

Ghostwriting: Is It for You?

by Dennis Briskin

Can't sell your own writing? Maybe you can sell it as someone else's. Have nothing to say? Maybe you can work for a client who does.

Like to gamble for a big payoff but have no cash? You can risk something even more valuable—your professional time.

Ghostwriting has all this and more for the young (or not-so-young) writer or editor with the right personality, professional skills, and appetite for variety and adventure.

But it's not for everyone. You can make money, have fun, learn new things, and meet interesting people.

You can also get horribly ripped off unless you know your value and how to use it. If you put someone else's name on your work or push someone else's favorite cause or ideas, do it so you come out a winner. Below are a few suggestions and observations gleaned the hard way.

Know Who the Real Client Is

Tomorrow you may be approached by an expert in some field, such as popular computer programs, to write an article under his byline for a big-name computer magazine. In return, the expert offers to pay you the magazine's \$500 article fee, but only after they pay him.

What's wrong with this picture? The expert wants to treat you as if you work for the magazine. But the magazine doesn't know you, has no agreement with you, and particularly has no obligation to pay you. Your client, the one gaining from your professional service, is the expert. He's the one who must pay you, no matter what happens to the article.

And pay well. No money, no work. Most people, especially self-funding individuals and sole proprietors like the computer expert, are not committed until they pay out real money. Then they



get very committed—to you and their project, which is what you want. I'm not a cynic or a misanthrope, but it makes sense to give people an incentive to treat you fairly.

Get Enough Up Front So They'll Take You and Your Work Seriously

One-third to one-half of the fee up front is standard. Real business people, and sole proprietors with their hearts in the right place, will understand and agree. The rest are poison as clients.

For book projects, where the billing can be thousands of dollars over months or years, I do five to ten hours of work for an agreed hourly fee in advance, so we can both get acquainted and not too

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committed too soon. Clients seem to appreciate this way of preventing big, unpleasant surprises down the road.

Have the Clearest Possible Agreement with Your Client

All clients, and most writers, do not know what writing really is. I don't mean how *hard* it is. I mean *what* it is.

When someone says, "Write me an article," (or even worse, "a book") they focus on the end product, not the work. Make sure everyone agrees to exactly what your job is and when it will be finished. (Not that such precision in advance is possible, but it helps to have goals to aim for.) If you don't put some limit on the time expended going in, you could wind up with a months-long part-time job at \$2 per hour. No joke. Plenty of hungry writers, and professionals who should know better, end up being exploited this way.

For your contract, a brief "letter of understanding" is sufficient and legally sound. Describe the work you will do (for an article you might specify "two one-hour meetings, one draft, and one revision"); the fee, along with a payment schedule; who owns the work (including authorship and copyright); and anything else that's really important, such as completion date and the hourly rate for additional work caused by the client's actions or inactions.

A typical payment schedule might be one-third of the fee on signing, one-third when the first draft is completed, and the final one-third when the manuscript

is either revised to the client's satisfaction or accepted by the publisher, assuming a publisher has been arranged in advance. I never guarantee that my client will get published, only that the quality will be deserving of publication and suitable for the target audience of readers.

Put a dollar figure on each hour of your time.

Don't waste your time specifying things you can't control or could not enforce, such as agenting services, guaranteeing publication, or royalties on books sold. Except for a clearly big-time celebrity whose book is guaranteed to sell (which is rare) royalties are only a big tease. Most books don't make enough for royalties to matter, they are slow to come in, publishers usually won't let you examine their records to verify the amount they owe you, and royalties tie you to the client forever. It is better to get paid a decent fee for the service on this book and go on to the next one.

Fee structures are quite variable, ranging from a flat fee to a percentage or some combination. It's all a matter of negotiation. Frequently the ghostwriter receives all of the publisher's advance and half the royalties, if any.

Often ghostwriters will accept a lower fee in exchange for their name on the cover (either "with" or "and" or "as told to"), because such promi-

nent mention can lead to other work. Of course, it may not. But ghostwriting, and book publishing in general, are so driven by ego desires and dreams that sometimes the only ones dealing in reality are the accountants and printers.

An important aside, not just for ghostwriting: avoid the cheap client's lure of "Do a good job on this project and we'll make it up to you [read 'pay you better'] on the next one." Get your present worth when it counts: NOW.

Know What You're Selling: Your Time and Ability

Clients like to think they are buying the finished product. That's fine, from their point of view. But the journey from the blank screen to the published piece is made via your precious time and your rare ability. That's what should be paid for.

