dozens of ghostwriters waiting for assignments or busily penning books regardless of what they tell you.

Ghostwriting companies advertise on their websites that you shouldn't trust freelancers. They want you to buy into the illusion that only a corporate entity can competently write and publish your book. It's not true. In fact, companies often use some of the most unqualified writers in the nation in order to increase their profit margins. Was the great literature our children study in school produced by a company? For companies to suggest that only *they* can produce good books is absurd.

Another truth that people learn the hard way is that hiring a ghostwriting company injects ideas and manuscript into a corporate bureaucracy. Working one-on-one with an experienced independent ghostwriter cuts out the middlemen and allows you to focus on one thing: the composition of your manuscript. After finishing your book (or even before the writing starts), a talented independent can explain all you need to know about how to submit your work to an agent or get it self-published.

Don't be deceived by a corporate business model. With companies, you might pay more and receive a less-polished product in the end. They don't own creativity, professionalism, or the ability to write great books and get them into the right hands.

## **17. Determining if You Need Developmental Editing**

Many ghostwriters are also developmental editors. Developmental editing entails reorganization, correcting grammatical errors, rephrasing awkward passages, eliminating repetition, and deleting or adding passages to make the manuscript crisp and publishable.

If you already have a rough draft of your book, you may not need a ghostwriter. You may simply need developmental editing to polish your manuscript. Professional ghostwriters provide this service since they know how to evaluate a manuscript and have experience in all aspects of writing one. Fees for developmental editing vary depending on the length of your manuscript and how much work the editor needs to do to bring it up to acceptable standards.

Some developmental editors charge by the word, others by the hour. Still others may quote a flat project fee, especially if a great deal of rewording is entailed.

Editing a manuscript involves a lot of judgment calls, so it's imperative that you hire someone with a keen eye and a thorough knowledge of the editing process.

## **18. Don't Expect A Ghostwriter to Wait on Your Decision Indefinitely**

No one should rush you into making a decision on which ghostwriter you should choose, but professional ghosts can't afford to wait weeks or months while you interview other writers. This is why I believe it's best to target the writer that looks the most promising and see if he or she is the right fit—and available. For most, comparison shopping is the rule and not the exception because people just don't understand ghostwriting or publishing. That's understandable, but the problem is that people are exposed to dozens of individuals in their search, many quoting unrealistic fees and offering advice that runs counter to the business of writing and publishing. Remember that a majority of the people you contact will not be professionals and won't have the experience or credentials necessary to make your proposed book a success.

As a known entity in the publishing industry, I always have people lined up asking if I'll write their books. Also, many of my clients are referrals from bestselling novelists and nonfiction writers. Assuming that a professional ghost, one who appears to be the perfect fit for your project, will be available in three weeks or three months is a dangerous assumption to make.

I know, I know—you want to see who's out there and also get a low price. But that's why I'm writing this book. If you educate yourself and know how to avoid sales pitches or writers who can't immediately demonstrate that they have the skills and background to write your book, you can shorten your search and target the right individual much quicker.

I'll repeat my mantra: you need to realize that most ghostwriters are not professionals. Some are even scammers who misrepresent themselves, like the individual who is really a company, or the company that is really just one person.

The average time it takes for me to negotiate and then acquire a client is anywhere between two days and two weeks. If someone comes back to me months later and I happen to be available, that's great. But if your prospective ghostwriter is unable to get work over a protracted period of time and is waiting for you to return, what does that tell you? It says that he or she is not in demand—or that he or she juggles multiple jobs.

It's just common sense that the very best ghostwriters don't remain available for long.

## **19. Don't Ask Ghostwriters to Participate in a Selection Contest**

Some people over the years have written to me and laid down the law: "The following process will be used to select the ghostwriter I feel to be the best among a possible field. Each writer contacted will audition by offering me a twenty-page writing sample based on my topic, accompanied by a non-disclosure agreement. The best three writing samples will be chosen, at which time the ghostwriters will produce a second sample that will assist me in determining who will ultimately write my book. Prospective ghostwriters will also provide me with 1) their educational backgrounds; 2) the number of years spent as a ghostwriter; 3) books and publications, both ghostwritten and those

written under their own names; 4) a brief essay on why I should select them. The entire process will take approximately three months.”

