

Ten Steps of Publishing a Nonfiction Book for the First Time

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On Earth Day 2019, after two years of steady labor, the Swoope Almanac Book Team released my book, *Swoope Almanac: Stories of Love, Land, and Water in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley*.

Writing the book is only half the journey. Editing, layout, publishing, printing, and marketing make up the other half. If you want to have your book published (as opposed to self-publishing it), you’ll need some help navigating the ten steps I found necessary to successfully publish and market your book.

Bobby’s Ten Steps

1. Determine the purpose or goal for the book.
2. Write the book.
3. Get a publisher.
4. Assemble a team.
5. Raise at least \$9K.
6. Listen to your editors.
7. Hire a graphic designer.
8. Select a print option.
9. Develop a marketing plan.
10. Market and remarket.

Don’t be disillusioned. Last year, over a million books were published in the U.S. alone. Additionally, over 1.6 million books were self-published. I remember well some advice I read, “Don’t expect to drive your limo into a stadium filled with people wanting to buy your book.”

Bottom line: You can get your book published and break-even but expect to sell it yourself.

Step 1: Determine the purpose or goal for the book.

If your purpose in writing a book is to make money or to sell a thousand copies, my advice is don’t do it.

As Rachel Carson said after her first book was published, “Book writing is a very poor gamble financially,”

You have to have a story to tell, a cause to champion, or maybe you just want to have some fun while losing money—and your mind.

The purpose of my book was to inform people about restorative agriculture and the environment. It wasn’t about the money or to sell a thousand copies. I thought breaking even would be nice.

Step 2: Write the book.

Early in the journey I talked to a publisher about publishing my book, and she said, “I’ll publish your book, but you have to write it first.”

You’re the author. This is the easy part. Get it done. It took me a year to write and assemble the first manuscript.

Step 3: Get a Publisher

Publishers today help with editing, organization, guidance, encouragement, and many details such as what to put on the title verso page, the ISBN number, the table of contents, indexing, style, and so much more, but don’t expect them to market your book. You will have to do that yourself.

Step 4: Assemble a team.

I got help ... and lots of it. I assembled a great team: the publisher, three editors, a graphic designer, illustrators, and a marketing and website organization. After I wrote the first manuscript, the editors and I went through countless revisions. We created my own style sheet and got the graphic designer to prepare the final manuscript (draft number 10!) for printing. In the meantime, I worked with my website and marketing organization to develop a plan to sell the book.

Step 5: Raise at least \$9K.

If you want good help, you should pay for it. It took \$9K to get my book ready to print. I gladly paid for editing, illustrators, website development, bookkeeping, layout, and publishing. I also had expenses for printing manuscripts, mailings, website development, and more.

I applied for and received two grants from environmental organizations, and I used some of my own money. Some folks donated to the cause. You might launch an online fundraising campaign. But one way or another you will need some upfront funding.

Step 6: Listen to your editors.

I had three editors. And thank goodness for all of them. My first-line editor is my wife. Her most repeated phrase in reading my material is, “Bobby, darling, this doesn’t make any sense.”

I got really lucky with my second-line editor who happened to be the publisher. Grammar and organization were of course her specialty.

The copy editor. Wow. This is the gatekeeper, a must-have, if you want your book to pass muster with grammar and style.

I must say that all my editors were very kind to me, and I felt they wanted me to succeed. One of them called me out and asked, “Bobby, do you even know two pronouns?”

“Who, me?” I replied.

Just kidding. But I know they shook their heads and chuckled many times at my lack of knowledge of grammar and style.

Step 7: Hire a graphic designer.

There is a lot more to layout than you can imagine. It’s good to get a professional to suggest how the pages, paragraphs, and fonts should look. The firm I chose also created cover designs for me to select from and put the final manuscript in the format most desirable for the printer.

Step 8: Select a print option.

You basically have two options with printing: print on demand or print upfront. We chose the latter. We store the books at our home in Swoope and ship directly from the Swoope Post Office. My wife and I sign each copy and write inscriptions when appropriate. Our Border Collie signs the books as well with a rubber stamp we had made from his front paw.

After two years of work and countless edits, the book was finally ready to print. The graphic designer sent the final electronic version to the printer to print one “blue line” copy for me to proofread. A blue line copy is the first run by the printer and they used to literally put a blue line through each page so whoever was proof reading it couldn’t make copies of it.

“Have you ever gotten a blue line copy back with no revisions?” I asked the owner of the print company.

“Never,” he replied with a chuckle.

I did indeed have more edits. Is any literary work ever finished, I thought?

Perhaps the scariest moment along the journey was signing the printer’s “proof” agreement that stated it was okay to print “as is.”

On Earth Day 2019 we launched the marketing plan. Within a year, we broke even.

Step 9: Develop a marketing plan.

I worked very closely with my website development organization and the publisher on a marketing plan. Because my book was an environmental treatise, we chose Earth Day 2019 as our launch day for the hardback copy. About six months before the launch, I sent complimentary copies of the manuscript to twenty-eight environmental leaders asking for their endorsements and support.

We had three phases for marketing the book. Phase I was the sale of the hardback copy from my website. Each copy came with a membership to an environmental organization, and we planted a tree in the purchaser's honor. Phase II was the release of the paperback on my website. Phase III was listing the book on Amazon. The books are still available on my website. We still sign every copy and ship from our home.

With this creative planning, I enjoyed several successes. The launch of the hardback copy on Earth Day via my website and social media was by far the most successful part of the campaign and those two channels continue to be the best way to market the book. The next most successful was hosting a booth for an Earth Day event in our local community.

The marketing campaign included sending a hardback copy to the same twenty-eight environmental leaders that were sent the manuscript to solicit their help. The responses surprised me—in different ways. My advice is to throw your net far and wide because you never know who or how your friends will help. Some will help; many will not.

Step 10: Market and remarket.

It is hard to predict what will prompt someone to buy your book. On social media, keep messaging and offering opportunities for people to purchase the book. Book signings and speaking events have worked well for me also.

Look for ways to remarket your book. Every time you send out a message you will make a sale.

Conclusion

Writing a book can be a way to share your thoughts or change people's behavior for the betterment of the earth. Raise some funds and get some help. You can at least break even and make a positive difference in the world.

But remember, the person responsible for selling your book is you. And in my opinion, the best ways to sell your book are on your website, through social media, and at book signings or speaking events.