Put a dollar figure on each hour of your time. Forty to eighty dollars per hour is about right, depending on your qualifications, the services you provide, the wealth of the client, and the cost of doing business where you live and work. Multiply your hourly rate by the number of hours you estimate it will take to write the work. (Estimating is a skill in itself. Learn it.) For a lengthy project, you might give a 5 to 15 percent "quantity discount," but don't go overboard with this. Every hour you underprice—or worse, throw away—is an hour you can never sell to someone else. Don't forget to include all your expenses for telephone, fax, copies, travel, and anything else beyond your actual service fee. Your

fees should always be quoted "plus expenses."

Relationships: The Real Problem

Beyond the basic writing and researching skills, the harder part of ghostwriting is dealing with the clients. Finding the right client can be like finding the right spouse or lover: Say "No" to the wrong people as well as "Yes" to the right ones.

In a wonderful book on the subject, *Ghostwriting: How to Get Into the Business* (Paragon House, 1991, \$8.95), Eva Shaw describes some yellow flags and flashing red lights to watch out for in screening clients.

Avoid people who are

- underfunded and want to pay you out of future earnings or royalties;
- secretive about their idea(s) (although a nondisclosure agreement sometimes makes sense for inventors and those in competitive businesses);
- not committed and have done no "spadework" before contacting you;

- "gamey"—abrupt, unreliable, or blaming;
- grossly suspicious or critical of you;
- grandiose or unwilling to develop reasonable expectations.

Look for people who have

- discretionary funds to pay your fees;
- salable idea(s);
- a commitment to and belief in their own projects;
- reliability;
- a positive, appreciative attitude toward you;
- reasonable expectations.

Finding and Screening Clients

Clients come from many sources. Be imaginative and aggressive. The best ways to find clients (in descending order) are professional referrals, personal referrals, public appearances and teaching courses, advertising, and cold calls.

Often you can find a client within a field you already know or care about. For example, sports figures such as athletes or team owners often look for a "ghost" among journalists who cover their sport and know the subject and its context very well. The same applies to business leaders: their ghostwriters are often experienced business writers who are on leave from a leading publication or making a career switch.

Ghosted books range over all subject areas, but the best-known areas are celebrity autobiographies such as those of film, sport, religious or political personalities; and self-help books by subject-area specialists such as doctors, attorneys, and psychotherapists. A third kind of ghosted book is what might be called "factory fiction." Often a well-known fiction writer's works, such as those of Ellery Queen, will actually be written by ghosts who are hired by the publisher to produce a "product" that

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fits a formula. If you are a quick learner and can write fast, you can find the jobs.

What Does the Ghost Do?

Anything and everything. I have provided a complete range of services, from the conception, the outline, and the actual writing to rewriting and editing. Much of my "ghosting" has included re-writing the failed efforts of nonprofessional writers who may be scholars or just ordinary people with an idea and a dream. As a ghost, you definitely want to be adding to your skills and interests as you move through your career.

Sometimes you may be asked to write about matters you disagree with or despise.

The actual working arrangements with clients are as diverse as you can imagine. Some ghosts literally never see their clients. Others may become like an adopted child. Typically, the writer interviews the client on tape and uses these interviews to "capture the voice," since almost always the book must sound as the client would if he or she could write.

The tapes may be the only "source" for the information. A celebrity may have no material to give the writer except the words that come out of his mouth. Or sometimes a ghost is asked to write a book based on the client's research.

Taboo Subjects?

It's your working life. How do you want to spend it? Sometimes you may be asked to write about matters you disagree with or despise. Only you can decide whether to take it. And how much you can take.

I have been approached about writing true crime books but always decline them. First, I have no expertise in the area. Part of what the ghost can offer,

besides his facility with the language, is his "feel" for the subject. It helps to know what you are writing about, although it is not essential. If you are good, you learn how to learn as you go.

Second, and more important, I don't want to spend six months or a year with my face rubbed in brutality and pain, which true crime and police procedurals are loaded with. Many more appealing subjects offer themselves.

When It All Works, It's Great

One of my main loves is exercising my creativity. When ghostwriting, I have to find solutions to many problems of how best to organize and express the client's ideas to produce the desired result. Although not "working with my own material," I still find the creative experience deeply satisfying. After all, the client comes to a ghost because he cannot do it himself, for whatever reason. The ghost finds an undifferentiated lump of clay, or a random pile of wood, and turns it into something useful and

perhaps beautiful. To make something out of nothing, or order out of chaos, is part of what keeps me interested and happy. Such satisfaction doesn't happen all the time, but often enough.

Do You Have What It Takes to Be a Ghost?

"All it takes to become a ghostwriter," according to Eva Shaw,

is the ability to put your ego aside (at least while writing for a client), study his or her word pattern, have perfect communication with the client, and be an expert in people skills. Of course it helps if you write for money and pleasure, enjoy stimulating conversation, have a great sense of humor and an even disposition, and can keep your wits while the world seems to be going mad. ■

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