As an industry professional with a known track record, I don't have time to jump through such hoops—or wait three months. Contests are for amateurs, and I always respectfully decline to take part in these “auditions.” The information being sought is important, but as it pertains to me, it can be found on my website or online at Amazon, Goodreads, Publishers Marketplace, LinkedIn, blogs, articles I've written, and other online sources since I maintain transparency in all aspects of my writing career. Virtually all of this information, in fact, is on my website, and if potential clients haven't taken the time to read my site, then they're probably not the right fit for me.

I've focused on how to choose the ghostwriter who is the right fit for your project, but it's a two-way street. Many ghostwriters accept any job thrown their way—a major red flag. I accept clients who I connect with and whose projects resonate with me on multiple levels. For me, filling out questionnaires is a non-starter, and if you're thinking of holding an audition, be aware that the most talented ghosts will decline. If you want to go beyond what's on a website—and you should—set up a call with the ghost. It's more informative and more intimate.

## **20. Read the Ghostwriting Contract Carefully**

The following should be a part of every ghostwriting contract. Keep in mind, however, that some contracts have to be altered to fit a particular project. Some books require research, for example, while some do not. Some projects, such as nonfiction books and memoir, require frequent phone contact and discussion, while many projects can be handled via email or only occasional phone contact (or some combination of the two).

- 1) The names of the parties entering into the contract
- 2) The legal jurisdiction under which the contract is enforced
- 3) A guarantee that the client is the sole owner of the literary property mentioned in the contract
- 4) A guarantee of confidentiality for the client
- 5) The fees to be paid and a schedule of when they are due
- 6) What constitutes breach of contract
- 7) Whether or not the manuscript will be revised
- 8) The time frame in which the work is to be completed
- 9) The availability of client and ghostwriter if telephone interviews will be necessary.

Beware of long contracts filled with legalese, especially when tendered by ghostwriting companies. Most people don't realize what they're signing when complex contracts are extended. Long and complicated contracts, such as those used by a ghostwriting company, should always be reviewed by a lawyer.

## **21. Conclusion**

Thousands of people look online for ghostwriters every day, and yet they don't really know how to screen candidates because they don't know the right questions to ask or understand that the vast majority of people who advertise their services as ghostwriters are not professionals. Potential clients are unfamiliar with the unethical business practices and business models used by many writers and writing services.

People assume that most ghostwriters are competent, and based on this false assumption they then try to find the least expensive writer possible. It's really a case of the blind leading the blind since most online ghostwriters don't know anything about the publishing industry and can't produce quality manuscripts. Prospective clients are therefore left in the dark as to how to intelligently select writers who can achieve their goals.

After almost twenty years, I have seen online ghostwriting explode into an industry that quite frankly horrifies me when I look at most sites, companies, and business models. If you've read this entire book, then you know that I fervently believe that the vast majority of individuals who declare themselves to be ghostwriters are simply cashing in on the internet's ability to reach millions of people. Anyone can put words on a page, but few can do so well. Even fewer can actually write a book that is polished enough to be considered for publication. Unfortunately, the internet lends credibility to people who don't deserve it.

If you know little about writing, publishing, or ghostwriting, I can predict with some degree of certainty that you will spend thousands of dollars on a bad product. The tragedy is that you may never know this if you don't understand the mechanics of organization, grammar, and style. It is my hope that this book will help you to make an informed decision as to whom you should trust to write your manuscript. You have very little recourse if you receive a poorly written book and experience buyer's remorse.

Good luck in your search for the best possible ghostwriter. I hope you find the manuscript and publishing success you hope for. All the best.

*William Hammett*

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